

## Living and Loving in Troubled Times: Reading Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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### Abstract

*Exit West* (2017) by the Pakistani author, Mohsin Hamid, fictionalizes the fact of living and loving amidst socio-cultural relationships and against the backdrop of the ever-increasing mass-migration/ emigration, displacement, violence and the refugee crisis. The paper aims at portraying Hamid's art of characterization and the narrative that works out each character's pursuit of life in troubled times. The novelist represents a rational approach and balanced attitude against dominance, complexes, instability and helplessness in the face of adverse circumstances. His transnational narrative thus introduces a 'counter voice' thereby shouldering the responsibility of bringing the whole world- both the more and the less powerful countries - on the same page, literally.

**Keywords:** Displacement; Emigration; Migration; Refugee; Transnational.

The world triangle, formed by the South Asian subcontinent together with Russia and the US, invites us to watch carefully the complex global scenario of social unrest, socio-political changes, forced taking over of governments, foreign interference, and the like. Amidst all of this, the South Asian subcontinent passes through a sensitive period of instability, displacement and dislocation due to porous borders, even as it struggles to co-exist in a strongly polarized world. It was on account of the height of confusion between militarism and moralism that the world turned into a playground of the super powers moving in and out of different countries, re-ordering the world as they liked.

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed an increasing importance of the concepts of nation, nationality and racial purity resulting in the exile and death of thousands of people. The South Asian countries, especially, have lived through unprecedented refugee-movements with scores of suffering people moving in and out

from one place or country to the other for shelter and stability. There are examples of such countries in Chechnya, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Sudan, Afghanistan and Myanmar, victimized by external interference. Several South Asian writers, as Bapsi Sidhwa, Mohsin Hamid, Khaled Hosseini, Nadeem Aslam, Fatima Bhutto, Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, Feryal Ali Gauhar, Kiran Desai and others, have problematized the issue of terrorism, the crossing of borders and the fragility of life in their fictional works.

The paper focuses on *Exit West* (2017), a novel by the Pakistani writer, Mohsin Hamid, who is a self-confessed 'mongrel', having lived parts of his life in Pakistan, America and England. A fable of deterritorialization, the novel is about the global refugee crisis, mass migration and xenophobia. It discusses the issues of violence, terror of militants and the military operations, faced by the fearing and tortured people through a love story set in an unnamed city. It remained unnamed till the end. It might be anywhere in the world, and thus it would help Hamid portray the all encompassing nature of migration, proving it to be a human phenomenon, considering all of us as migrants. Saeed and Nadia met at an evening class on corporate identity and product branding "in a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace or at least not yet openly at war" (Hamid 1). An independent man, Saeed worked for an advertising firm, and Nadia worked for an insurance company, and wore a black robe, and lived alone, which was something rare in their traditional and religious country.

The theme attracts readers exercising a powerful grip, requiring the parallel moving but never coming close movements of Saeed and Nadia, two similar personalities but with differing attitudes to life. While Saeed prefers the materialization of love and sex after marriage, Nadia, though loves passionately and cares for him morally, keeps mum to his marriage proposal; and the idea behind this, maybe the writer's approach to establish the superiority and solidity of love, and social and moral cooperation, though bypassing the importance of the institution of marriage. Hamid's narrative surprises readers for having woven the story and different events around such strange, similar yet different, lovers who give up physical intimacy very soon, and realize it only in the end.

Tariq Ali's book, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* (2002) mentions how the same United States, who had formed an international network of Islamic militants with different countries to fight against the Russians in Afghanistan, came back to fight against the Taliban, whom it harbored with Pakistan (Ali 1-11). In the same way the fear raised by Thomas L. Fried-

man looks genuine that a connection of all the knowledge centers on the planet together into a single global network could usher in an amazing era of prosperity and innovation, if politics and terrorism were not to get in the way. It will empower not only the software writers and computers geeks to collaborate in a flat world but also Al Qaeda and other terrorist networks. (Friedman 8)

No doubt migrations have always been there for economic, academic and worldly purposes, but things become serious to humanity's concern when civil strife, riots, internal and external political interferences strangle life forcing the legal residents to move in and out of countries introducing unstoppable entry of refugees. The civil war in the story struck the city with pictures of pains, horror, uncertainty of the people pottering about their errands for one moment and dying the next, shootings and the old car bombing, letting one feel it in one's chest cavity as a subsonic vibration made by loud speakers, rockets and heavy machine guns hitting Saeed's flat and building, helicopters filling the sky like birds startled by a gunshot, the hawkish mobile sculptures with pilots and gunners chopping across the sky, etc. As the militants appeared to have changed their strategy to take over big territories, instead of detonating a bomb here or orchestrating a shooting there, Saeed and Nadia had to be careful with a vast number of refugees, not to run over an outstretched arm or leg. London was shocked with legal residents in minority, being referred to as the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation.

