

VIGNETTE OF MIGRATION AND REFUGEE CRISIS IN EXIT WEST

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ABSTRACT: "When we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind". Migration is not only a geographical displacement but a displacement of culture, history and ideas and causes deep psychological crises and internal moral conflict. Diasporic literature is an umbrella term that includes all the literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but the works are associated with native culture and background. It has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. The diasporic experience has been reflected in the novel *Exit West*. The present study emphasis on Migration experience and Refugee crisis with the novel, *Exit West*.

Keywords: Migration, Refugee, Surrealism, Change, Love.

The nation being religious brings unity amongst the nation but then isolates from the entirety. This is true in case of Pakistan. Geographically, linguistically, culturally and historically South Asia is a vital part of Pakistan's personality. Yet for decades a majority of Pakistani policy makers, intellectuals and strategists have attempted to virtually relocate Pakistani within the Muslim Arab Middle East to make their religious identity strong. Pakistan is unique among Muslim countries in that it is the only country to have been created in the name of Islam. It is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country, with a similarly diverse geography and wildlife.

Literature in Pakistan has evolved its own identity and become the socio-cultural document of an era of hope and hardships. Mohsin Hamid is a Pakistani novelist, writer and brand consultant. He has been called a water lily for the way he has drifted from place to place. His novel *Exit West* was published in 2017 and it was long listed for Man Booker Prize.

In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid pursues a highly idealistic but worthy goal that regards our planet's geography, its borders and resources in a different way. *Exit West* is a wonder of a novel. Hamid's stunning writing flows elegantly and beautifully, inspite of its obvious political undercurrents, it is not an overtly political story. Instead, Hamid strives to take a more universal, existential and ultimately hopeful view on the issue of the refugee crisis and how the global community is reacting to it. There is also romance but that is far from a conventional love story.

Hamid presents the constant churn of connection versus alienation, of new possibilities versus bittersweet nostalgia, of the cages the people build for themselves that the people yearn to transcend versus the freedom they long for but also fear, of the comfort and joy of love versus how that love turns to loss and heartbreak: these all apply to particular lives and Nadia and Saeed's tales for certain, but also to the essence of what it means to be human. Hamid does allow the characters to become as important as his larger ideas and themes, also the estrangement of Nadia and Saeed as they encounter sectarian war, death, hunger, fear, refugee, camps, the anger and kindness of strangers on their journey of migration.

Exit West is brief, but it packs quite a punch, distilling into one novel the entire experience of migration of two characters. While there's just enough detail that the violence driving migration is recognizably of our times, mostly Hamid is interested in withholding detail in order to render migration in universal terms that transcend contemporary politics and posit migration both as an inevitable fact of life and in some cases, as an engine for positive change.

The true beauty of *Exit West* is the delicacy and humanity with which Hamid shows the self-discovery of Nadia and Saeed as they react to their new surroundings. Saeed grows more devout as his religion becomes his primary lifeline to his past and his beloved parents, while Nadia seeks new experiences that her former nation denied her. Their romantic relationship slowly fades and is replaced by a different, sibling-like bond; the deep knowledge that comes from watching a person evolve from their origins.

In *Exit West*, migration is a fundamental form of change. While Hamid is not naive about the dark side of migration; the omnipresent threat of violence, the pain of losing a homeland, the resentment towards newcomers, he makes effort to show the beautiful new possibilities that migration can produce. When Nadia and Saeed finally settle down in an immigrant built new city in Marin country, the melting pot of their new home is breeding new artistic and culinary forms, while the pool of willing labour builds homes and communities.

Hamid also briefly departs from Nadia and Saeed's story to tell vignettes from around the world, including two lonely oldmen from different continents finding solace together, and a suicidal Englishman who departs for Africa and finds a new lease on life. Another vignette shows a woman who has lived her whole life in one house, only to see the neighbourhood transform around her; the narrator concludes, "...when she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it. We are all migrants through time." (Hamid 209). With this magnanimous point of view, Hamid encapsulates the generosity of his message, not casting blame on opponents of migration, but portraying it as an inevitable facet of nature and change something that can be embraced or merely endured, but cannot be denied. Nadia and Saeed are taken by the undertow of compulsory migration and are dragged, both willingly and unwillingly into the throes of global migration.

