

# UNSETTLING AND UPROOTING: DEPICTION OF MIGRATION IN MOHSIN HAMID'S EXIT WEST

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**ABSTRACT--** Migration, regardless of voluntary or forced has always been a representation of human individuality and group conduct. The displacement of humans from their native place is always a matter of conflict between countries. The problems and crisis that refugees face in the present world has its roots in the two World Wars. Millions of people can be seen taking shelter in different host countries. An uncertainty in economic conditions and wars are pressurising a lot of people to migrate from their own countries to other places in search of a better life. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) is such a novel that discuss about the inescapable relocation of people across nations and even across continents when the world is fully occupied by commotion and disorder. In world marked by this kind of hard heartedness, art often place a key role in sharing the stories of love, humanity and compassion. *Exit West*, shortlisted for the 2017 Booker Prize has become an epitome of such a portrayal. The novel discusses the random and frequently appearing anonymous characters in a similar imaginary world and they recount their experiences of managing in such a situation. By adding a tinge of magic realism, Hamid has created a well-made plot that portrays the universal menace while at the same time it discusses about the digital influence of modern era- smart phones which is mentioned in many places in the novel. It is indeed a socially relevant novel which arrived at an apt time, a time characterised by refugee issues worldwide. Hamid asks us to visualise ourselves in the place of others as everyone share equal problems. As Hamid says, "We are all migrants through time".

**KEY WORDS--** Migration, Refugees, Social Issue, Magic Realism, Digital influence

## I. INTRODUCTION

International migration has been a widely discussed topic and is of much intellectual interest in today's world. Because of this new trend, literatures on migration is been steadily increasing. There are many factors that contribute to this trend of migration. This includes both negative and positive factors. Positive factors include emergence of free market societies, people going to other countries for job opportunities, agricultural innovations and higher education. In fact globalisation is also a major factor. The negative factors include wars, diseases, colonisation, economic instability etc. Migration due to positive factors is never forced but on the other hand, migration due to wars and chaos are always forced upon the people. This trend is seen on large scale in our world nowadays which has its roots in the two World Wars. Even after eight decades after the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, this practise is still continuing. In such a situation marked by hard heartedness, literature seems to be the most effective way to share stories of love, humanity and compassion. One such work of art is Mohsin

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Hamid's novel, *Exit West*, (2017). *Exit West* shows new direction in mobility studies, migration studies and postcolonial literature with reference to the influence of new technologies (smart phones) in the lives of the protagonists. This novel which is shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2017 had also won multiple awards globally including the LA Times Book Prize. The issues of identity, change, forced migration and its traumas in the present face of a war-ridden and fast-evolving world has been addressed in this novel. Magic realism has also been used as a feature in the novel to tell the story of flux and transience in the life of the protagonists.

## II. DEPICTION OF MIGRATION IN EXIT WEST

"In a city swollen by refugees"- this is how the novel opens. The name of the city or country is not mentioned. The protagonists are two young people, Saeed and Nadia. The settings reveal some kind of Muslim background. Nadia is an unconventional young woman who stays away from her parents and is an independent lady. This decision of her, to live away from her parents makes her unconventional in the highly traditional place. Saeed, on the other hand is a well-mannered young man who lives with his happy family. They meet in "an evening class on corporate identity and product branding" (Hamid, 1). They notice each other and slowly fell in love with each other while the world around them is full of chaos and conflicts. The city is undergoing transition from a peaceful place to a dangerous and confronting one. There is civil wars taking place in their country but the reason for the war or the participants of the war is not mentioned anywhere in the novel. In midst of this abyss, the young couple fall in love. Both of them are well educated and they know how to face the situation. Even Saeed's parents are well read and they easily accept Nadia into their family. A sudden change in their life occurs when Saeed's mother is killed in the war. And then they are forced to flee the city. Herein comes the portion of magic realism in the novel. They escape through 'strange magical black doors' and these doors open onto places like London, San Francisco, Greece or Dubai. Refugees arriving in new places are completely uncertain about the situation and the place of arrival since they only feel a sense of danger all around.