The study aims at portraying Hamid's art of narration and characterization that works out each character's pursuit of life in troubled times. It projects the voice of the soul with its reciprocal aspect of human relationships in general, sharing love and sorrows, simultaneously challenged by the weakening, terrifying adverse winds of social, political and cultural degeneration. *Exit West* displays it portraying an unnamed city, teetering on the edge of the abyss with physically and emotionally choked life, on account of the militants and military operations, with the parallel dramatic and magical provision of the unknown and dark doors, letting the citizens move in and out anywhere in the world for shelter and stability. The writer's narrative art places his characters' particular bent of mind against a selection of different big and small events and things, adding to their formation of identity, with their actions and reactions; and the result maintains the constantly burning flame of love and net of human relationships, against what otherwise looked hellish and intolerable.

Nayantara Sahgal too supports the idea of resetting in her essay, 'Rejecting Extinction': "In reverse, a migrant can feel securely rooted to

the ground where he has settled because it is human nature to put down roots, and natural to adapt to one's surroundings and be influenced by them. So there is no hard and fast divide between the condition known as exile on the one hand and roots on the other" (Sahgal 7). The study keeps looking for the points, human throbs, and candle-lights that stand out as the advocacy of its point of view - for example, the portrayal of Saeed's family enjoying green tea, taking turns to look up at Mars and the planets through the black, sleek telescope, handed over to his father by his grandfather, placed against the heavy machine guns and rocket fires, with the spread of refuges trying to create the rhythm of normal life with the others, staring at the city, "occupied many of open places in the city, pitching tents in the green belts between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the boundary walls of doors, sleeping rough on pavements and in the margins of streets." (Hamid 23), and the old emotional retired army officer at San Diego, California, recollecting their army's respect for the uniform and their bond with one another just like that of brothers, etc.

The portrayal of the helplessness, reluctance and wavering of Saeed's father too proves to be a niche letting love and emotions lit up across disaster. Saeed's father, a retired university professor, appeared to rebuke himself for not having earned enough to send Saeed abroad safely, instead of helping the youth and the country through research and teaching, which looked merely an expression of vanity. His father, who looked for his lost wife's company amid his cousins, once got confused mentally deciding whom he saw: whether they were children playing with a ball or teenagers with a goat's head or human head, on account of the extreme intensity of his pains and troubles. Hamid himself realized Saeed's father's painful clinging to his past and his fear for his son. Hamid said in an interview given to Terry Gross that the portrait of Saeed's father seemed to be unique in the sense of moving both backwards and forwards at the same time with his past looking for his wife's company, and the future wishing for his son's security, that his country could not provide. In the same way, Hamid's picture of Saeed's mother's mental map of place made an impact on readers: shrunk and resembling an old quilt with patches of government land and patches of militants' land, where she had spent her entire life.

Hamid depicts Saeed's father's intensity of pain and helplessness while leaving his child for departure. The universal truth went together with the comparison painting the future necessity of a drowning parent to let go of the child. "If a flood arrives, one must let go of one's child, because holding on can no longer offer the child protection" (Hamid 92). One could not forget his words that his sons arc sat atop his fa-



ther, a hill atop a hill, a curve atop a curve. Also Nadia's realization of the universally acknowledged truth chased readers convincingly: "but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (Hamid 94). Another universal truth conveyed the helpless surrender of the migrants: "To flee for ever is beyond the capacity of most, at some point even a hunted animal will stop exhausted and will await its fate." (Hamid 163)

Even minor characters contribute to the design of the writer, such as a war photographer capturing the first kiss of the old man and the wrinkled man, and then deleting it as a gesture of uncharacteristic sentimentality and respect, and the foreman differentiating the unimaginable scale of the present from the limited labour of the past.

The novel surprises its readers with the central point of the creation of doors, through which Saeed and Nadia with several of others moved abroad, as an alternate possibility, a way out for the suffering humanity to steer clear through the violence caused by militants and military operations. The doors become symbolic, and perform as the point and the central image, forming the theme of mass migration and refugee crisis. One can say *Exit West* offers magical doors as a way out to human beings and the world for a dependable substitute with a formation of refugee cities, camps and countries, as can provide a possibility of a human give and take, a reciprocal human structure of relationships. On being asked about the magical doors, Hamid accepted that they exist as a representation of the technological reality of our lives through internet and computers..

Arjun Appadurai, who considers the prominent role of imagination with the juxtaposition of mass mediated images and mass migration, comes quite close to share such a concern of Hamid's, regarding the loosely connected state of affairs in the world. Keeping in view the threats, troubles and weakness of nation states, such as border wars, culture wars and massive immigrant populations, Appadurai hopefully finds the world moving towards diasporic public spheres based on the link between the work of imagination and the emergence of a world with electronic media joining producers and audiences across national boundaries (Appadurai 1-23). It is in this reference that one views the symbolic use of the doors with the elements of magic moving alongside internet and social media providing immense access to people anywhere within seconds.

To create a home away from home, the story transfers Saeed and Nadia first to Mykonos in Greece and then to London, turning them and other migrants into trackers, and forming a kind of camaraderie against the

fight of the nativists, whose hostility was obvious through rumours of a tightening cordon separating illegal residents with the help of soldiers, armoured vehicles, drones and helicopters. Their water and electricity were stopped, but this hostility went concurrently with volunteers and agencies delivering medicines and food sent by the host government, and here Saeed was touched by a young native boy and his earnestness, empathy and good intent, whom none had the power to refuse.

