Global Rejects/Refugees as Liminal Nomads in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West.*(*)

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Abstract
Throughout history, humans have consistently engaged in perpetual migration, driven by the pursuit of a more prosperous existence or the need to escape perilous areas. However, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of displaced individuals, and the topic of the 'refugee crisis' is frequently discussed in public. Refugees, who may be either outcasts or persecuted in their homeland, are compelled to migrate and face several challenges in quest of a welcoming destination. However, they often encounter resistance and are viewed as a potential danger to the social fabric and culture of the host country. This paper examines the plight of Saeed and Nadia the protagonists of the novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid (2017) who embark on a journey from their war-torn city through magical doors that start appearing in various places and can teleport people instantly to the more developed and stable first-world countries. Saeed and Nadia are in a constant mode of movement enforced by the rejection they encounter at each border/door crossing in their journeys, thus caught in a perpetual state of liminality and 'in-betweenness.' The analysis draws on the concepts of liminality and nomadism as defined by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987) respectively.

Keywords: Refugees, Journey, Liminality, Nomadism, Mohsin Hamid, In-Betweenness, Gennep, Deleuze and Guattari.

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الملخص:

على مر التاريخ ظلَّ البشر منخرطين بشكل دائم في الهجرة بجميع أشكالها، مدفوعين بالسعي نحو حياة أفضل أو بالحاجة إلى الهروب من المناطق الخطرة التي تهدد حياتهم. ومع ذلك، شهدت السنوات الأخيرة زيادة كبيرة في عدد الأفراد المهجَّرين قسريًا، وأصبح موضوع "أزمة اللاجئين" يُناقش بشكل متكرر على الملأ ومختلف المنصات. اللاجئون، الذين قد يكونون منبوذين أو مضطهدين في وطنهم، يُجبرون على الهجرة ويواجهون عدة تحديات في سعيهم للحفاظ على حياتهم وحياة أسرهم. ومع ذلك، فغالبًا ما يواجهون مقاومة ويُنظر إليهم على أنهم خطر محتمل على النسيج الاجتماعي والثقافة في بلد الاستضافة. تستعرض هذه الورقة معاناة سعيد ونادية، بطلي رواية "Exit West" للكاتب محسن حامد (٢٠١٧)، اللذين يشرعان في رحلة من مدينتهما التي مزقتها الحرب عبر أبواب سحرية تظهر في أماكن مختلفة ويمكنها نقل الأشخاص فورًا إلى دول العالم الأول الأكثر تطورًا واستقرارًا. سعيد ونادية في حالة حركة مستمرة بفعل الرفض الذي يواجهانه عند كل معبر حدودي أو عبور للأبواب في رحلتهم، ومن ثم فهما عالقان في حالة دائمة من "الحدية" و"الوجود بين بين". يستند التحليل إلى مفاهيم "الحدية" و"الترحال" كما عرّفها أرنولد فان جينيب (١٩٦٠) ودولوز وغوتاري.(1987)

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللاجئون، الرحلة، الحدية، الترحل، محسن حامد، البينية، جينيب، دولوز وغوتاري.

Introduction

Shortlisted for the 2017 Booker Prize, the novel *Exit West* written by Mohsin Hamid presents a different view of the journey of refugees. The two protagonists Nadia and Saeed meet in a class in an unnamed city, as war breaks and militants take control of the city, they start seeking refuge. They learn about the existence of doors that could take them to different cities across the globe. They try different doors to different cities, each presenting a new journey experience for them. The novel depicts Saeed and Nadia as refugees on their forced journeys, the reasons they embarked on these escapes, and the various ways they were rejected by each territory they crossed. As 'nomads' they are in a constant mode of movement enforced by the trajectories they encounter trapped in a liminal state of being. This paper draws on the concepts of liminality and nomadism, the analysis of Saeed and Nadia's journey in the novel to show how they exemplify the concept of liminal nomadism which will be thoroughly explained in the next section.

