
Unstable Homes, Unstable Lives: A Psychogeographic Exploration of Gentrification in Awais Khan's *In the Company of Strangers*

Aneeq Sajid (Corresponding Author)

HOD English at Superior Group of Colleges, Jhelum Campus.

Email: aneeqwrites@gmail.com

Dr Junaid Mahmud

HOD English at Government Graduate College, Tahlianwala Jhelum.

Email: chjunaid3@gmail.com

Abstract

Spaces are never neutral; they actively shape an individual's consciousness. In the wake of gentrification, these spaces become sites of exclusion, moral decay, and profound loss, where individuals struggle to maintain their sense of self amid shifting social and spatial orders. This article examines Awais Khan's *In the Company of Strangers* (2019) through the intersecting lenses of Guy Debord's concept of psychogeography and Sharon Zukin's theory of gentrification to explore how urban spatial transformation in Lahore disrupts the psychological and moral integrity of the character(s). The study argues that gentrified spaces are not merely physical constructs but also psychogeographic forces that shape consciousness, manipulate desire, and erode individual agency. The research employs textual analysis, and looks into how Khan uses figurative language, spatial metaphors, visual motifs, and irony to depict the city as both seductive and alienating. Ali's journey shows how gentrified spaces, built to serve the rich, lead the poor into confusion and loss. Drawn by false hopes of a better life, he becomes trapped in a city that controls his choices and slowly breaks down his sense of self. Moreover, this article argues that Khan's portrayal of Lahore transforms the city into a symbolic landscape, where gentrification operates as psychological violence and leads to Ali's tragic unravelling and eventual death.

Keywords: Psychogeography, Gentrification, Cartography, *In the Company of Strangers*, Awais Khan

Urban spaces are never neutral. They are constructed, contested, and often weaponized by those in power. In Awais Khan's *In the Company of Strangers* (2019), the city appears not merely a backdrop but a central force shaping the fate of its characters, especially Ali who is

a working-class young man caught in the grip of wealth, violence, and desire. This paper explores how gentrified spaces transform Ali's identity, distort his moral choices, and ultimately lead to his tragic downfall.

Using Guy Debord's concept of psychogeography and Sharon Zukin's theory of gentrification, this study examines how urban environments influence emotions, behaviors, and personal values. In the selected text, elite clubs, gated communities, and exclusive social circles are not just symbols of wealth, rather they are mechanisms of exclusion and manipulation. Ali accepts help from Mir Rabiullah, a powerful figure who exploits him, in attempt to support his injured brother. On the surface level, Ali's alliance with Mir draws him into a dangerous world of crime and secrecy. However, on the deeper level, there are multiple other things at the play that lead him to his eventual downfall.

This paper argues that In *In the Company of Strangers*, Awais Khan portrays Ali as a tragic product of gentrified urban space, where socio-economic disparities and spatial reordering, examined through Guy Debord's psychogeography and Sharon Zukin's theory of gentrification, reshape his identity, entrap him in cycles of exploitation, and ultimately lead to his downfall. As the gentry class manipulates urban space for its own symbolic and material gains, Ali's moral compass is fractured by competing loyalties; to his family, to the woman he loves, and to the very system that commodifies him. This reveals how gentrified environments can fracture subjectivity and facilitate tragedy.

The present study aims to address two central questions. Firstly, it examines what socio-economic and spatial dynamics of gentrification, as articulated by Sharon Zukin, shape Ali's identity and sense of belonging in Awais Khan's *In the Company of Strangers*. Secondly, it investigates how Guy Debord's concept of psychogeography helps to elucidate the processes by which Ali's relationship with urban space contributes to his moral and personal decline. By addressing both the structural and experiential dimensions of urban transformation, this study explores how gentrification not only reconfigures physical spaces but also fractures individual subjectivity.