Nadia found it a bit like that of a university dormitory with complete strangers living in close proximity, with their best behaviour adding warmth to the conversations. London introduced the writer's objective of portraying the all-encompassing cover of refugees and migrants with the ever-spreading occupation of the houses, parks, disused lots, unoccupied mansions in the boroughs of Kensington, Chelsea, and the other expanses of Hyde Park.

At this point, one may recollect Stuart Hall's views on gradual assimilation, struggle, hybridity, 'a positioning', and a mutual discourse of 'being' and 'becoming' (Hall 234). We come close to Hall's idea of identity when the novel portrays the influx and unwanted spread of millions of refugees and migrants, their struggle with the host countries' police, leading ultimately to their acceptance of labour-based access to small residences.

To Nadia, these migrants - in different colours and attires - looked charming, having formed their own language, a kind of cacophony with a mix of English. They created a better scene than the stifled life amidst militancy in her place of birth, and relished it. The group of saeed's country folk too created a bonding together of migrants along religious principles, cutting across divisions of race or language or nations. Hamid compared the mixed or indifferent groups of migrants to the placing of "the hearts together, all the clubs together, all the Sudanese, and all the Honurans." (Hamid 143)

It was by turning his characters into migrants, led abroad by adverse circumstances, that Hameed had a glimpse of their inner and external adjustment. Nadia and Saeed came to experience their mental and spiritual growth, as an answer required by the writer to defeat social, political world terrorism and violence. Nadia, though faster accommodating, realized her growing confidence, with the capacity to face and stand the black burly man raising a pistol to her, having joined a food corporative in a commercial zone outside Sansalito in Marine. Even Saeed, who felt nostalgic and slow in adjustment, claimed his unbelievable transformation. After his father's death, he started praying more and more and working hard

as a substitute. At first a mystery, his prayers gradually came to connect him to the notion of being a man, a gentleman, who stood for community, faith, kindness, decency, a man like his father.

Saeed's transformation did not look abrupt, even though coming all of a sudden. Hamid looked for a man whose swift imagination and sentiments could enable him to take in a complete sweep of Nadia's body, on one side, and enter deeper to trace the relationship of Nadia's lemon tree reminding him of his parents and a desire for peace for all, on the other. He was different from the other people in the sense that he prayed to honour the goodness of his parents, who raised him. He realized that love and loss united humanity, with death and birth being integrated to life, and that, sorrows and transitory nature of existence will provide a base to humanity's potential for building a better world. Thus Saeed took prayers as a lament, consolation and hope.

Besides the magical realism of 'doors', a very suggestive reference to an old woman in the nearby town of Palo Alto in Marin, California, illustrates the difficult situation, the objective behind writing the novel. She lived there, had not moved; travelled but never moved; and, yet felt that the world had moved. Her neighbourhood had changed rapidly with the cluster of California families. She concluded that everyone migrated, and even if we stayed in the same houses our whole lives, things changed. We could not help it, and we were all migrants through time.

In short, Hamid's story does achieve its objective(s). The novelist's transnational approach bears resemblance to Appadurai's idea of globalization. Such an imagined picture of the world with several doors may shock us in its reflection of a loosely connected wayward spread of human existence, but it is not only less dangerous than the present state of affairs, but also capable of nurturing a social, cultural and emotional intermingling of people irrespective of nations, regions, religions, castes and ideologies. Such mixed groups will be called citizens of the world. Hamid's example suggests that the development councils of such refugee groups will keep striving for the welfare of their people without any politically motivated interference of the world's superpowers.

One can compare Terrie Akers's interpretation with that of Leerom Medovoe, in terms of the concepts of 'worldly', 'global', 'world capitalist system', 'imperial structure system', and 'world-system literature'. And it brings readers to see the title of Hamid's novel *Exit West* and consider it moving against the West's notion of the suffering refugees, from Mykonos (Greece) to London and California (US) finally. Then, in the

end, Nadia and Saeed meet again in their unnamed city. Is it not a kind of amalgamation of the East and the West or the periphery and the core or the imperialist, capitalist and the third ordinary world, something more than the victory or defeat of the West or the East?

Actually speaking, a voice from the South Asian subcontinent, Hamid's novels enter into a dialogue with the world and the United States particularly to consider itself as an 'other' to match the traditionally considered 'other' passively accepting the West. Hamid's dialogue is all for equal, sensible and healthy reconsideration of both the sides, and it is in this way that he establishes a counter voice, rejecting the South Asian stereotypical attitude. *Exit West* asks the West to rethink and reconsider their selfish, politically colonizing policies in order to let innocent and individual countries flourish as they like, with a suggestion to human beings to think for others as generously as they think for themselves. Hamid intends to fight the indecency of the corrupt, selfish and interfering world politics, raising the weaker, struggling and accommodating voices busily taking root once again in refugee camps. Hamid prepares a plain ground teeming with love and feelings as the new address of humanity, created with such delicate and vulnerable tools as prayer, social and moral exchanges and relationships, which the world otherwise rejects as useless and foolish.

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