Imaginary Portals and Oppressive Technologies in *Exit West*

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* is a migration novel written for a post-9/11 world, becoming only more relevant as anti-migrant sentiments have risen globally. In the novel, readers observe the third-person narrative of Saeed and Nadia, citizens of an unnamed Muslim-majority warring Eastern country, who *exit west* through magical portals. These portals take them to refugee encampments on the island of Mykonos, the outskirts of London, and finally the San Francisco Bay Area. Interspersed in the main narrative are vignettes that describe the journey of other migrants through portals elsewhere. A major theme of the novel is the effects of modern technology, from mobile phones to surveillance and even those that are not always thought of as technological advancements, like transportation.

A historical background for the 2017 novel is the immediacy of the 2015 European Migrant Crisis. According to a 2015 UN High Commissioner for Refugees report, "Over one million refugees and migrants have fled to Europe by sea this year, many on board dangerously inadequate vessels run by people smugglers" (UNHCR). These migrants, mostly Syrians, were fleeing war and persecution, one of many reasons why people migrate. These causes also include environmental factors such as natural disasters, extreme weather, and other sudden changes, all of which is affected by the ongoing problem of climate change.

Hamid's novel is importantly a work of magical realism, a genre of literature that blends realism with fantastical elements. The portals satisfy Wendy Faris's magical realist criterion, outlined in her definition of the genre, the *irreducible element of magic*, or "something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them." (Faris 315). Kowal notices, however, that unlike the magical realist works of García Márquez, Morrison, or Rushdie, to whom critics have compared Hamid, the novel features no other fantastical elements aside

from the portals. Instead, the novel creates a “magical” element of hope and optimism. (Kowal 37). The novel offers some examples of practical ways to mitigate the migrant crisis, namely self-sustaining migrant encampments. A “halo” of these appear around Hamid’s London. However, I argue Hamid’s strongest impact on his readers is his exemplifying optimism and hope in the face of both danger and an often unsupportive world.

The combination of magic and technology in the text, without venturing into science fiction, is an interesting choice for Hamid. As Naydan points out, Hamid is acting as a “literary philosopher of technology” (Naydan 435) who considers the material impacts of our modern age. In this paper, I interpret Hamid’s use of technology and its impacts in his novel, allowing myself a broad definition that includes digital, electronic, and logistical technologies. I describe how Hamid is depicting migration in both realist and magical ways, as real-world migrants use and are impacted by the same technologies.

Mobile Phones

Throughout the novel, Saeed and Nadia use mobile phones to enrich their lives. The novel describes phones as a way for Saeed and Nadia to be “present without presence” (quoted in Naydan 434), or to be together in a virtual sense when they are unable to do so physically. Both Saeed and Nadia use phones to communicate when apart, to communicate with family when they leave home, and to keep up with their home country’s news. By including mobile phones in the novel, Hamid is not only taking part in a philosophical discussion of mobile technologies but showing a correct portrayal of real-world migrant phone use, as supported by migration research.

The novel highlights the importance of the ability to be present without presence when it first mentions phones. When Saeed and Nadia meet alone together for the first time, their phones rested “screens-down between them, like the weapons of desperadoes at a parley” (17). Here, the

novel compares phones obstructing meaningful presence to dangerous and divisive things like weapons. This shows the dual nature of phones and of technology in general: they have both helpful and disadvantageous effects on the physical world. Naydan argues that for migrants, mobile phones are also "screens" in the sense that digital technologies help "screen-out" those who wish to traverse national borders. Access to mobile devices in the novel contributes greatly to the success of Saeed and Nadia, and in real life, lacking such access can be an obstacle in a migrant's path.

After their introduction, the novel sets up a dichotomy of phone use between Saeed and Nadia, developing two opposing patterns of usage. Despite both being in constant possession of their phones, Saeed uses his phone primarily for information and communicating. He sees its entertaining power as a "banquet of limitless food… stuffing himself until he felt dazed and sick" (40), and thus he resists its pull. Nadia, however, uses her phone as an endless source of entertainment. The novel describes her behavior as occupying a space: she "explored the terrain of social media" and "rode [her phone] far out into the world on otherwise solitary, stationary nights" (41). This spatial metaphor references the way we conceptualize phones as portals to a navigable digital "world."

The first piece of infrastructure, other than physical buildings, that is dismantled in Saeed and Nadia's home country is their mobile phone connection, shut off ostensibly as an "anti-terrorism" measure by the government. The novel describes their desolation as they are "deprived of the portals to each other and to the world" (57). Hamid is emphasizing the connection between mobile phone access and physical access: the ability to instantly communicate has become an essential part of present-day social relationships. However, as is the

case of Saeed and Nadia, networks are frail things that can be eliminated easily, severing connections and limiting the ability to be “present without presence.”

