



GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS: A STUDY OF MOHSIN HAMID'S NOVEL *EXIT WEST*

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Abstract:

Refugee crisis in the last few years of the present century has assumed such vast proportions which find parallels only during the World War II. The world is witnessing millions of people undertaking arduous journeys to escape their war torn countries of origin. Economic instability and deadly conflicts are forcing innumerable people to leave their homes in search of better lives. Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017) is a modern take on the inevitable migration of people across countries, even across continents, when societies descend into chaos and conflict. This paper makes a humble attempt to highlight how *Exit West* depicts the plight of refugees in their war ravaged countries by specially focusing on an anonymous city torn apart by civil war. I argue that keeping the city unnamed is a way of universalizing the predicament of refugees. The novel uses the unusual but very clever teleportation device of black doors to transport people across different places instantly.

Key Words: Mohsin Hamid, Refugees, Borders, Black Doors & Magic Realism

Introduction:

The transnational author, Mohsin Hamid has been preoccupied with critical issues of global relevance like identity crisis, racism and mass migration of people. Not only are his novels timely, but he also shows an anxiety about future. The main focus of his award winning second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) was the post-September 11th world and the changing nature of the US's relationship with the East, and in particular with the Muslim world. In *Exit West*, he once again writes about a subject that has been making headlines recently. Be it Brexit or the immigration policy of Donald Trump, borders are being closed down on 'unwanted outsiders' in a world where distance in time is collapsing radically. Mohsin Hamid tries to imagine a world where there are no strict borders and where people move across places with a relative ease.

Discussion:

Exit West unfolds through two lovers, Saeed and Nadia, who fall in love in an unnamed city fallen apart by a deadly conflict. The two protagonists show contrasting attitudes to deal with life. Saeed is a conformist who lives with his parents and adheres to most of the beliefs and traditions he has inherited from them. Nadia, unusually, doesn't believe in traditional way of thinking or living. She is a mysterious character who abandons her home and religious practices, even though she wears a black robe to conceal her body.

The turn that things are going to take is predicted in the first sentence of the novel itself: "In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her." (Hamid, 2017: 1) The couple eventually become refugees when the city they live in becomes unlivable. In a magical way, they travel to Greece, London and the USA in order to rebuild their lives.

The novel then is a timely reflection of the events of the modern world where everyone seems to be on the move. The two protagonists, however, stand for every refugee in the modern world. Near the end of the novel Hamid's narrator declares "We are all migrants through time." (Hamid, 2017: 209) The world around us is changing and we too change with it, or migrate in time, even if we stay in the same place all our life. At another point in the novel the narrator says: "That summer it seemed to Saeed and Nadia that the whole planet was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north, but also southerners moving to other southern places and northerners moving to other northern places." (Hamid, 2017: 167)

On the other hand, the novel does much more than just reflecting the chaos and conflict present around us. It rises to the level of a masterpiece by bringing together the real and the magical. Mohsin Hamid, being a mongrel, has a profound and deep experience of emigration and he describes the emigrant affairs in a characteristically elegant and flowy prose.

The core question around which the novel *Exit West* revolves is 'What makes a refugee move?' Migration is not an easy process. Our past never leaves us. Even in the middle of chaos and dangerous circumstances, people strive all the odds to live life normally. The omniscient narrator tells us: "It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class..." (Hamid, 2017: 1) Next, we are told that our "eternally impending ending doesn't put a stop to our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does." (Hamid, 2017: 2) The suggestion is that human beings are very resilient and they don't cease to live even in the most trying circumstances. Hamid seems to emphasise very early in the novel that

people find it quite hard to leave their homelands. It is made vividly clear that Saeed and Nadia don't move until the time doing so becomes inevitable.

The first few chapters of the novel cover the reasons and circumstances which compel people to flee. Mohsin Hamid painstakingly explores the whole process of painful 'leaving' and the dilemmas that go on in the minds of people once they choose to leave. Saeed and Nadia decide to leave only when the militants gain a strong foothold over the city, controlling all the basic necessities of life. They are left with no choice but to flee for their lives, leaving their loved ones behind. The fact of migration is agonising and full of violence. "When we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind." (Hamid, 2017: 94)

At this point, Mohsin Hamid introduces an element of magic realism of secret rectangular black doors which transport people to different places in an instant. In magic realism, "writers weave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched *realism* in representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements..."² Unlike the characters in this novel real life refugees face immeasurable dangers in crossing over to safer places. They don't have the luxury of magic doors to escape. And this experiment makes *Exit West* quite distinct from Mohsin Hamid's earlier attempts in the genre. The concept of doors is "effective in evoking the proximity of the desperate zones and the more secure ones in the world today, suggesting that building walls and immigration regimes of extreme vetting is not just impractical, but downright inhumane."³ Some readers find it an unnecessary element in such a story which, they say, should have got the risky adventures common refugees face. But Mohsin Hamid, in an interview, defends the use of surreal on the lines that he wasn't interested in how migrants move.

"It can be a mistake to focus too much upon how they move.... The bulk of the migrant or refugee story is 'What made you want to leave home?'.... 'What happened to you in the new place?' And those two parts of the story are the parts I wanted to focus on."⁴

The readers might miss the horrifying and perilous refugee journeys but that is not what Hamid was interested in. His focal point is what happens to refugees before 'leaving' their homeland and after 'arriving' at their new destinations.

The door is not just a symbol for instant transportation of refugees but also a strong character influencing the lives of millions of people. Mohsin Hamid weaves it in to the main thread of the narrative in such a dexterous manner that we take it in immediately without any reservations. The method, therefore, is a deliberate inclusion, not a mere chance, which enables the author to add an essential element to the ordinary lives of refugees the influences of modern technology.

Conclusion:

Exit West is a story about dislocated people and their experiences, and the tale is made typical with the help of magically created doors that take refugees to different places. The novelist is guessing an age in which all the humankind will be refugees. We are provided with glimpses of a migration apocalypse where everybody seems to be on the move. Wars and drastic climate changes cannot be ruled out in the time to come. All this gives *Exit West* a faint tinge of science fiction as well. While dealing with the subject of inevitable mass migration of people, the physical and mental agony faced by refugees has also been exquisitely portrayed. Hamid has tried to alter our perception about the concepts of nationhood and borders. He posits a quite different approach towards the issue of mass migration of people by presenting a totally different view of world geography and the artificial borders. The novelist is reminding us that it is imperative to rethink our beliefs about the world and our future.

References:

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