In 2017, the year when Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* was published, the number of forcibly displaced people around the world reached an unprecedented rate of 68.5 million people. The latest numbers according to the UNHCR as of 2024 have reached 110 million forcibly displaced persons around the world, 36.4 million of this number are refugees. This harrowingly increasing rate of displacement shows how forced displacement is affecting more people rapidly around the world where an individual can suddenly find themselves embarked on a journey at any point. These numbers also show that the refugee crisis is no longer a contained problem that is far away from anyone. This refugee crisis is also on display to the entire world and every now and then we can see the escalation of violence in various places around the globe and the tragic deaths of many of those refugees on their journeys seeking a safe place for themselves and their families anywhere that would provide them shelter, which does not really happen for the most part unfortunately.

Why Hamid wrote *Exit West*

With this awareness of the refugee crisis and the failure of the developed countries to provide real help for the refugees arriving there, Mohsin Hamid wrote *Exit West*. In a prior article in The Guardian titled "Why Migration Is a Fundamental Human Right" Hamid condemns the failure of the global north to help refugees because its boundaries "build an apartheid planet" where passports and IDs are markers that exacerbate the gap between those who have and those who do not have (Hamid, " Why Migration Is a Fundamental Human Right."). Because their experiences have joined them as undesirable and unworthy of survival or preservation, Hamid does not differentiate between refugees and illegal immigrants. He believes that both groups are considered undesirable. Hamid asserts in another interview with Graeme Green that the current crisis is not about people being refugees and migrants from other countries, "the crisis is that we think of such movements of people as a crisis" (Green). "I wanted to write a very large book about the entire world on a very small scale, so I needed to find some way of covering a lot of ground," Hamid says as he elaborates on how a single book might cover a variety of mobility patterns to Alexandra Alter in his interview with the New York Times (Alter). Hamid went on to explain his motives behind writing the novel in many interviews and articles.

Hamid's fame and position as an immigrant himself, along with the lack of comparable works of literary fiction concerning the European refugee crisis produced and published swiftly enough to appear while the crisis was still occurring, contributed to *Exit West* receiving a tremendous amount of critical and popular attention. According to Claire Chambers, Nadia somehow aligns with generalizations about the global north and Saeed the global south (216). In an interview with renowned journalist Mariella Frostrup for the BBC, Hamid said that he "wrote it thinking of Lahore, modelling it after the city of Lahore, where [he] live[s]"; Hamid notes that his aim was to garner as much reader identification with the characters as

possible: "I also wanted to open it up – to have people from other places imagine this as their city, so [as] to widen the entry point into the novel, for different types of … readers from different places (Frostrup & Hamid, 2017).

In his attempt to also humanize the refugee experience and make it more relatable, Hamid says that he created the magical doors to eliminate the sense of 'otherness' towards refugees. He states in an interview with Ann Brice in Berkley News,

> I think we use the journeys of migrants to place them in a different category ("I never crossed the Mediterranean in a small rubber boat; this is a different kind of human from me.") Take away the journey, and you have a person who was in one place, and now is in a different place, something that happens to all of us — when we leave our parents' homes, for example. 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.'

Which is quite an unconventional approach to the refugees' case. In his attempt to eliminate and 'humanize' the journey, Hamid creates magical doors that would teleport refugees from one place to another inspired by the dark rectangle of his mobile phone and screens as he mentioned in another interview. The doors, even though they replaced the dangerous sea journey and added the widely applauded element of Magical Realism, did not make those refugees any less liminal nomads than any other refugee. The doors in this sense become the 'border', the crossing points, and portals to new points on their journey, and with each door, something in them changes. It is, however, noteworthy to mention that the repeated critical interpretation of the doors as a 'humanizing' approach to the refugees and that it would help the readers identify more with the refugees' crisis as a literary brilliance, is in itself extremely dehumanizing

towards the real refugees who suffer the most incredible journeys to cross borders. This view devalues real refugees by labeling them as subjects that we cannot identify with because their journeys are either unbelievable or they must be superhuman.

In *Exit West*, the journey is a central theme. The novel follows the journey of Saeed and Nadia, who leave their home in an unnamed city during a civil war and travel through a series of mysterious doorways to various locations around the world. Their journey is one of both physical and emotional displacement, as they leave behind their old lives and try to find their place in a new world.