Hamid uses mobile phones again as a literary device when Nadia browses news on her phone in London, sitting on the steps of a building. On one headline is an image of a robed woman that Nadia, at first, believes to be herself. The novel describes this experience of Nadia wondering how she could both “read this news and be this news” and a “bizarre feeling of time bending around her” (157). The novel goes on to continue this theme of liminality and unreality to describe news of war, migrants, and nativism, finally comparing the call for nativist violence in Nadia’s London to violence in Nadia’s home country, a powerful equation.

Hamid’s depiction of phone usage, apart from being a literary device, conveys how real-world migrants actually use phones, though the public does not always see migrants and refugees as phone users. Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić, who studied migrants’ digital footprints, point out that “the possession of… a smartphone, is perceived by the public opinion and media reports as incompatible with the status of a »real refugee«” (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 144). And yet, as interviews by Ennaji in a UNESCO report show, refugees use phones and related technologies extensively, finding that “Refugees can spend up to a third of their budget on internet access” (Ennaji 20).

Migrants use mobile phones for many tasks. A review of migrant phone usage research by Mancini et al. found that refugee’s major concerns included informational tasks related to learning of their home country’s news, accessing services in their host country, and acquiring location and weather information while traveling. They found that “mobile devices were the main device used to accomplish these tasks” (Mancini et al. 7), and in one study, 95% of the Syrian refugee participants used smartphones while in route to Europe. Overall, the Syrian

migrants' successful traversal of physical borders partially depended on their use of digital devices, and access to them formed a border of its own. Not having access to electricity or network connection limited their ability to access the information they needed. Mancini et al. found that many accounts of human trafficking of refugees included their immediate withdrawal from mobile phone access, reducing their ability to access help.

Reporting from Taxin and Biraben of The Associated Press describes a mobile phone application called SmartLink which immigrants who have crossed the US-Mexico border are forced to install. The application's purpose is to track migrants awaiting their legal proceedings. While this is touted by the United States government as a cheaper, more humane alternative to temporary imprisonment, advocates argue that this kind of tracking reduces privacy and opens migrants to exploitation through their data. These concerns stem from the lack of control these migrants have over their digital worlds.

Surveillance

Access, control, and digital presence are all themes of mobile phone usage by the migrants in *Exit West* and in real life. However, just as mobile phones produce a dichotomy of helpful and harmful effects on their users, technology in general can cause profoundly negative effects when it is used by those in power against smaller groups. An example of this is the kind of surveillance that can be done using mobile phones, but also through drones and other forms of violent technologies.

Surveillance is observation by a powerful group against a less powerful group, and it is featured explicitly and implicitly throughout *Exit West*. In contrast to mobile phones, which mostly empower Saeed and Nadia, Hamid portrays surveillance as a threatening force, juxtaposing it with more tangible forms of violence. More subtly, Popescu and Jahamah, who

explored state violence in *Exit West* and in another migration novel, argue that "the third-person narrator in *Exit West* functions explicitly as an instrument of surveillance" (134). They reference the reader's ability to access the inner lives of the characters. Furthermore, each chapter of the novel features a short vignette of other migrants exiting portals, many of which include themes of "watching" with power dynamics reflecting surveillance.

Hamid's portrayal of surveillance as a violent force is dependent on surveillance preceding actual or implied violence. For example, the government of London surveils migrants, which sets the scene for violence, as "at night, in the darkness as drones and helicopters and surveillance balloons prowled intermittently overhead, fights would sometimes break out, and there were murders and rapes and assaults as well" (146). The state of constant observation by the governmental forces immediately preceding violence is no coincidence. These measures, as we see later in the chapter, were meant to intimidate migrants into leaving. The mention of both surveillance and violence together further emphasizes the fact that the government is not on their side. It does this by showing that the government is observing violence and doing nothing to stop it—their goal is to remove migrants, not protect them.

Another scene in London mentions the fear that surveillance produces: "even more than the fighter planes and the tanks these robots, few though they were, and the drones overhead, were frightening, because they suggested an unstoppable efficiency, an inhuman power, and evoked a kind of dread" (154). Describing the fear of the surveillance drones as greater than the fear of more tangible violences like planes and tanks is a significant way Hamid rightly portrays surveillance as a form of violence. Like mobile phones, the function of surveillance is to provide its user with the ability to be "present without presence," but in this case the power is in the hands of the oppressor.

