

Mapping Postmodernism: A Critical Study of *Exit West*; A Novel by Mohsin Hamid

Mashooque Ali Jamari¹ Mukesh Meghwar² Sadaruddin Meerani³ Safdar Shah⁴

¹ Primary School Teacher, School Education and Literacy Department (SE&LD) Government of Sindh, Pakistan.

✉ mashooquealijamarith@gmail.com

² Primary School Teacher, School Education and Literacy Department (SE&LD) Government of Sindh, Pakistan.

✉ mukeshkumar034146@gmail.com

³ BS Scholar, Department of English Linguistics and Literature, Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan.

✉ sadaruddinmirani2020@gmail.com

⁴ MS Scholar, Department of Education, Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan

✉ safdar.shah@szabist.edu.pk

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Abstract: *Exit West* by Pakistani-born British novelist Mohsin Hamid sheds light on the Postmodern factors of society, the global refugee crisis, migration, dystopia, and Sexual Orientation. The present research underlines the various aspects and dimensions of these issues, revealing the state's brutality against citizens. The study is set to describe Hamid's critique of postmodern society. Mainly, magical realism reveals some protesting implications against mistreatment and exploitation by government authorities. The present study uses a qualitative research design. The data is analyzed using textual and thematic analysis as research tools. Data collection and data analysis are done simultaneously. The findings suggest that the novel is a representation of the Muslim world affected by wars, terrorism, and military rule that cause people to emigrate to the West.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Refugee Crisis, Magical Realism, Dystopia, Otherness



Corresponding Author:

Mashooque Ali Jamari

Primary School Teacher, School Education and Literacy Department (SE&LD) Government of Sindh, Pakistan.

✉ mashooquealijamarith@gmail.com

Introduction

With the depiction of people suffering from a chaotic situation, leaving their natives with no chance to come back, "*Exit West*" of Mohsin Hamid is a truly Postmodern novel with the themes of Dystopia, Migration, Civil Wars, and Western ideologies such as sexual orientation, and all these issues emerge in Post-Modern society. Hamid's *Exit West* revolves around two central characters, Saeed and Nadia, in which he seems to elevate the social and political conditions of an unnamed city, where martial interference forces people to leave their native places. It is a portrayal of an unnamed territory where people are displaced. Saeed and Nadia, the protagonists, first meet when they are taking evening classes as students. The male protagonist, Saeed, follows the cultural customs and norms; he is not an independent man and lives with his family. The female protagonist, Nadia, lives alone in an apartment on rent. At the very beginning of the story, Saeed and Nadia meet "in a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war" (Hamid, 2017, p. 3). Shortly, the domain of the city becomes worse, the military's interference increases, and the murders of vernaculars occur. The Curfews cause people anxiety, and they feel the insecurity of their lives in this war-like situation and a death-torn country. Therefore, people set their way to neighboring countries, and approach certain mysterious doors which will transfer them to happier spots. The host countries start building borders to encounter a high ratio of migrants. Moreover, in migrant camps, people face the crisis of their identities because they are not supposed to demonstrate any position. They live in tent cities together with people from different areas, communities, and cultures. So, this multiculturalism creates serious problems for refugees.

The present research also answers: how does Hamid portray an image of a dystopian society, and what are the consequences of this war-like situation? The novel encloses the facts that how much migrants are troubled when they

leave their natives, "When we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind (Hamid, 2017, p. 94) and in new lands, they are considered "other". For the writer's technical language and plot construction "Exit West's narrative style enables the reader to look at events from multiple perspectives and to fully understand the constantly mutating dynamics between the two young refugees" (Calderari Matthias, 2020, p. 3). Exit West is the elusiveness of a migrant's dream, which will bring happiness and peace to them. Dehumanization and devaluation are characterized in the novel, and it is a topic of pivotal importance in post-colonial literature as well. However, Migration, Civil Wars, and Dystopia are all contemporaneous and widespread subject matters, so the novel is the documentation of society, and these are key issues due to forced migration and labor migration in Europe.