The journey is also a metaphor for the larger theme of migration, as the novel explores the experiences of people who are forced to leave their homes due to conflict, persecution, or economic hardship. The novel raises questions about what it means to be a refugee, and how people cope with the challenges of building new lives in unfamiliar places. The refugee narrative in *Exit West* deviates from the traditional method of crossing national boundaries. The absence of boats, trains, trucks, or check rooms in the story emphasizes the act of traversing through doors. Hamid had the concept for the novel while engaged in a Skype video-call with an individual in the United States. The computer screen functioned as a literal window, allowing him to see and observe the physical environment in which the person was situated in America (Gall). Given the highly technologized nature of the world, Hamid found the concept of doors serving as borders to be very plausible. Hamid's unique approach of traversing doorways imbues the experience with a heightened sense of intimacy, subtly impacting both sides of the boundaries in an unconventional narrative fashion.

Exit West tells the story of Saeed and Nadia in an unnamed country. The country, portrayed as strictly very religious, soon falls into civil unrest and becomes a battlefield of militias. Saeed and Nadia are drawn to each other and start developing feelings and meet in

Nadia's apartment regularly. Saeed must wear a women's black robe and cover-up to be able to go up to Nadia's place. The unrest escalates and the government cuts off all cellular and internet services as a counter-terrorism measure and they can no longer communicate, Saeed urges Nadia to move in with him and his parents, but she refuses, soon afterward Saeed's mother is killed by a random "stray heavy-calibre round" (72), and this makes Nadia move in with Saeed and his father seeing the state they were both in. Both Nadia and Saeed realize they can no longer stay in the country and that they must leave as soon as possible. Word spreads about the emergence of mystery doors across the city that teleport people to other cities of the world.

Saeed and Nadia first arrive in Mykonos in Greece, but they discover that the Western countries are aware of the doors' existence, and they arrive in a large refugee camp that is guarded by the government. Nadia becomes friends with a girl who helps them go through another door that takes them to London, England. In London, they emerge into an abandoned mansion that refugees have occupied. The numbers of refugees increase, and they start forming groups based on the national origins of each group. Saeed and Nadia's relationship changes over time and becomes staler and more unsatisfying for both. The tension increases with the British government and violent clashes happen but in the end, the government recedes from escalating the clashes and decides to build a "halo city" (167) on the outskirts of London for the refugees to live in. In exchange, the refugees have to work in a construction camp to earn a house of their own later on. Nadia and Saeed are exhausted with both their work and their own relationship and decide to take one last journey to Marin, California. Nadia starts to explore her sexuality in new ways and Saeed becomes more interested in a preacher's daughter and they eventually decide to separate as they have drifted away over time in a way that cannot be resolved. They keep in touch for a while until they slowly stop contacting each other. Fifty years

later they meet again in a café in their home city that does not seem recognizable anymore to them or feel like home. They agree to go watch the stars in Chile someday, but they never meet again.

The characters teleport to 'dream destinations' yet they are still in a position of liminality and have no immediate possibility to reterritorialize; they gain no sense of safety and they remain on the move: first, they go to Mykonos, which in the mind of the regular person is a heavenly place and luxurious destination, but they are unable to stay there for long as they are kept in a camp by the border. They then make another 'crossing' to London, a major European capital that is also considered a dream destination for refugees, and ironically, they emerge in a mansion, which turns out to be another confinement. Saeed, Nadia and the refugees are also not safe there and they move again. They go to Marin and as their relationship fades away, the narrative ends with them meeting back in their own home city, and from the conversation between them, we get the sense that they keep moving after Marin until their return. Therefore, what Hamid calls the elimination of the journey does not really remove it entirely because the refugees even if they teleport, they remain liminal nomadic subjects crossing trajectories, one after the other trying to reterritorialize but to no avail. Even the 'return' phase that we are given in *Exit West* does not give them a sense of return as they no longer identify with their original city or feel at home; they are forever trapped in their liminality.