Saeed and Nadia move from places to places, but each place has its own challenges, hardships and danger. All they have as a hope are the radio announcements which pave a way for them. Also, they have their smartphones with them, which is a fact mentioned more than once in the novel. This shows that the novel takes place in recent times, a time that is technologically advanced. And the irony is that even when technology is so much advanced, man's mind is still primitive due to which he still practises such heinous crimes. Saeed and Nadia and all other people in the city are shown as very reliant on their smart phones to know about the events happening around them. Among Saeed and Nadia, Nadia was a bit more influenced by phones as she saw no need to limit the use of phones. Also, she frequently explored and is an active member of the social media. These minute details are used by Hamid to show that it is our contemporary world and not the ages before. When the war was at its peak, every mobile phone in the city lost the signal and Nadia and countless others felt afraid and isolated since their life was so much dependent on their smartphones.

Meanwhile, tensions were rising between migrants and natives. When people came to new countries as refugees, the natives in the country rejected them. This is the main issue associated with migration. Refugees are never given a place anywhere in the world. They have to undergo a lot of pressure and humiliation wherever they go. Since the situation was becoming worse day by day, a sort of friction is felt between Saeed and Nadia and as a

result they mutually decide to move apart. The ending of the novel is set half a century in the future. Saeed and Nadia meet after a very long time, share a cup of coffee and then leave, while the world around them is still in chaos.

Hamid, being a Pakistani writer, calls his work somewhat geographically autobiographical. He says, "The novel is not autobiographical in the sense that it is not the story of the events of my life. And yet, as I wrote it, I saw autobiographical elements creeping in. It is geographically autobiographical, in that I have lived in a city like the nameless city of Nadia and Saeed, and also in London, where they flee, and also in the San Francisco Bay Area, where they flee later, and I have spent time in Tijuana, Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo and all other places in which characters in the novel suddenly appear. These locations are not present by chance. They have mattered to me. They are locations that have mattered to my life. And feelings in the novel seem close my feelings, to my recollections of love and especially first love, to my thoughts about getting older, of watching my children grow, of recognising the differences in the arcs of our lives, and to understanding my parents, who live next door, differently as a result." (Hamid). While reading the novel, the unnamed city seems to be Syria or Hamid's native place Pakistan. At the time of this book, Syria was undergoing a lot of refugee problems. When Hamid was asked about this, he said, "Well, I think there is a basic, human reality, which is why we have laws that protect refugees. In the same way that if you see someone in a swimming pool and they are drowning, we feel a sense that we should do something to help them, human life is precious, and if we do nothing and let that person drown, then we are not just wasting human life, we are diminishing ourselves. The refugees are like that. We know that they are people. We know that they are drowning. We know that it is possible to help them, and if collectively we don't do anything, we have diminished ourselves enormously. I think that is happening as far as Syrian refugees are concerned". Also he points out that his novel is not directly speaking about Syrian refugees, rather his novel is showcasing the plights of refugees all around the globe.

Also, Hamid has taken two well educated young Easterners as the protagonists which also suggest an attempt of subverting the stereotypical Easterners. Hamid himself is an Easterner and he calls himself a refugee to some extent as he had travelled a lot and had faced some of the problems that Nadia and Saeed faced during their journey. Hamid has ended the novel in an optimistic note. Since, both Nadia and Saeed are educated; they know that their separation leads to their betterment and not downfall. While talking about the future, he proposes that each and everyone in the world will be immigrants some day, whether we are educated or not, whether we are rich or poor, whether we move from places to places or we live in the same place until we are dead.