The multi-awarded novel "Exit West" by Pakistani-born British novelist Mohsin Hamid sheds light on the serious issues concerning Muslim countries, possibly due to the increasing ratio of terrorism and its roots there. So, in this context, both protagonists seem to be the nativists of Muslim countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, and as well as Pakistan. This is not merely an assumption but a proven fact, because there are certain causes behind it, i.e., incidents of 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London, etc. These incidents have been the topic of great debates. However, Mohsin Hamid has emphasized these topics in his other works, especially in "The Reluctant Fundamentalist". The present research also reveals how and in what ways magical realism has been helpful to Mohsin Hamid in registering a protest against mistreatment and exploitation. Hamid reconnoiters the ongoing issues of identity crises, displacement, relocation, and change even with a war-ridden and quickly growing world in his novel "Exit West". The novel shadows the lives of the two characters, Nadia and Saeed, as war and a radical system drives them to leave their home country in the quest for shelter in the West.

It is a story about displaced and dislocated people and their encounters, too, and it is made common with the help of magically made dark and narrow doors that take displaced people to better places. Hamid symbolizes human smuggling through these magical doors. The darkness and narrowness of walls throughout the way symbolize fear, risk, and dangers faced by the refugees. After reading "Exit West" one may feel sympathy for the refugees because the novel portrays a realistic picture of society. The author is speculating an age wherein we all will be displaced; all will be refugees. Hamid rightly says, "we all are migrants through time" (Hamid, 2017, p. 90). We are specified peeps of the world where everyone is by all accounts progressing. In other words, everyone is on the passage. According to Mir, the novel is a "timely reflection of the events of the modern world where everyone seems to be on the move" (Mir, 2018, pp. 15-16) Wars and radical distinctive changes which cannot be ran out in the time to come. Though this gives "Exit West" a swoon touch of science fiction too. However, while dealing with the subject of the unavoidable mass replacement of people, the physical and mental suffering faced by the refugees has also been superbly delineated. Hamid has strived to change our perception about the ideas of nationhood and borders. He cliques a unique methodology on the issue of mass movement of people by presenting an entirely unexpected perspective on world geography and artificial borders. The writer attempts that "nothing is genuinely tragic in Nadia and Saeed's relationship, just as nothing is tragic in their ulterior separation caused by the estrangement accumulated " (Gheorghiu, 2018, p. 88).

Magical Realism

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Magical Realism has been the popular writing style among English writers. It leaves a lot of booklovers in misperception. A manner that subsists somewhere between imaginary and realism, several readers get it assorted with hypothetical fiction, urban imaginary, and more. It can be disturbing, and some readers discover it annoying.

Mohsin Hamid uses magical realism writing techniques to talk over the consequences and traits of a dystopian society, which he has artistically dealt with and symbolized, such as migration. This technique has opened up new challenges in the field, and "the result is that most of the novel's politically subversive potential is not carried by the single element of magical realism (teleportation)" (Kowal, 2020, p. 37). While discussing the elements of magical realism in her paper Anum admits that Mohsin Hamid's central purpose of using these elements of magical realism is to "draw a vivid picture of change, migration and the dangers they entail" (Aziz, 2018, p. 3). Of course, the novel represents a glimpse of Saeed and Nadia's travel to different areas, it can also be said that Hamid has used these elements of



Magical Realism to concomitantly criticize the existing aggressive social and political conditions. As far as the elements of Magical Realism are concerned Anum admits that the elements have very carefully been placed by Hamid in the right places. She states Hamid has used magical elements to portray a vivid landscape of transformation and displacement and the threats they entail. Further, she stresses the painful situations which Hamid has emulated throughout the novel. She also puts down Hamid's style of blending magical elements with that of real life. Anum Writes "He subtly blends in the magical elements with the real by referring to the magical "doors" as "dark rectangles" (Aziz, 2018, p. 2). Though, the magical elements can also be seen as the delineations of the rule of smugglers in this sort of condition like war times. Anum concludes her study with the statement "Hamid uses the story of their journey to create a microcosm of the globe which is constantly changing and reforming due to the onslaught of terrorism" (Aziz, 2018, p. 3). Using these magical elements Hamid has shown how quickly the world is changing. He has tried to discover technological advancements. Hamid has created an imaginary world in which long distances mean a little. He has discovered new secret doors which transport people within seconds too long away.