Liminality and Nomadism in the Refugee Experience

The concept of liminality, which is quite useful in reading the novel since it portrays the characters in an ongoing state of liminality, refers to the transitional or in-between state that Saeed and Nadia find themselves in as they migrate from one place to another. According to what Deleuze and Guattari state in "Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine": "A Path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy

and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo" (380). Consequently, the nomad is locked in a state of in-betweenness, which is a road that accelerates the movement to another path. This, in essence, forces the nomad to capitalize on the route itself and strive to construct new territories out of it. The perpetual state of in-betweenness that the nomad refugee is trapped in while they are on their trip is a reflection of the state of liminality that Gennep describes as occurring in a hero's journey. Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between the nomad and the migrant saying,

> The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principal, points for him are relays along a trajectory. […] even though the nomadic trajectory may follow trails or customary routes, it does not fulfill the function of a sedentary road […]. The nomadic trajectory […] *distributes people* […] *in an open space*, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating. (380, original emphasis)

This description of the nomad mostly applies, though *not entirely*, to the case of the refugees. Unlike migrants, the path of the refugee is uncertain and far from smooth; it is a perilous road of escaping guards, border officials, mobsters, sickness, rape, and so many atrocities. Refugees also move from one place to another not by choice, but as a consequence of what happens at the point they arrive at.

The concept of liminality was initially introduced by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in 1960 as a means of demonstrating the rites of passage. The hero's rites of passage are comprised of three distinct phases. The first stage is known as separation or detachment, during which the hero is deliberately separated from the rest of his

community. The second phase is referred to as the 'liminal period' or the transition. It is a state of being in-between where the hero experiences a loss of identity and becomes essentially stateless. The final part of the hero's journey is the reincorporation or return to society, during which the hero is embraced by society, praised, and attains a new social standing. Anthropologist Victor Turner expanded on the notion of liminality in his chapter titled "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in the 'Rites De Passage' in The Forest of Symbols (1967)." Turner's concept of the liminal phase represents a state of transition or being in-between. Therefore, the refugees' trip is fundamentally a depiction of their state of being liminal nomads, as shown in Hamid's *Exit West*

Liminality is a common theme in the anthropology of migration and refers to the sense of being neither fully connected to one's old life nor fully integrated into one's new life. In the novel, Saeed and Nadia's liminal state is symbolized by their passage through the mysterious doors that transport them from one location to another. These doors represent the threshold between their old lives and their new lives, and the uncertainty and insecurity that come with leaving behind the familiar and entering the unknown.

In the novel, Saeed and Nadia's migration through the mysterious doors throws them into a permanent state of liminality, as they leave behind their old lives and disconnect from the familiar structures of their homeland. As they try to build new lives in different parts of the world, they must grapple with the challenges of liminality, as they try to find their place in unfamiliar cultures and societies. The author uses onomastic play in the character names, as Claire Chambers points out, because the initials of the characters, "N" and "S," match the compass points that are lacking in the book's title, Exit [East] West (216). Chambers goes on to say that Saeed somewhat aligns with assumptions about the global south, whereas Nadia is linked to generalizations about the global north (216). Other critics have adopted various points while reading the novel, For instance,

Paula Brauer (2019) focuses on magical realism, and Chambers examines how it merges with digital technology. Aziz Huq (2018) and Amanda Lagji (2018) investigate mobility and representations of political populism while the natural and universal aspect of migration is examined by Sonia Shah (2020), while the novel's staging of the "worlding process" is examined by Knudsen Eva Rask and Ulla Rahbek (2021), who also emphasize the postcolonial literature's normative effectiveness. As part of the new mobilities paradigm, Lagji (2018) adds that readers of Exit West also need to pay attention to shared time despite separate spaces.

However, these studies have not taken into account the state's discriminatory immigration laws and counterterrorism tactics against immigrants, especially in Britain, where the novel's second portion is situated. While some have called Exit West a "Brexit novel" (Shaw 2018, 26), in reality, the book was published before Brexit and is more accurately understood as a commentary on the rise of anti-immigrant politics between the early 2000s and 2017.

Saeed and Nadia's Liminal Nomadism

The novel starts immediately with setting the beginning of their departure from their home city. Hamid clearly focuses on the departure stage rather than the initiation phase or the return, almost half of the novel is devoted to the elaboration on why and how they were forced to leave their country, it is a mixture of city description, especially on how it turns from a place of refuge to displaced people into a repellant country in itself that people need to escape if they want to survive. The reader is introduced to a city that is about to fall into civil unrest and an in-medias res action, the city is already swarming with refugees from other fallen cities and is about to become one itself, the city is "swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace" (1) showing that this once safe city sought by refugees is not so peaceful anymore and setting the scene for more upcoming turbulence. Hamid then notes that,