This study is limited to analyzing the effects of gentrification on the protagonist Ali in Awais Khan's *In the Company of Strangers* (2019) and does not extend to other characters or Khan's other novels. The theoretical framework is confined to Sharon Zukin's theory of gentrification and Guy Debord's concept of psychogeography. Additionally, the study focuses specifically on urban transformation within Lahore, Pakistan, and does not generalise findings to other cities or contexts. The research is qualitative and interpretative; thus, relies primarily on textual analysis rather than empirical or quantitative methods.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on urban transformation and gentrification by providing a literary exploration of these processes within the context of

contemporary Pakistani society. By focusing on Ali's experiences in the selected text, the research highlights the complex socio-cultural and psychological impacts of gentrification.

Employing Sharon Zukin's theory of gentrification and Guy Debord's concept of psychogeography, the study bridges literary analysis with critical urban theory, which demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary approaches in examining the human dimensions of urban change. The findings offer insights not only relevant to literary scholars but also to urban planners, sociologists, and cultural critics interested in the lived realities of marginalized communities affected by gentrification.

Moreover, this study foregrounds the city of Lahore as a site of contested urban development, and contribute to postcolonial and South Asian urban studies by highlighting local specificities within global processes of urban restructuring. Ultimately, it advances discourses about authenticity, displacement, and the struggle to dwell meaningfully in rapidly changing urban environments.

The rationale behind opting for two theoretical props lies in the very fact that Zukin's framework critically exposes gentrification as a capitalist-driven process that commodifies urban space. This perspective is essential for understanding the structural and socio-economic forces reshaping Lahore's urban landscape and marginalizing its long-term residents. In contrast, Debord's psychogeography focuses on the subjective, emotional, and experiential aspects of space, and it helps in exploring how the physical and social environment influence individual behaviors, identities, and senses of belonging.

By emphasizing the relationship between geographical space and human experience, psychogeography reveals how urban transformations affect not just the physical environment but also the psychological and affective realities of individuals like Ali. Together, these theoretical approaches enable a holistic exploration of gentrification's multifaceted impact; both as a macro-level capitalist process and as a micro-level lived experience. This combined lens allows the study to critically analyze how economic, cultural, and spatial dynamics intersect to disrupt authentic dwelling, reshape identity, and challenge the protagonist's (Ali) agency and sense of belonging amid rapid urban change.

Urban landscapes are not just physical spaces but complex socio-cultural and political constructs that shape and are shaped by human experiences. In this context, the rapid transformation of urban landscapes through gentrification is a phenomenon that has garnered significant academic and social attention. Gentrification, broadly defined, is "the movement of new middle-class residents into poor and working-class inner-city neighbourhoods, spurring the rehabilitation of a district's previously abandoned or neglected housing stock and the revitalisation of its commercial life" (Goldfield 302).

Gentrification is a social and economic process closely tied to capitalism, which creates clear divisions in society based on politics, money, and culture. Buchanan explains that capitalism “divides space along political, economic, and cultural lines” and acts as “a force that rejects mixing and community” (52). Sharon Zukin adds that gentrification is driven by a desire for authenticity, but this desire leads to culture being turned into a product to sell. As the city changes, it is “imploded by new investment, new people, and ‘the relentless bulldozer of homogenization’” (7). This means that gentrification changes not just the physical city but also how people live in it, causing conflicts between old traditions and new ways, between feeling at home and feeling pushed out, and between diversity and sameness.

Guy Debord’s idea of psychogeography helps us understand how cities affect how people feel and act. He defines psychogeography as the study of “the exact rules and effects of the geographical environment, whether planned or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (Debord). This means that the design and layout of cities are not just empty spaces but powerful forces that shape our experiences. Cities can make people feel many emotions like loneliness, nostalgia, or belonging. They also influence how people move around, interact, and connect with others. Because of this, the environment plays an important role in shaping who we are, how we relate to others, and our mental health. When gentrification changes these spaces, it can disrupt people’s ability to feel at home, as familiar places become unfamiliar or even hostile, pushing people out or making them feel excluded.

For example, imagine a neighborhood where long-time residents have lived for generations. Suddenly, new shops, expensive cafes, and luxury apartments replace old markets and community centers. The people who once felt safe and at home may now feel like outsiders in their own streets. They might avoid places they used to visit, lose connections with neighbors, and feel stressed or anxious. This emotional impact, explained by psychogeography, shows how gentrification changes not only buildings but also people’s lives and identities.