While reading "Exit West" one may feel sympathy for the refugees since the novel portrays a realistic picture of society. For he has adopted the symbolic style of writing the mere reader may not easily understand, close concentration is required to get real meaning and concept of the story. The use of magical elements may also imply a postmodern world; in other words, we may say that he has presented an online world. Hamid wants to show how we inhabitants are connected by having different geographies. Though with great distance we are in contact with each other via social media and there are several other sources of communication. Hamid portrays a picture of today's world; he might have shown the rapid progress of science and technology. The author shows that no matter if we are sitting hundreds of miles away, but we have access to each other, we can video call someone who is far away.

Sexual Orientation

Apart from these themes, the novel also encompasses the theme of sexual behavior. Md. Al Walid has given a wonderful and completely new meaning to the novel. For him, sexual fluidity is one of the novel's angles to be researched. For several reasons, "the novel introduces us to heterosexual relationships" (Walid, 2021, p. 15) in several places. Concerning Postmodernism, the ideological shifts can easily be traced in the literature produced after the 1960s, especially in fiction. Postmodernism has brought an idea of Westernization, in result people of eastern ideologies have lost their own indigenous cultures and ethics. It has reduced social, moral, and as well as virtuous values, especially "from the 1960s to present day, the postmodern era has transformed and dominated Western culture of self-understanding" (Kapus, 2018, p. 4). Due to the ideological alteration from the contemporary war attitude, diverse views of society including politics, sexuality, religion and race relations have been influenced to conform to the postmodern perspective's framework or worldview. The character of Nadia is a clear-cut example of Postmodern individuality, for instance, "they ...always stopping short of sex, upon which she no longer insisted, and which they had by now found ample means to circumvent" (Hamid, 2017, p. 80). Postmodernism has threatened the family structure because in postmodernism an individual has much more freedom. Therefore, the traditional family structure has broken down. The Postmodern concept of collectivism has been replaced with individuality and individual values, which have no more place in this era. About an individual "Postmodern sexuality has also triggered a major change in ideology; traditional values of the marriage covenant, fidelity, emotional and sexual intimacy" (Kapus, 2018, p. 4).

However, the usual life has evolved into a segregated society. The concept of the coalition has collapsed. In the Postmodern era "Marriage has become deinstitutionalized and individualized (Kapus, 2018, p. 4). Post-modernism refers to the series of abstract bases and ideologies which may be defined as opposition to those of the generally attributed to modernism and its concepts of science and knowledge. The growth of intellectualism and scientism in Modernism caused people in mental disorders so, Postmodernism suppressed scientism. In both World Wars, science played a major role in the destruction of human lives, and after the bloodshed in World War II, Post-Modernism emerged against various ideological concepts of modernism. It raised reactions against Enlightenment ideas embedded in modernist literature. Modernism abides faith in the notions, beliefs, culture, values, and norms of the West, Postmodernism discards Western values and principles as a minor part of human experience and which rejects such ideas, beliefs, culture, and norms. It questions the objective truth and philosophers and authors are unsatisfied

with World War II, the Cold War, and conspiracy theories. As human, we cannot aloof from the basic conditions of humanity. Love and sex are both natural phenomena and cannot easily be avoided. No matter how much terrible life they have experienced but “sex, however, is obvious in Saeed and Nadia’s relationship as they are having continuous close times together” (Walid, 2021, p. 17). In *Exit West*, Nadia questions patriarchal values; she is independent and rejects stereotypical roles, and she chooses her own ways to live. Across their journey, Nadia has gradually adopted Western ideology, and she casts off old values. For instance, “in *Exit West*, the female protagonist deconstructs the cliché image of the Muslim woman with her courage, her sexual identity, and her liberating views of herself and the world on the move” (Tekin, 2021, p. 33).

Dystopia

Due to the unstable political conditions and civil wars people put their lives at risk, and for people from war torn countries “the human world has been converted into a dystopian society where everyone is steered by powerful authorities, of which Nadia and Saeed are exponents” (Nayab et al., 2020, p. 590).