> It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class—in this case an evening class on corporate identity and product branding—but that is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying, and our eternally impending ending does not put a stop to our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does. (1-2)

The normalcy of life even under the threat of war may seem strange to the view of the unthreatened eye, but it is the constant state of life for such places where citizens are forced to act as if they have a stable life even though they may cease to exist at any given moment. It is almost like their liminality starts in their home countries. This remark on the power of human life and the strong desire to survive and live a normal life even amid trouble and turbulence until this life ceases to exist anymore is only a depiction of the lives of the millions who live in troubled cities of the world. It is also a reminder that even cities that are considered a place of refuge can fall into strife at any given moment, rendering it an exit point rather than a destination.

In a sudden transition, as Saeed is downloading an email and thinking about Nadia, the narrative drifts to Australia as the first vignette introducing the magical doors where a white woman is sleeping while,

> The door to her closet was open. Her room was bathed in the glow of her computer charger and wireless router, but the closet doorway was dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness. And out of this darkness, a man was emerging. He too was dark, with dark skin and dark, woolly hair. He wriggled with great effort, his hands gripping either side of the doorway as though pulling

> himself up against gravity, or against the rush of a monstrous tide. His neck followed his head, tendons straining, and then his chest, his half-unbuttoned, sweaty, gray-and-brown shirt. Suddenly he paused in his exertions. He looked around the room. He looked at the sleeping woman, the shut bedroom door, the open window. He rallied himself again, fighting mightily to come in, but in desperate silence, the silence of a man struggling in an alley, on the ground, late at night, to free himself of hands clenched around his throat. But there were no hands around this man's throat. He wished only not to be heard. With a final push he was through, trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal. He lay still, spent. Tried not to pant. He rose. His eyes rolled terribly. Yes: terribly. Or perhaps not so terribly. Perhaps they merely glanced about him, at the woman, at the bed, at the room. Growing up in the not infrequently perilous circumstances in which he had grown up, he was aware of the fragility of his body. He knew how little it took to make a man into meat: the wrong blow, the wrong gunshot, the wrong flick of a blade, turn of a car, presence of a microorganism in a handshake, a cough. He was aware that alone a person is almost nothing. The woman who slept, slept alone. He who stood above her, stood alone. The bedroom door was shut. The window was open. He chose the window. He was through it in an instant, dropping silkily to the street below. (5-7)

The above quotation marks the first display of the magical doors in the novel, the refugee is portrayed as a dark creature emerging from an abyss of darkness, yet he is trying as much as possible not to disturb the peace of the sleeping white woman. As readers, we are not given a lot of details regarding this door and how the man got through it or

where is he coming from, we are only shown his arduous struggle of passing through the door and his oppressing silence so as not to be discovered. Hamid juxtaposes the glow and brightness associated with the woman as opposed to the infinite darkness out of which the man emerges, himself a dark figure with dark hair. The way he struggles to get up and rise out of the door is almost similar to a birth process, or a close escape from being murdered or almost an exorcism in a sense. The awareness of the danger around his very existence is highlighted by "He wished only not to be heard" (7) because he knows that being heard or located will be the end of him. The door rather than being the universal archetypal symbol of hope and new beginnings, invokes only fear and darkness. The uncertainty that comes with the doors which in themselves emerge unexpectedly for no known reason makes the doors liminal spaces that offer no clarity. The very first introduction of the doors is quite ominous: an intruder emerging into a sleeping woman's bedroom with the use of light and darkness contrast is more fearsome than hopeful. The light and dark contrast will remain a prominent theme throughout the narrative. The play between light and dark is touched upon several times in the novel, for example: Saeed and Nadia wonder what life in "light London" would be like where people can go out for dinner and walk freely while they are sitting in fear in "dark London" (142) where the government cut off power from the refugees' area.