Gentrification, as a process of social and economic change in cities, has been studied extensively but still leaves important gaps, especially when it comes to understanding its psychological and spatial effects on individuals. This study focuses on the novel *In the Company of Strangers* (2019) by Awais Khan, and applies the concept of psychogeography to explore how gentrified urban spaces shape the mental and emotional worlds of characters. As the research on primary text is limited, and psychogeography has not been widely used in this context, this study fills a significant gap in literary scholarship by examining how gentrification influences identity, memory, and belonging in Lahore, a Global South city often overlooked in this field.

Ruth Glass (1964) was the first to introduce the term "gentrification" in her book *London: Aspects of Change*. She described how middle-class people moved into working-class neighborhoods, causing physical changes and pushing out original residents. Glass mainly focused on visible changes in the city but did not deeply explore how these changes affect the feelings and experiences of the people living there. This research builds on Glass's work by looking beyond the physical transformation to understand how such changes affect the psychological experience of space, especially in Lahore, Pakistan.

Neil Smith's (1979) "rent gap" theory explained gentrification as a process driven by capitalist investors who seek profit from undervalued urban land. While Smith's theory highlights the economic forces behind gentrification, it does not fully address how these changes impact residents' emotions, social relations, and sense of place. By using psychogeography, this study goes further than economic explanations and investigates how the physical changes in the city reshape how characters think, feel, and relate to their environment.

Saskia Sassen (1991), in *The Global City*, discussed the effects of globalization and the service economy on cities like New York, London, and Tokyo. She showed how economic and spatial changes happen in these global centers but paid less attention to the cultural and emotional impacts of gentrification on residents. This research shifts the focus to Lahore, emphasizing how gentrification affects people's emotional connections, community ties, and identities, areas underexplored by Sassen.

Colin Reilly's thesis, *Cityscapes and City Spaces* (2017), examines how gentrification is represented in literature and film, focusing mainly on New York City. Although Reilly highlights the loss of urban spaces, his work tends to overlook the psychological impact on individuals and primarily centers on male perspectives. This study responds to those limitations by concentrating on how gentrified environments shape the inner lives, memories, and identities of characters in Lahore's changing cityscape.

James H. Peacock (2019) explores the idea of "haunting" in Brooklyn fiction, where gentrification unsettles residents' sense of self and belonging. His analysis shows how urban changes bring the past into conflict with the present, disrupting continuity and memory. This research extends Peacock's ideas to a non-Western context, showing how the transformed spaces in *In the Company of Strangers* create feelings of psychological displacement and alienation, producing "ghosts" of the past within Lahore's rapidly changing neighborhoods.

Though Awais Khan's novels have received critical praise, they remain under-studied academically. *In the Company of Strangers* portrays Lahore during a time of intense gentrification. Mansour Ahsan discusses the theme of "strangers" in familiar social circles

but does not explore how the city's changing spaces influence the characters' minds and social interactions. This study builds on Ahsan's work by highlighting how the psychogeography of gentrified Lahore shapes characters' mental states, emotions, and ways of living.

Zafar et al. (2013) apply a Marxist perspective to *In the Company of Strangers*, focusing on class conflicts and power struggles. Their work highlights economic inequality but does not fully consider how changes in urban space actively shape these struggles by affecting how people experience identity, place, and relationships. This study reinterprets these class tensions by using a psychogeographical approach that links spatial transformation to psychological and social divides.

Sabir et al. (2024) offer a feminist reading of *In the Company of Strangers*, examining gender dynamics and patriarchal power structures. However, their focus remains largely on social relations without fully addressing how gentrified spaces affect women's mental and physical experiences. This research expands on their analysis by showing how changes in urban environments influence women's psychological geographies and embodied lives, deepening the understanding of gender in gentrified settings.