It also pictures a dystopian society trapped in civil war. Gilbert Sophie admits “*Exit West* is a story about how familiar a persistent human existence is, even at the edge of dystopia” (Sophie, 2017). Gilbert’s statement directly points out the life of Saeed and Nadia because throughout their journey they both, facing the troubles, have also experienced love. So, this love at the edge of dystopia has been a key point of Gilbert’s discussion. By Gilbert’s view, we come to know that no matter how difficult human life is, the true essence of life and as well as passions cannot be elevated. It is quite difficult to overcome the rash challenges of life and to counter the obstacles to fulfill the existence with joy. In one of his interviews, Hamid said that in the *Exit West* he has represented life not as the basic condition of humanity. The romance of Saeed and Nadia in the tent city in Mykonos and as well as in other places gives two possible meanings in the novel, one, that it is just an alternate to take off from the intimidating circumstances of their country and second, that it is the depiction of basic condition of humanity. No matter how bad the worst conditions are, love is invulnerable. It is the story of a couple who spent a troubled life, first in a state trapped in the civil war and later, in migrant camps.

In her paper, she has analyzed the novel from the perspective of historical fiction. She has also emphasized the issue of the refugee crisis in a particular context of Politics. She critically develops an understanding based on her observation of the social problems across the world. She believes that the novel is a representation of historical events. Gheorghiu adds that while reading the novel (*Exit West*) or as well as writing about refugees “the battle of Mosul (Iraq) and the Yemenite Civil War coming immediately to mind”. (Gheorghiu, 2018, pp. 88-93) she has endeavored to sketch the picture, not only of Syria, affected by civil war and aggressive social conditions but also some historical events, through the lenses of modernism. His discussion about the novel is not only well-grounded but also remarkable because of the themes which he has discussed Hamid has also esteemed. Gheorghiu grasped the story as the documentation or history of the lives of Syrian, Afghanistanian, and as well as turkey. Since the last couple of years, both countries Syria and Afghanistan have produced a large number of refugees.

It has already been discussed that the novel is not about a particular geographical place. Then one can simply associate this novel with refugees from North Waziristan and as well as some other areas trapped in civil war. Though going a few years in Pakistan’s political and social history the unnamed country is “quite identifiable as Pakistan, and the unspecified militants as the Taliban” (Sadaf, 2020, p. 639). Pakistan army’s attacks in different areas of North Waziristan are subject to producing a high ratio of refugees. Consequently, the theme of the novel is in itself universal.

Migration

Thousands of refugees drowned during their journey to European countries. Approximately four thousand people lost their lives by 2015 while crossing the Mediterranean congested into unseaworthy and overcrowded boats by traffickers. Many were struck with diseases and died, several families were broken. Although the number of refugees entering Europe peaked at just over one million in 2015. Of this, half were Syrian, while twenty percent were from Afghanistan and only seven percent refugees were from Iraq, and the remaining 33 percent were from Africa. Most of the refugees from Africa crossed the borders because they were trying to reach Europe through the borders of Libya.



The deficiency and the lack of an effective rule of government in Libya have supported people traffickers to control almost unrestricted out of Libyan ports. There are rumors that many refugees are being sold and made as slaves in Libya. Somalia and Lebanon are also experiencing refugee crises but the high flow from Syria. Hamid may represent the conditions of Syrian refugees because Syria is experiencing the worst conditions.

There is a long history of displacement in several disciplines. In the last decade, this has been extensively studied due to the increase in migration. These topics have always been under constant investigation and development for the emigrants who have created disturbance in the world. In just the past few years, this has emerged as a phenomenon of exceptional interest for the reason that, it has extensively been observed that there has been overcrowding and social disturbance among the natives. There are certain other disadvantages of mass migration for host countries such as the discrepancy between diverse religions and cultures, the increasing cost of the services of health and education, and racism. "Hamid in this magical romance unearths the global conflicts and political maneuvers buried under smooth world surface" (Nayab et al., 2020, p. 591).

The readers may miss the alarming and hazardous refugee's adventures, however that is not Hamid's interest. However, his point of convergence is what befalls refugees before "leaving" their country and after "arriving" at their new destinations. The doors are not only images for the moment transportation of refugees yet additionally a solid character affecting the lives of a huge number of people. Mohsin Hamid weaves it into the primary string of the story in such an adroit way that we take it in immediately with no reservations. The technique, therefore, is a purposeful consideration, not an insignificant possibility, which empowers the author to add a basic component to the standard life of displaced people: the impacts of present-day innovation in other words modern technology.