In *Exit West,* Hamid depicts the real-world effects of surveillance as a form of violence. One place where surveillance impacts migrants is the Mediterranean Sea, a location where Jumbert points out two ongoing crises: for some, the most concerning problem is the challenge of securing borders against these migrants, that is, preventing migrants from crossing into a country. For others, it is the humanitarian crisis of migrants dying at sea in large numbers (Jumbert 674). Loukinas, in a study of surveillance practices in Greek border zones, points out the connection between these issues: surveillance for security purposes leads to migrants opting to take smaller floating vessels and more dangerous routes in order not to be detected, leading to a measured increase in deaths at sea (Loukinas 442). Loukinas further shows that surveillance, again to secure borders, does not reduce the number of migrants making perilous boat journeys, so surveillance doesn't advance the cause of securing borders after all, only leading to migrant death.

Jumbert's concern that migrants are dying at sea in greater numbers, can however, be an application of surveillance. In a study of the aims and limits of surveillance in the Mediterranean, she argues that the same surveillance technologies used to control borders can be used to find and rescue migrants in distress. She points out that rescuing distressed vessels is itself an obligation under international law (Jumbert 686). This parallels with the monitoring of violence without intervention in Hamid's London, which further emphasizes that migrants face governments that do not seek to save or aid them.

Transportation

The use of transportation in the novel is uniquely not realist, and instead magical realist. Perfect, in an article about Hamid's depiction of refugees, points out that the choice of portals allows Hamid to "skip over" the entire journey of migrants, one that is often risky and perilous

(Perfect 196). The novel describes portals as magically transformed versions of existing doors that transport the user into a doorway in a different location. The novel constantly emphasizes that they are "dark," initially using a literary reference: "the closet doorway was dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness" (8). All vignettes also feature migrants traveling through portals, and Saeed and Nadia do so to travel from their home country to Mykonos, and later to London and San Francisco.

The novel describes teleporting through portals as a distressing experience. When Nadia first enters a portal, she "felt a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it" (104). While this does align with the hardships of migration, it is curious that Hamid would decide to remove an otherwise core part of the migrant experience from the novel. Perfect notes that this removal "risks negating the extraordinarily hazardous, frequently traumatic, and often deadly nature of the journeys undertaken by displaced people" (Perfect 196). Perfect argues that Hamid might believe the kind of suffering experienced by migrants is not representable by literature, and the inclusion of a new, magical technology allows readers to consider the impacts of real technologies. In addition to Perfect's point about technology, I argue that the portals collapse the journey of migrants into a single step that can be used as a literary device to foreground broader observations on migration.

On the island of Mykonos, Saeed and Nadia live in a refugee encampment that functions as a kind of waiting-space where refugees' goals are to *exit west* to more desirable locations. The military guards these areas, but only if they are considered desirable, as the novel says, "The doors out… the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured" (106). The in-out, richer-poorer alignment that Hamid sets up here emphasizes that anti-migrant actors prevent migrants from entering desired

destinations but encourage them to return to places where, like in Saeed and Nadia's case, they experience danger. Furthermore, as Lagji argues, the doors show how international organizations and nations prioritize preventing movement over addressing the actual causes of movement (Lagji 225). While Saeed and Nadia are helped and shown empathy by a native of Mykonos, the military seeks only to prevent their escape.

Hamid himself has also explained his choice of portals in an NPR Fresh Air interview, explaining that he feels the doors are already present in our lives in the way we can instantly communicate via the internet. He also emphasizes his decision to focus on the reasons that lead people to migrate and their lives after migrating (Hamid). In another interview with Anne Brice of *Berkeley News,* he points out how the public uses the journey of migrants to reduce or other migrants. He says, "I don't intend to minimize the dangers and difficulties of migration with the doors. I intend to minimize the strength of our instinct to treat our fellow humans as 'other.'" (Brice). Hamid describes the portals as a device to build reader empathy, as the experience of being in one place and then another is one everyone can relate to. The use of this magical technology in Hamid's novel, while not a portrayal of real migrant journeys, works rhetorically to point reader attention to other aspects of the migrant experience.

Conclusion

Hamid, acting as a "literary philosopher of technology," includes real-world technology such as mobile phones, surveillance, and transportation in his novel *Exit West* in order to present a simultaneously realist and magical representation of the migration experience. Mobile phone access can empower migrants, while lacking control over their digital worlds can put them in harm's way. Surveillance is a kind of violence that anti-migrant actors use to cause material, measurable harm. Finally, transportation, a defining characteristic of migrants, is presented

magically to build empathy and foreground specific aspects of the migrant experience apart from the physical journey itself.

The way our modern age affects migrants positively and negatively should be a focus of both future research and future literary work, both of which serve to benefit migrants, people who work with them, and readers. Hamid's portrayal of a hopeful migrant experience using technology works towards this focus, building reader empathy at a time in history where it is needed more than ever.

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