While previous research offers valuable insights into the economic, social, and political dimensions of gentrification, it often overlooks how the physical transformation of urban spaces affects the psychological experiences of residents. Moreover, much of the existing scholarship centers on Western cities, leaving Global South contexts like Lahore underexplored. The limited literary criticism on *In the Company of Strangers* rarely engages with spatial theory or psychogeography, and tends to treat urban change superficially. This study addresses these gaps by integrating psychogeography with theories of gentrification to analyze how changing cityscapes actively shape characters' identities, emotions, and social relations.

Guy Debord's concept of psychogeography provides the primary conceptual tool for this study, offering insight into the dialectical relationship between urban space and human consciousness. Psychogeography examines how spatial configurations and urban landscapes shape emotional, psychological, and social experiences (Debord 2012). Debord argues that space is socially produced and infused with power relations that shape people's identities, behaviors, and perceptions. This research applies psychogeography to illuminate how the gentrified environment in Lahore mediates Ali's mental map, moral conflicts, and sense of belonging, contributing to his psychological entrapment and eventual downfall.

Complementing Debord's insights, Sharon Zukin's theory of gentrification highlights the socio-economic and cultural processes through which urban space is transformed and

commodified. Zukin (2010) argues that gentrification involves not only physical redevelopment but also symbolic appropriation by the gentry class, who reshape neighborhoods to serve their material and cultural interests. This leads to displacement, marginalization of lower socio-economic groups, and the fracturing of community ties. This study draws on Zukin's framework to analyze how the spatial reordering depicted in *In the Company of Strangers* reflects and enforces class struggles, contributing to Ali's fractured identity and tragic fate.

Together, Zukin's and Debord's theories enable a nuanced exploration of how gentrified space operates as both a material and symbolic force, shaping Ali's identity, moral dilemmas, and social relationships. While Zukin's framework provides the primary lens for analyzing the socio-economic dynamics of urban transformation, Debord's psychogeography enriches this analysis by revealing how altered urban environments manipulate not only geography but also the psychological and ethical dimensions of human life.

This study adopts a qualitative approach and employs textual analysis to interpret the novel's representation of urban space and its impact on characters' mental and social landscapes. By situating Ali's tragedy within the psychogeographical and gentrification dynamics of Lahore, this research underscores the profound effects of spatial injustice on individual destinies and social fragmentation in contemporary urban contexts.

Khan's debut novel, *In the Company of Strangers* (2019), has been praised for how it explores the lives of Lahore's wealthy society and the complicated relationships between its characters. Khan's story not only entertains but also encourages readers to think about the cultural and social forces that shape his characters' lives.

The analysis uses the idea of **psychogeography** to look at how the novel shows gentrification in Lahore and its effects on the characters. Psychogeography helps us understand how the changing city affects people's feelings, thoughts, and everyday experiences. In the novel, a suicide bombing happens in the prologue, where the main character Ali's brother loses a leg. This tragic event hints at the dangers and confusion Ali will face later. It also reflects a point made by Kathleen Donnelly, who says that gentrifiers often feel guilty but shift the blame to others, like the government or property developers (Donnelly 374). In the novel, this idea comes up again and again, showing how people avoid taking responsibility for the problems caused by changes in the city.

The bomber's words: "they are not humans; they do not feel" (Khan x), show a cold and detached view of others. This reflects how the characters also feel disconnected as the city around them changes. Gentrification, while promising a better and more "authentic" city life, actually breaks apart the characters' relationships with the places and people they care about.

Lahore's changing look, with its rare moments of clean air and blue skies (Khan vii), shows a contrast between the hope of a fresh start and the reality of disruption and loss.

The story focuses on three main characters: Ali, Mona, and Bilal. Ali, who used to work as a model, is forced to go back into the industry after his brother's injury. Mona and Bilal are a rich couple living comfortably in the city's upper class. Bilal runs a construction business, while Mona feels trapped in an unhappy marriage. Their stories show how gentrification creates stress and conflict. Mona escapes into the world of modeling and has a brief, intense relationship with Ali. This relationship reflects the struggle between personal desires and the pressures of a changing city.