The following time the doors are described, more specifically the passing through the doors is also quite as ominous, "Through an open door, a young soldier looked down upon their city, a city not overly familiar to him, for he had grown up in the countryside, and was struck by how big it was, how grand its towers and lush its parks. The din around him was incredible, and his belly lurched as he swerved." (33) Just as the doors are used as a means of escape from strife, it is also a portal for mercenaries and soldiers who want to join the war from other countries for various reasons be it political, religious, or just fighting for money. Thus, the doors serve a dual

purpose either saving lives or bringing more death. As they learn more about doors, they have a sense of hope to survive their city which has become a "deathtrap" (69). As more people started knowing more about the existence of these doors, "[t]he effect doors had on people altered as well. Rumors had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country." The doors become the representation of the spark of a journey towards hope, safety, and a new life. "Some people claimed to know people who knew people who had been through such doors. A normal door, they said, could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all." (69-70) which adds another hint at the supernatural power of the doors, and at the same time their unpredictable random appearance anywhere. Here Hamid plays on the concept of magical realism, for it seems like a magical solution for the people to be safe at the simple act of crossing a door's threshold. They started regarding their doors with a new confused feeling; "each of their doors, regarded thus with a twinge of irrational possibility, became partially animate as well, an object with a subtle power to mock, to mock the desires of those who desired to go far away, whispering silently from its door frame that such dreams were the dreams of fools." (70) The quotation highlights the power of any object over the hopes of people. Even the inanimate doors because of their newly established power as portals or exits to better places out there in the world have gained the agonizingly seeming power to mock and make fun of the simple human hope and desire for safety and the possibility of a stable life away from unrest. Not only do the doors take on a new significance, but windows also become a new form of borders as Hamid notes "One's relationship to windows now changed in the city. A window was the border through which death was possibly most likely to come" (68). Windows that are typically a universal symbol of hope and freshness have become the iconic portal of death, a border standing between life and death. In such times the human relationship even with objects like doors and windows can

change dramatically. The existence of these doors and the easiness of border-crossings that they have provided to refugees in reaching the rest of the world "indeed were being discussed by world leaders as a major global crisis" (83).

Hamid keeps giving glimpses of how war can tear everything down and take away all sorts of familiarity leaving everything that made "home" completely unrecognizable as he notes "War would soon erode the facade of their building as though it had accelerated time itself, a day's toll outpacing that of a decade" (9-10). This is a description of how war can destroy years of memories in a moment and change even the faces of the oldest of buildings. The narrative in this sense keeps preparing us for the upcoming change that will befall this unnamed city and building the liminality of Saeed and Nadia. Constant reminders are inserted for the readers to think how close such changes can be to them as stated by Hamid as his main objective. The city is already overflowing with refugees, which is described in the text as

> Refugees had occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents in the greenbelts between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the boundary walls of houses, sleeping rough on sidewalks and in the margins of streets. Some seemed to be trying to re-create the rhythms of a normal life, as though it were completely natural to be residing, a family of four, under a sheet of plastic propped up with branches and a few chipped bricks. Others stared out at the city with what looked like anger, or surprise, or supplication, or envy. Others didn't move at all: stunned, maybe, or resting. Possibly dying. (23)

This quotation is very significant as it shows how a city that is already on the brink of war itself is taken over by refugees or rather 'occupied'. The quotation is a manifestation of the desire for

reterritorialization by the refugees anywhere they go as they are trying to recreate a "normal" life even under the direst circumstances on the margin. It also shows that the refuge that those refugees sought is about to descend into war as well, which indicates the lack of safety anywhere they go. Moreover, the way the refugees are described shows the level of detachment to their cause by others; they are merely objects not living bodies to be avoided by the natives as described in "Saeed and Nadia had to be careful when making turns not to run over an outstretched arm or leg" (23). Another instance of detachment shows in "[i]n times of violence, there is always that first acquaintance or intimate of ours, who, when they are touched, makes what had seemed like a bad dream suddenly, evisceratingly real. For Nadia this person was her cousin" (28) which is an interesting commentary from Hamid on how unreal or detached people are from disasters until they touch them in person, that is when they realize the gravity of the situation. This is highlighted in how Saeed and Nadia look at the refugees with fear or avoidance not long before they become refugees themselves. This could also be viewed as the worldview of the refugee crisis; they only start paying attention to it when it becomes an internal problem or when the refugees move to them. Another example of this would be the old American white man in California wondering in serious disdain who those people that keep coming to his country are as "[t]he old man asked the officer whether it was Mexicans that had been coming through, or was it Muslims, because he couldn't be sure, and the officer said he couldn't answer, sir" (47). This a typical stereotyping question by an old man on the other side of the globe, in America specifically California, as the prosperous West sounds so irritated about newcomers from the typically troubled countries of the South more generically Mexicans or Muslims, which represents most people's views of the global South, the domain of trouble. The worldwide phenomenon of widespread migration is mirrored in the individual journeys of Saeed and Nadia, which can be observed on a microscopic scale.

