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The Never-Ending Western Exit

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* is a reimagination of the refugee experience through a lens of magical realism, critiquing global failures to respond to the displacement of people with empathy. Hamid strips away borders of space, time, and identity through the surrealism of the magical doors present in his world, trying to reframe Western perceptions of migration as a shared human condition that transcends national borders and harnesses a cross-cultural responsibility. Hamid writes, "We are all migrants through time" (Hamid 202), revealing how displacement is more than just physical relocation; it is also a psychological transformation. The people who go through these magical doors no longer have a singular, stable identity; instead, they have multiple identities that they are juggling.

Exit West opens in a nameless city on the brink of civil war, this being a deliberate way of Hamid rendering an anonymous and thus universal feeling of compassion for the innocent people caught in the crossfire. This allows the story to speak for a more global refugee experience rather than operate in a geographically specific/nationalistic framework. The magical doors further reinforce this narrative; these mysterious black portals are described by Hamid himself as "the passage was both like dying and like being born" (Hamid 103). This reflects the nature of the trauma that comes with displacement, being both a change of place and a 'rebirth' into a world where the migrants have to change and reconstruct their identities constantly, while also dealing with the violent severing of their former identities. The protagonists of the narrative, Saeed and

Nadia, use these doors to escape from their town, and end up in multiple different places; first, Mykonos, then London, and then Marin. Hamid carefully walks the line of presenting migration as not a spectacle but as an intimate upheaval. He never sensationalizes the refugee suffering; his prose resists the traditional narrative structures of climax, mirroring the temporal existence of living a life in limbo, one that does not have a narrative conclusion. Hamid deliberately writes in English to appeal to a Western audience, yet he does not exoticize his characters. This linguistic strategy is ethically charged, highlighting the tensions between the global visibility of refugee narratives and their vulnerability to commodification.

Saeed and Nadia follow paths where they find each other, but eventually diverge. They are written to be bound by their shared experiences and perspectives of war and the loss that comes with it, but their diverging paths are a result of them responding differently to their changing environments as they go through the magical doors. Saeed is seen clinging to his religious roots and the regret of leaving his father behind. Leaving his homeland takes away a piece of him, a piece that he used to cherish without knowing. Hamid writes, “Now, though, in Marin, Saeed prayed even more, several times a day… When he prayed he touched his parents, who could not otherwise be touched…” (Hamid 201). Nadia, by contrast, is seen embracing the flux of exile. She finds freedom, afforded by shedding the social conservatism of her homeland. Hamid writes, “[Later,] Nadia announced… that she was moving out on her own, an unmarried woman… Nadia and her family both considered her thereafter to be without a family” (Hamid 21-22). While different from Saeed, she, too, loses a piece of herself. Their divergence shows how migration is not homogenous; it changes people in different ways and is not monolithic. Hamid, again, resists facile portrayals of refugees; he insists on the complexity that comes with

the process. His narrative does not symbolize Saeed or Nadia as two possible outcomes of migration, rather, they are people, alive, but full of contradiction and ambiguity.

Migration in *Exit West* is not merely physical displacement, it disorients time, culture, and stability. Similar to Homi Bhabha's theories of "third space" identities in *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 56), Hamid's migration stories present cultural hybridity that resists the homeostatic impulses of self and nation. This is evidenced by the brief narrative vignettes of unnamed migrants that are interspersed between the protagonists' narratives. These are seemingly irrelevant to the larger narrative, but they serve to bring the narrative focus to the global migrant condition and how it is collective. The episodes of the man in Australia coming out of a door and unexpectedly finding love, and the elderly woman in Palo Alto allowing migrants to live with her, serve to push readers to see the displaced not as aliens taking from natives, but rather as mirrors of their humanity. Hamid aims to challenge Western narrative expectations through this refusal to center the plot entirely on Saeed and Nadia. Stereotypical refugee fiction leans on a linear approach of victimizing its characters and adding romanticized redemptive arcs throughout. Hamid's plot progression follows the journey refugees actually go through; fragmented and non-linear. He also has a way of grabbing readers' attention when they least expect it. One jarring passage is where he writes: "When we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (Hamid 98). The sudden use of the word "murder" forces readers to recognize the emotional violence that comes with leaving one's native home. The migrant story is not a 'journey to freedom' as some Western audiences think it to be; it's one tinged with the darkness of guilt and erasure. As referenced earlier, Saeed embodies this grief in his continuous battle with the guilt of leaving his father and slowly losing his religion. Nadia's 'freedom' too is complicated; it is a bold mask covering the vulnerable parts of herself. Through them, Hamid

rejects the usual binaries that we associate with people and their personalities: liberal and conservative, migrant and native, black and white. Instead, his characters are fragmented and in this way, are human.