Psychogeography in the novel shows how the characters' feelings and relationships are shaped by the city's physical changes. Mona reconnects with her old friend Meera after many years, and Meera introduces her to modeling. This gives Mona a short break from her problems, but it also shows how shallow and fragile her connections have become. Ali and Mona's love story, though strong, cannot survive in a city where everything feels temporary and disconnected. After Ali's tragic death, Mona often visits his grave, showing her deep sense of loss and the way the city has made her feel alone.

Sharon Zukin explains that gentrification tries to create an "authentic" urban experience by fixing up neglected areas (Zukin 31–32). In the novel, Lahore seems to flip between its old, chaotic self and a modern, polished version. The smell of "damp earth and moon grass" (Khan vii) and descriptions of missing traffic wardens and broken signals (Khan viii) remind us that even with new developments, the city's problems remain. The description of public parks and old lawnmowers shows a city caught between its past and future. These details highlight the disruptions and losses caused by gentrification, which not only push out long-time residents but also change how people feel and interact with their city.

Psychogeography, as introduced by Debord, studies how geographical environments influence human emotions, behaviors, and social interactions. In Ali's story, the rapidly gentrifying spaces of Lahore are not just passive backdrops but active forces shaping his identity and choices.

Initially introduced as a former model struggling with family hardships, Ali's journey unfolds amid the complexities of societal expectations, economic pressures, and personal aspirations. Ali's decision to return to the modelling world shows the broader impact of gentrification, as his search for financial stability clashes with the need for a genuine connection to his changing city, Lahore. Sharon Zukin defines authenticity as a "continuous process of living and working, a gradual build-up of everyday experience" (6). Ali's re-entry into modelling reflects his deep desire for such authenticity.

When Ali first leaves modelling, his life falls into financial hardship and family problems. His brother's tragic injury where "they cut off his leg!" (14) due to a bomb blast adds to the family's struggles: "Money. We don't have any" (15). Ali's mother, once full of life and hope, now shows the physical effects of years of suffering; her face is "etched with weariness and sorrow" (15), clearly showing the family's fall into poverty.

Faced with these challenges, Ali's decision to return to modelling is not just about money but also about trying to find a place where he belongs in Lahore. Zukin says that in a gentrified city, authenticity means continuously living and experiencing everyday life amid constant change. Ali's modelling career is his way of staying connected to the city and its changing social and economic world. By returning to modelling, Ali uses his skills and connections to survive and help his family (15, 25).

Ali's return to modelling shows his strength and determination to find a real place for himself in Lahore's fast-changing environment. Even though modelling might not be considered honorable or respectable in his culture, Ali's choice reflects his commitment to supporting his family. This shows how he negotiates his values with the realities of his social situation.

Zukin explains that gentrification "implodes" cities through new investments and people, creating "the relentless bulldozer of homogenization" (7). This process causes inequalities and segregation, leading to "greater inequality and greater injustice" (Harvey 94). Ali's life shows these effects clearly. He feels guilty about his brother's injury and says, "if he had only made enough money to buy them a car, Hussain wouldn't have had to rely on public transport" where the accident happened (61).

Struggling financially, Ali seeks help from Gul, who introduces him to Mir Rabiullah, a secret terrorist. Ali's initial acceptance of Mir's help seems practical, driven by the urgent need to pay for his brother's medical care. But soon, Ali gets caught in a moral and ethical trap, which shows the dark side of gentrification's pressures. Mir controls Ali's money and life, that highlights how economic gaps in gentrified cities allow exploitation and abuse of power.

The spatial dynamics affect Ali's psychology deeply. The fragmented urban environment mirrors his fractured identity: torn between his humble origins and his longing for acceptance in the gentrified elite. The city's spatial segregation isolates him from stable community support, pushing him towards desperate choices. For instance, his guilt over his brother's accident, which happened because of reliance on inadequate public transport, shows how uneven urban infrastructure harms marginalized residents. These everyday spatial injustices shape his feelings of helplessness and failure.

Moreover, the social rituals and events held in gentrified spaces, like the housing society's opening ceremony, become charged with symbolic meaning. The fact that Ali is forced to carry out violence at such a public event underscores how these spaces, while appearing polished and prosperous, hide underlying tensions and conflicts. The spectacle of gentrification conceals displacement and social violence beneath its surface.