Nevertheless, Hamid portrays other forms of migration through the short vignettes that intersect with the couple's experience. While a lady is asleep in Sydney, a door suddenly opens, revealing a dark-skinned man who enters through the entrance and then leaps out of the window. Another fleeting view is of an Englishman who, instead of taking his own life, gets transported via a doorway onto a location in Namibia. There, he discovers a fresh purpose for his existence. An individual hailing from Brazil departs via a doorway to Amsterdam, where he develops romantic feelings for another male individual. While in Tokyo, an individual observes two Filipina females exiting a door and chooses to pursue them. Finally, there is an elderly woman who has spent her entire life residing in a residence in California. However, she has observed that everything in her surroundings has been in constant motion and has now transformed, resulting in a complete upheaval of her life. Consequently, whenever she ventures outside, she perceives herself as having also migrated, recognizing that everyone, even those who remain in the same homes throughout their lives, inevitably experiences a sense of migration. We are all individuals who move from one place to another over the course of history.

The escalation keeps building up and we see the gradual loss of control of the government over everything in the city until it all falls apart, violence starts to dominate the scene rapidly, for example, "Gazes leapt away from his gaze, as they might among packs of dogs in the wild, in which a hierarchy is set by some sensed quality of violent potential."(26) The people of the city are likened to a pack of wild beasts where dominance is only determined by strength and the power of violence. The city is deteriorating into a scene of wildlife.

Despite things looking bright for a very short time when the government seemed to be regaining control of the city, suddenly they are faced with an "antiterrorism measure" that further disconnects them from the world, they are stifled more and more in their homeland. During these times in a sharp contrast, the romance

between Saeed and Nadia was blooming more and more but the circumstances gave their romance a different light, "I couldn't find flowers," he said. She smiled at last, a half-smile, and asked, "Do you have a gun?" (61) Saeed's attempt at romance seems unrealistic in the current circumstances that their city is facing, Nadia is the more realistic and pragmatic of the two, she is concerned about their safety and asks him if he has a gun for protection. She realizes that their safety now has become their personal responsibility. Furthermore,

> People vanished in those days, and for the most part one never knew, at least not for a while, if they were alive or dead. Nadia passed her family's home once on purpose, not to speak with them, just to see from the outside if they were there and well, but the home she had forsaken looked deserted, with no sign of inhabitants or life. When she visited again it was gone, unrecognizable, the building crushed by the force of a bomb that weighed as much as a compact automobile. Nadia would never be able to determine what had become of them, but she always hoped they had found a way to depart unharmed, abandoning the city to the predations of warriors on both sides who seemed content to flatten it in order to possess it. (66)

More and more changes are happening around the city, houses that have been longstanding there are vanishing, people are vanishing, and no one really knows what is happening to them or how, the people are more and more defamiliarized with their own hometown. Home becomes more and more unsafe by the day. The biggest incident remains Saeed's mother's death which Hamid relates in a very blunt casual manner,

> had Saeed's mother not been killed, a stray heavy-caliber round passing through the windshield of her family's car and taking with it a quarter of Saeed's mother's head, not while she was driving, for she had

> not driven in months, but while she was checking inside for an earring she thought she had misplaced, and Nadia, seeing the state Saeed and Saeed's father were in when Nadia came to their apartment for the first time, on the day of the funeral, stayed with them that night to offer what comfort and help she could and did not spend another night in her own apartment again. (72)