The enduring precariousness of the migrants' lives, though, does not preclude the genesis of new social forms. The camps on Mykonos are inhabited by people 'falling within a band of brown that ranged from dark chocolate to milky tea', who speak 'in a cacophony that was the languages of the world'. In this context, 'everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was'. This emergent understanding of difference as sameness is deepened, for Nadia especially, in London. There, she and Saeed find themselves residing in a sprawling house evidently absent its lawful owners but convivially occupied by Nigerians, Somalis, and others "...from as far west as Guatemala and as far

east as Indonesia.” (Hamid 124) The house’s council meetings, represent ‘something new in her mind, the birth of something new’ the idea of a polity founded on the exigencies of mutual survival, wherein difference is the source of the universal rather than its violent corollary.

The refugee crisis portrayed in *Exit West* has been injected with Surrealism focusing the refugees to migrate the land they live in a whisk. Freud initiated the psychoanalytic critiques of surrealism with his remark that what interested him most about the surrealists was not their unconscious but their conscious. His meaning was that the manifestations of and experiments with psychic automatism highlighted by Surrealists as the liberation of the unconscious were highly structured by ego activity similar to the activities of the dream censorship in dreams and that therefore it was in principle a mistake to regard surrealist poems and other art works as direct manifestations of the unconscious when they were indeed highly shaped and processed by the ego.

In this view the Surrealists may have been producing great works but they were products of the conscious not the unconscious mind and they deceived themselves with regard to what they were doing with the unconscious. In psychoanalysis proper the unconscious does not just express itself automatically but can only be uncovered through the analysis of resistance and transference in the psychoanalytic process.

The device of a magical door is reminiscent of C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, in which four children find a secret passageway, through a wardrobe in a spare room, to the mysterious realm of Narnia. There animals can talk, and good and evil openly battle. In the novel, it sounds perversely counterintuitive of Hamid to use a fairy-tale-like device as a way to move his characters from their war-torn homeland to a new life in the West. The treacherous journeys undertaken by refugees across seas or deserts; at the mercy of the sun, rain, cold, heat, hunger, thirst and unscrupulous smugglers; among other untold random terrors were condensed into a simple step through a portal.

Hamid, however, is less interested in the physical hardships faced by refugees in their crossings than in the psychology of exile and the haunting costs of loss and dislocation. Having left their families, their villages or their countries, many of the characters in his earlier novels, like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, also felt like outsiders yearning to escape the bounds of family or class or expectation, and yet at the same time homesick for some sense of roots and belonging. And in *Exit West*, Hamid does a harrowing job of conveying what it is like to leave behind family members, and what it means to leave home, which, however dangerous or oppressive it’s become, still represents everything that is familiar and known. For Saeed, prayer remains a way to connect with his dead mother and his beloved father, who refused to make the journey with him and Nadia. He prayed fundamentally as a gesture of love for what had gone and would go and could be loved in no other way. Saeed thinks that prayer was

...Saeed would pray with his father and the men, and prayer for him became about being a man, being one of the men, a ritual that connected him to adulthood and to the notion of being a particular sort of man, a gentleman, a gentle man, a man who stood for community and faith and kindness and decency, a man, in other words, like his father. (Hamid 200-201)

By mixing the real and the surreal, and using old fairy-tale magic, Hamid has created a fictional universe that captures the global perils percolating beneath today’s headlines, while at the same time painting an unnervingly dystopian portrait of what might lie down the road. The world in *Exit West* is, in many respects, an extrapolation of the world, people live in now, with wars like the one in Syria turning cities into war zones; with political crises, warp-speed technological changes, and growing tensions between nativists and migrants threatening to upend millions of lives.

Hamid creates a plot relevant to today’s global issues, yet many seemingly important details are left out. Although the discussion of immigration, refugees, faith, and the constant fighting between ‘natives and migrants’ imply controversial subjects, the language of *Exit West* keeps the novel from being about a specific crisis. Hamid never clarifies which country his characters are originally from or what religion they practise or what language they speak. Although certain practices such as prayers throughout the day and women wearing robes seem to imply that the two are Muslim, this is not explicitly stated. This ambiguity might make it hard to contextualize the deeper messages of a novel about race and religion, but it actually makes it more applicable. This vagueness also sheds light on a particular refugee experience, while suppressing any prejudice a reader may have that could influence their ability to sympathize with those who must flee their homes. Its obscurity allows this text to be read in many different ways, depending on what global issue it is being compared to.

Exit West is a remarkable accomplishment nevertheless, not putting a human face on refugees so much as putting a refugee face on all of humankind. Saeed and Nadia seem thinly sketched as characters by design, standing in as an everyman and everywoman who can communicate the ordinariness of the apocalypse. Their love affair is complicated, as most love affairs are, and is challenged to an unthinkable degree by the conditions they find themselves in. But together, they represent the instinct to find communion with other people, and to love even amid circumstances that mean loving another makes you twice as vulnerable.

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