These spaces exert pressure and control over Ali's movements and decisions. The housing societies and commercial zones where Ali works and socializes are designed to exclude people like him economically and culturally. His reliance on Mir and involvement in illegal activities reveal how the marginalized are forced into hidden, shadowy parts of the city to survive. Mir's coercion of Ali into terrorism can be seen as a manifestation of the dark underside of gentrification: where socio-economic inequality creates vulnerability and exploitation.

Ali's romantic relationship with Mona, a wealthy woman significantly older than him ("forty-one years old," 21), serves as a poignant example of how gentrified urban spaces shape personal relationships and desires. Mona lives within the privileged, gentrified world of Lahore, which has the spaces characterized by exclusivity, wealth, and social distinction. For Ali, whose life is marked by economic hardship and social marginalization, Mona represents a gateway into this elite sphere, a form of social and emotional authenticity that he desperately craves.

Sharon Zukin explains that gentrification reshapes not only physical spaces but also everyday routines and social interactions: "The city is imploded by new investment, new people, and 'the relentless bulldozer of homogenization'" (7). Mona's world embodies this new urban reality—marked by privilege and social power. Ali's attraction to Mona reflects a desire to transcend his marginal position in Lahore's socio-economic hierarchy and find belonging in this newly gentrified environment.

However, Ali's love for Mona also reveals the deep inequalities and tensions produced by gentrification. His attempts to win her affection by buying expensive gifts, "They're not expensive," he lies with a "giant smile plastered on his lips" (211), mask the moral compromises and financial desperation underlying his actions. To afford these gifts, Ali becomes entangled in Mir's terrorist network, showing how his personal relationship is inseparable from the broader socio-economic pressures shaping his life. This relationship is thus not simply romantic but also a site where economic survival, social aspiration, and ethical compromise collide.

From a psychogeographic perspective, Mona's privileged spaces and Ali's marginal background produce a spatial and emotional divide. Mona's attraction to Ali, and Ali's to her,

challenge social norms and highlight the emotional void that gentrification's social polarization often creates. Loretta Lees notes that gentrification can lead to "social polarization and the erosion of community cohesion" (Lees 397-398), which is visible in Ali and Mona's complex dynamic that is a mixture of genuine connection, social aspiration, and economic necessity.

Ultimately, Ali's love life with Mona embodies the contradictions of dwelling within a gentrified city. While Mona offers Ali a sense of belonging and authenticity in a world that often excludes him, this relationship simultaneously draws him deeper into the coercive power structures represented by Mir. Ali's pursuit of Mona's affection fuels his moral decline, trapping him in a cycle of dependency and violence. The emotional and spatial fragmentation of their relationship reflects the broader disorienting effects of Lahore's gentrification, where personal desires are entangled with the harsh realities of socio-economic inequality and spatial segregation.

In conclusion, Ali's story shows how gentrification deeply affects individuals beyond just changing buildings and neighborhoods. It breaks people's connection to their city and causes serious personal and moral struggles. As Ali tries to live authentically, supporting his family and holding to his values, he manages the challenges of Lahore's changing economy. However, when he compromises his values and gets caught in Mir's dangerous plans, his life falls apart. His tragic end is a powerful reminder that when people cannot find a true place to belong in a city shaped by gentrification, they risk losing themselves and their moral compass.

In conclusion, Awais Khan's *In the Company of Strangers* offers a nuanced critique of Lahore's gentrified urban landscape, dramatizing how socio-economic disparities and spatial reordering deeply fracture human subjectivity. The novel, viewed through the lenses of Guy Debord's psychogeography and Sharon Zukin's theory of gentrification, illuminates the entanglement between urban space and personal identity. It reveals how gentrification is not merely a physical transformation of the city but a force that commodifies human experience, rewires moral compasses, and erases possibilities for authentic dwelling.