The emotional fragmentation goes beyond the protagonists, it's also present in the stylistic choices throughout the text. Hamid uses long, comma-laden sentences, which breathe as the characters do, without certainty, and full of hesitation. One example of this is when Saeed and Nadia arrive in Mykonos: "They lay together in silence, and it was a different kind of silence than the one they had known in their city, one less charged with fear and more infused with exhaustion" (Hamid 104). The use of parataxis reflects the mental state of the protagonists; they are provisional, and so is the migrant journey they are on, one that forces them to adapt and survive.

Beyond just people, Hamid also criticizes the larger political frameworks surrounding migration. When Saeed and Nadia begin to settle in London, Hamid goes out of his way to point out how the city is divided into two distinct parts: native and migrant. These are separated by fences, and drones seem to be omnipresent. Hamid again subverts globalistic perspectives and presents a slow, tense integration. Negotiation is the guiding force in this imagined London; the refugees are considered threats by the host society, but in actuality, their fear is the true obstacle. Here, Hamid critiques the fragility of Western liberalism by presenting their reactions through the migrant lens. Generally, London is perceived as a liberal city, and a direct mention in the narrative may lead one to believe this reflects reality. Still, they respond to the migrants with hostility. Hamid points out the ambivalence in liberal beliefs, which often hide their xenophobia under dense bureaucratic language, illustrated in scenes where government officials and local activists debate quotas and policing, highlighting the moral indifference of the legal system. The

narrative refuses to engage with Western practices of refugee stories, being full of graphic depictions of death and refugee camps. This restraint is strong, as it is an easy way to commoditize migrant stories. Hamid chooses to define his characters by how they choose to carry on despite what may have happened to them. This is seen in both the central protagonists, especially Nadia. She continues to live on and do what she needs to do: reading, gardening, and even falling in love again. Hamid gives his characters interiority and in doing so, does not frame the refugee as someone in need of saving, but rather as someone with their agency.

Borders are nothing more than imaginary lines drawn up by our ancestors of yesteryear, but current societies treat them as static, living beings. Hamid's use of magical realism in the narrative is not aesthetic; it is a political commentary. This technique draws attention to the emotional and ethical aftermath of migration, and strips away the process of it, which in itself is painful. He does this to not take away from this process, but rather add to it, and in doing so, helps us imagine a world where borders are what they are; imaginary, and movement through them is a right and not a privilege. His speculative frameworks are both critical and aspirational: critical of current immigration systems embedded with violence and privilege, and aspirational for a future formed based on humanity rather than fear. The lack of physical barriers associated with migration pushes the readers towards radical empathy, tearing down their emotional and cultural walls. Hamid never describes the magical doors; what they are, what they look like, who placed them, or even what powers them. This is done to bring readers to think about the aftershocks of migration, rather than the mechanics of it. Hamid critiques current immigration systems that are procedural and legalistic but devoid of humanity and empathy. He reminds readers that migrants are human beings and are not reducible to numbers; the process they go through is always personal and always psychological.

The narrative's ending offers a version of coexistence that strikes as neither cynical nor utopian, but rather human. Saeed and Nadia split and go their separate ways, but without finality. Both feel the presence of residue within one another from all the places they've been together, the things they've seen together, and from the relationship they shared. They live in new communities and continue their lives, but they left a lasting impact on one another. The narrative does not give readers closure, instead, it gives them continuation. They find new people to love and live with, and when they eventually meet again, half a century later, their coffee is tinged with sadness. This meeting brings out the parts of them that they fell in love with at the start of the narrative, but one that they know is not what it was; it has changed and become an amalgamation of their separate journeys. Hamid refuses to give readers a redemptive or tragic ending; instead, the novel closes with the two making plans to go to Chile, but he doesn't tell us if this plan comes to fruition. This open-endedness sheds light on the realities of migration, a seemingly never-ending process of negotiation of self and society.

The imagined future in *Exit West* is one where communal hospitality becomes possible, but is not utopian. It has its own set of tensions and is built on mutual trust and recognition, rather than leaning heavily on legal or judicial systems. The migrants and locals work to negotiate their own spaces, and new norms emerge. The current systems we live in are rigid and dense, but Hamid tells us that humans are fluid and so are our relationships with one another. This process can come with discomfort, but there should be respect. The imagined vision of *Exit West* aligns with his broader projects of rewriting the politics of belonging not through a nationalistic lens, but through a human one instead.

Works Cited

1. Hamid, Mohsin. *Exit West*. Riverhead Books, 2017.

2. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.