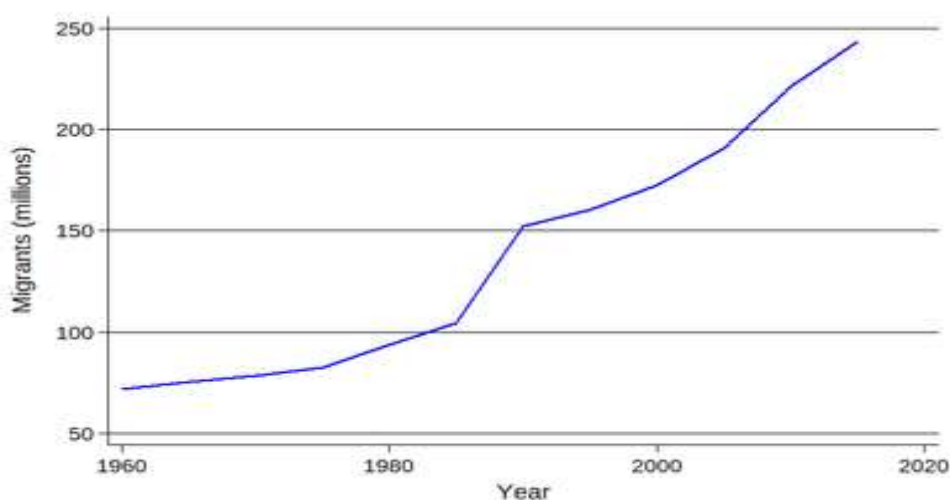
There are references in the novel to the hierarchical system prevalent in the world. For example, indirectly, West is shown as more powerful than the East and so people escape to the West for a better living. But, we can see a breakdown of this hierarchy through the doors as they become easy routes for the migrants to escape. We can read this as a phenomenon opposite to colonisation. That is, earlier, people in the West came to the East as colonisers without the consent of the people in the East and now they go to the West as refugees without the consent of the people in the West which is a reversal of history.

The war that happened in Middle East countries pushed many people to migrate to European countries. The novel discusses about the migration of people in a war affected country, especially to the West. Another aspect of migration is people going to the West in search of jobs and for higher education. This is because of the popular notion that Western Culture can improve our social status. The novel's title itself suggests an ideological

disconnection between East and West. The term ‘Exit’ added to ‘West’ suggests the refugees’ urge to go out of Western countries to their own homelands. In the novel, the people did not come to Western countries for a better living. They were forced to move out from their native land. There are many causes that lead to migration. For example, While looking at the overall scenario of migration, it can be shown as

**Table 1:** the overall scenario of migration

<b>BENEFITS</b>	<b>DETRIMENTS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety, Stability, Freedom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence, Wars, Forced migration</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher wages, Lots of job opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor wages, Lack of opportunities</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agricultural and technological advancements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pollution, Natural disasters</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better quality of life, Family reunifications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of good services, Family separation</li> </ul>



**Figure 1:** Graph taken from Wikipedia

Acceptance of migrants by the natives in the host countries is a major issue. Refugees find it difficult to adjust to the cultural practices of the new country. Also, they are seen as terrorists by most of the host countries. When Saeed and Nadia reached Marin, he spend more time on prayer than earlier. This can be read as his determination to go back to his homeland culture as he felt alienated in the new place. The only way he could cling onto his culture at that time was through his prayers. Likewise, every refugee undergoes a lot of mental trauma and pressure when they are been uprooted from their native lands. A sense of helplessness could be seen in the novel through

the lines, “Without borders, nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they had to play” (Hamid, 62). Borders are a significant thought identified with migration. *Exit West* is trying to question this concept of borders which is in fact man-made and imaginary. Hamid questions this notion of socio-political borders by demonstrating the public sphere which is always spiteful towards the migrants and they use native people as a medium to clear out the migrants from their country. Hamid has used “magical doors” instead of borders in his novel (Hamid 69).

In this rhetoric, refugees are considered as intruders in the host countries. Pushing refugees out of their national borderlines using their laws and policies is considered an elementary way to get rid of them. Maybe, this is the reason why Hamid did not use the idea of borders. The people go through a great deal of internal conflicts because of their inability to blend in with the new culture. And this in turn is the reason for the increasing number of mental asylums in the host countries. Borders are not just mere lines that mark the “outer limits of territories, but they are rather everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people and things is happening and is controlled” (Balibar).

### III. CONCLUSION

The novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid is a novel that focuses on the aspect of belonging in a politically unstable global landscape. Through an omniscient third person narrator, Hamid discusses the traumas people face in a city which is dealing with a civil war and its after effects. The city is deliberately not given a name so that the context of the novel can be universalised and it persuades the audience to envisage how one could place themselves in such a situation. There have been many novels before this which discuss migration with elements of fantasy. But the migration of refugees to different countries especially in the West is no fantasy story. Hamid has included a tinge of magic realism in a much realistic novel in order to indirectly refer to the illegal ways the refugees may sometimes adopt to escape. Proper ways of transportation will mostly be neglected for the refugees and so they may resort to some illegal routes. Maybe this is what Hamid intended to say using his ‘black magical doors’. As Hamid says, “Because of the transient nature of human life, migration is the starting point for everybody.”

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