It is a bitter truth that whenever there is migration, people create a lot of problems when they get there. It has bad effects upon natives, their cultures, languages, and privacy are distorted. Because refugees need a lot of time to understand the new environment. Obviously, they need health facilities, educational facilities, and space to settle on. So, the result is that "they see the world through the filter of the ruling paradigm, the reality is distorted, and their anger is directed towards the refugees" (Bağlama, 2019, p. 153).

Though many research studies suggest that the high population growth in South African countries and especially the Middle East, was one of the driving forces behind the crisis. On the other hand, it is also suggested by the researchers that "Global Warming" can also increase emigrant pressures in the upcoming times. In many cases, migration has been a shelter or as well as a cover for the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL). Though, militants disguised as refugees or immigrants as well. By religious associations, the bulk of contestants were Muslim, usually Sunni Muslim, having a small part of non-Muslim sections. According to the reports of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the chief three races of refugees crossed seas were over 1 million in the Mediterranean. These sea arrivals of refugees include 46.7% Syrian, 20.9% Afghanis, and 9.4% Iraqi. These reports show the number of refugees who traveled between January 2015 and March 2016. Belonging to different countries, all migrants were living together in London, and this was the reason that nativists, as well as the government authorities, created problems for them.

Mohsin Hamid uses the narrative of their adventure to make a microcosm of the earth which is continuously fluctuating and transforming because of the invasion, violence, war, and uprooting. "Exit West" deliberates these progressions with hopefulness for a progressively fluid world that wavers among societies and individualities easily. Along these lines, at last, while Nadia and Saeed meet again following five decades in the once tumultuous city of their beginnings, they now envision gazing at the stars in Chile. Though they have changed, they remain the same individuals, embodying the essence of real people and their growth. Hamid's narrative is a clear, idealistic, and real depiction of our modern age. His ongoing Sitara-E-Imtiaz (Star of Excellence) from the government of Pakistan is a timely and merited corroboration of his eminence. Hamid's story presents a vivid, optimistic, and authentic representation of contemporary society. His continuous receipt of the Sitara-E-Imtiaz (Star of Excellence) from the Pakistani government serves as a timely and deserved acknowledgment of his distinction.

In the present era, displacement, a phenomenon as old as human civilization, seems to prompt the redefinition of borders as we have known them the transformation of boundaries as we have understood them since the



development of national states. It is most likely in this key that Mohsin Hamid's most recent creation should be read, after all, as a commitment, with the key authors of fiction, available to them, not to the recognizable proof of an answer for a world crisis, yet to another understanding and acknowledgment of the Author. Hamid has used incredibly simple, yet powerful and significant, composition interlaced with components of magical realism to tell an account of humankind's influx through the experiences of the two characters. He reconnoiters the temporariness of human contact in the greater plan of the world which in any case frames bonds and leaves enduring effect, forming characters, and evolving lives. Regardless of the significance and depth of the topic, *Exit West* never gets depressing and keeps on painting a hopeful and varied image of a world with an intrinsic comprehension of human instinct and wealth of silliness.

Conclusion

Postmodernism Demoralizes the beliefs of human beings, and it alters the actual reality. *Exit West* is all about the catastrophic experiences of displaced peoples, those who are forced to leave their natives. Hamid uses Magical realism writing style to fantasize his readers. *Exit West* is Mohsin Hamid's criticism on Postmodern society, displacement, migration, Sexual Orientation and social injustice. There is not only injustice of law in the native country of the protagonists, but issues arise in the form of discrimination, wherever they go. It further makes lives more destructive and more painful. Hamid's version of Mykonos is a transit area, where thousands of refugees live in tents, in a camp, outside the city, and trade for water, blankets, and access to electricity, to charge their phones while robbing others or guarding themselves against being robbed. The novel is a realistic literary representation of the hard times endured by refugees, calling to mind disturbing images of their wretched existence, broadcast by European televisions in the summer of 2015. Hamid portrays Mykonos as a temporary refuge, where countless refugees reside in tents within a camp on the outskirts of the city. They barter for essentials like water, blankets, and electricity to charge their phones, all while either stealing from others or protecting themselves from theft. The novel serves as a stark literary depiction of the harsh realities faced by refugees, evoking unsettling visuals of their dire living conditions, which were widely shown on European television during the summer of 2015. The novel indicates an idea of westernization overlapping the eastern ethical and moral values. Researchers have tried to reference all those incidents, which certainly make the reader realize the brutality of the state.



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