The findings indicate that Ali's journey, from his initial moral disorientation after the bombing to his entanglement in elite spaces and his ultimate self-annihilation, mirrors the psychogeographic pressures of a gentrified Lahore. Debord's concept of psychogeography elucidates how the urban environment, through its spatial reordering and visual landscapes, exerts a profound influence on Ali's consciousness. This is evidenced in Khan's symbolic use of fragmented spatial imagery, such as the "silent ghosts" of traffic lights and the recurring motif of surveillance and panoptic control, highlighting how urban space constructs psychic residues and manipulates behavior.

Zukin's theory of gentrification, meanwhile, clarifies what socio-economic and cultural forces shape Ali's identity and sense of belonging. The novel exposes how gentrification, driven by the desire for authenticity and commercial reinvention, produces spaces of exclusion where the poor are marginalized and their traditions commodified. The commercial elite's control over Lahore's reconfigured spaces: luxury hotels, fashion studios, high-end boutiques, turns Ali into a symbol of both upward aspiration and moral compromise. His commodification as a model and eventual entrapment in Mir Rabiullah's criminal network exemplify Zukin's critique of how gentrification erodes genuine community and replaces it with exploitative transactional relationships.

By intertwining these theoretical perspectives, the study answers the research questions by showing: firstly, what socio-economic and spatial dynamics of gentrification shape Ali's identity and entrap him in cycles of exploitation, including elite control of symbolic spaces, erosion of authentic social ties, and replacement of communal belonging with aestheticized surfaces; and secondly, how the city's psychogeographic forces manipulate his consciousness and moral integrity, and draw him deeper into patterns of alienation and disintegration.

Ultimately, *In the Company of Strangers* offers more than a critique of urban displacement; it stages gentrification as a psychogeographic force that scripts personal catastrophe. Khan shows that Ali's tragedy is not only the result of external socio-economic pressures but also of an internalization of the city's fragmented and alienating spaces. His final act, the ironic smile as he detonates the bomb, signifies a complete collapse of moral agency, shaped by a Lahore that seduces, exploits, and discards. In this way, the novel reveals the devastating human costs of urban transformation, where the city itself becomes both a character and a force that erases possibilities for authentic existence.

Recommendations:

Given how *In the Company of Strangers* illustrates the devastating psychogeographic impact of Lahore's gentrified spaces on Ali's subjectivity and agency, further research should explore how other Pakistani novels and narratives depict similar phenomena. Specific attention should be paid to how socio-economic disparities are entangled with urban aesthetics and commodification of individuals.

This study reveals that spatial reordering in Lahore is not only a backdrop but an active force that shapes Ali's desires, loyalties, and moral compass. Future studies should investigate how psychogeography operates in other South Asian urban contexts, focusing on characters whose decisions are dictated by space-induced pressures. This could illuminate patterns of spatial entrapment and resistance.

Khan's use of figurative language, such as the motif of vision, shifting urban imagery, and

spatial irony, provides critical insight into how the city manipulates perception. Future researchers should conduct close readings of such linguistic devices in *In the Company of Strangers* and similar works to uncover deeper connections between language, space, and psychological collapse.

While this study highlights the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of gentrification, subsequent research should examine its cultural impacts, such as the loss of heritage, erosion of communal bonds, and changes in urban memory. Lahore, as depicted in the novel, can be analyzed as a case study for how cultural displacement parallels socio-economic exclusion.

Ali's tragic trajectory underscores how gentrification fosters moral dilemmas, where upward mobility is tied to ethical compromise. Future research should explore similar characters in other Pakistani texts or urban narratives, focusing on how class-based manipulation within gentrified environments influences moral collapse.

Although this study is literary in nature, its findings resonate with real-world urban development issues in Pakistan and beyond. Policymakers and urban planners might consider how gentrification, as depicted in literature like Khan's novel, affects marginalized communities' mental health, agency, and ethical frameworks. Literature can thus inform more humane, inclusive urban planning.

REFERENCES

1. **Ahsan, M.** (2020, July 12). *In the company of strangers*. <https://mansourahsan.com/2019/08/01/in-the-company-of-strangers/>
2. **Belsey, C.** (2013). Textual analysis as a research method. In G. Griffin (Ed.), *Research methods for English studies* (2nd ed., pp. 160–178). Edinburgh University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0b4xz.12>
3. **Danielle.** (2020, January 3). *Review: In the company of strangers by Awaiz Khan*. The Reading Closet. <https://thereadingcloset.home.blog/2020/01/13/review-in-company-of-strangers-by-awais-khan-awaiskhanauthor-inthecompanyofstrangers-bookguildsimonschusterin/>
4. **Debord, G.** (1981). *Introduction to a critique of urban geography* (K. Knabb, Trans.; Original work published 1955). <https://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/urbgeog.htm>
5. **Debord, D.** (2008). The right to the city. *New Left Review*, 53, 23–40.
6. **Donnelly, K.** (2018). The gentrifier's dilemma: Narrative strategies and self-justifications of incoming residents in Bedford–Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. *City & Community*, 17(2), 374–393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12296>

-
7. **Freeman, L.** (2006). *There goes the 'hood: Views of gentrification from the ground up*. University of Chicago Press.
 8. **Fujitsuka, Y.** (2007). Gentrification and neighbourhood dynamics in Japan: The case of Kyoto. In D. R. Goldfield (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of American urban history*. SAGE Publications.
 9. **Heidegger, M.** (1977). *Sein und Zeit*. Vittorio Klostermann.
 10. **Hussein, A.** (2012). Pakistani English literature. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48(5), 485–496.
 11. **Jera's Jamboree.** (2022, September 7). *Book review: In the company of strangers: Awaits Khan*. <https://www.jerasjamboree.co.uk/literary-fiction-in-the-company-of-strangers-awaitskhan/> Retrieved May 27, 2025.
 12. **Khan, A.** (2020). *In the company of strangers*. Liberty Publishing.
 13. **Kim, K.-J., & Kyung, S.-C.** (2011). State-facilitated gentrification in Seoul, South Korea: For whom, by whom, and with what result? Paper presented at RC21 International Conference: Social Consequences of Gentrification.
 14. **Leach, N.** (Ed.). (2005). *Rethinking architecture: A reader in cultural theory*. Routledge.
 15. **Lees, L.** (2008). Gentrification and social mixing: Towards an inclusive urban renaissance? *Urban Studies*, 45(12), 397–403.
 16. **Lees, L., Slater, T., & Wyly, E.** (2007). *Gentrification*. Routledge.
 17. **Lefebvre, H.** (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell.
 18. **Mahmood, B., Asim, M., Khan, M. J., & Nawaz, M. H.** (2021, October 28). *Book review: In the company of strangers*. Minute Mirror. <https://minutemirror.com.pk/book-review-in-the-company-of-strangers-8075/>
 19. **Moore, R.** (n.d.). *Understanding gentrification in Southeast and East Asia*. (Working paper).
 20. **Peacock, J. H.** (2019). Those the dead left behind: Gentrification and haunting in contemporary Brooklyn fictions. *Studies in American Fiction*, 47(2), 161–188.
 21. **Reilly, C.** (2017). *Cityscapes and city spaces—Representations of gentrifying New York in novel and film* (Master's thesis). Utrecht University.
-

-
22. **Sabir, M. R., Asim, M., Khan, M. J., & Nawaz, M. H.** (2024). Exploring echoes of empowerment and androcentrism: A feminist study of Awais Khan's *In the Company of Strangers*. *International Journal of Literature and Languages*, 4(9), 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.37547/ijll/Volume04Issue09-03>
 23. **Slater, T.** (2011). Gentrification of the city. In G. Bridge & S. Watson (Eds.), *The new Blackwell companion to the city* (pp. 571–585). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444395105.ch50>
 24. **Smith, N.** (1979). Toward a theory of gentrification: A back to the city movement by capital, not people. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 45(4), 538–548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944367908977002>
 25. **Uzma Aslam Khan, U.** (2017). *The golden legend*. Viking.
 26. **Zafar, H. M. J., Nasir, M., & Sadiq, R. A.** (2023). A Marxist analysis of *In the Company of Strangers* by Awais Khan. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 4(2), 708–717.
 27. **Zukin, S.** (2009). *Naked city: The death and life of authentic urban places*. Oxford University Press.