The death of Saeed's mother is related in a very casual matter-of-fact tone that is very cruel and sarcastic showing how random and unpredictable death has become. In just the moment that Saeed's mother took to search for her earring, she got killed immediately in a most horrific way. This was a new shift in Saeed and Nadia's relationship, Nadia moved in with Saeed and his father which would never be considered acceptable in different circumstances or 'normal' ones before the city fell into strife. So, with different political conditions, many values change accordingly and what would be abnormal is accepted for different considerations. The human connection and the desire to keep loved ones taken care of and secure comes above tradition and customs. The liminality of Saeed and Nadia has various levels that are portrayed even before the beginning of their journey as refugees, they are caught in between their traditional customs of society and religion and their tendency towards a more liberal style of life. With these rapid and drastic changes, Saeed and Nadia knew certainly that they could no longer live in this city, thus they "dedicated themselves single-mindedly to finding a way out of the city" (82). Despite how close the current circumstances made Saeed and Nadia's relationship, they were both seeking departure for different reasons and with different objectives in mind,

> Saeed desperately wanted to leave his city, in a sense he always had, but in his imagination, he had thought he would leave it only temporarily, intermittently, never once and for all, and this looming potential

> departure was altogether different, for he doubted he would come back, and the scattering of his extended family and his circle of friends and acquaintances, forever, struck him as deeply sad, as amounting to the loss of a home, no less, of his home.
>
> Nadia was possibly even more feverishly keen to depart, and her nature was such that the prospect of something new, of change, was at its most basic level exciting to her. But she was haunted by worries too, revolving around dependence, worries that in going abroad and leaving their country she and Saeed and Saeed's father might be at the mercy of strangers, subsistent on handouts, caged in pens like vermin. (89-90)

This is a depiction of the difference between immigration or chosen departure against the forced departure or being a refugee, Saeed is aware of becoming a refugee with little to no hope in the possibility of return. Even more the anticipated end of having any connection left with family or relatives or friends as each one will be venturing somewhere in the world to survive. Nadia also had her own fears even though for her travel was a new opportunity to gain independence away from her strict community, but as she is now traveling as a refugee not as an independent willing person, she is afraid that she will be even more less independent and will be under the mercy of others and natives of whatever country they end up at. They are both aware of their transition into being refugees rather than travelers but for Saeed it is a temporary state but not as temporary for Nadia. They are already experiencing liminality in their hometown, but it is the fear of navigating it in foreign land that is more alarming.

With their minds set on leaving, Saeed and Nadia explore all possible ways until they finally get a response from one of the door agents, ironically, even though these doors emerged out of nowhere and ideally seem to be a freeway out for desperate people, they

became controlled by underworld lords who charged a lot of money to allow people to go through doors that were not ironclad by official security. With the approach of their departure, Saeed's father decides that he will not leave his country and he wants to remain close to his dead wife and his birthplace, he does not see that he has much left in life to look for new opportunities, but he makes Nadia promise to look after his son and "by making the promise he demanded she make she was in a sense killing him, but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind." (94) Leaving anyone behind means they are dead to those who leave, not because they want to sever the ties but because staying home means death eventually, home is no longer safe and they both know that there will be no reunions or ever seeing each other again.

They finally go to the place where the door through which they were scheduled to depart was, a door in a dentist's office,

> The room was gloomy and the dentist's chair and tools resembled a torture station. […] [the door] did not reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end […] It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it. (97-98)

The description of the room, its shadiness, the darkness that shrouds the whole process of passage, and then the actual agonizing description of the passage itself is quite interesting. It is a death on one side, the side of exiting and the land you are leaving, and birth on the other side, the land of arrival despite its menacing darkness. It is an excruciating pain as if being released from the womb. As they cross the threshold, they begin their initiation phase marking their eternal separation from home.

The doors emerge unexpectedly, and individuals who travel through them seek a better life in a turbulent environment. Many refugees go on boat journeys and cross borders with this attitude. Those who utilize the magic doors, like many real-world immigrants, encounter challenges in their new temporary dwellings. The magical doors become challenging for governments to uphold closed-border laws since they upend the regional structures of the nation-state and immigration.

They try to go to the door that teleports to Germany but the heavy security around the door intimidates them and they end up avoiding it lest they get shot at randomly. Then they manage to get through a door to London "to have a room to themselves—four walls, a window, a door with a lock— seemed incredible good fortune" (69) which shows the decline of quality of life for them after the comfort of their homes to feel privileged to merely have a room for their own.

However, the natives feeling threatened by the increasing flux of refugees, begin attacking the refugees with the silent blessing of the English authorities,

> They realized that their street was under attack by a nativist mob, Palace Gardens Terrace being roiled in a way that belied its name. The mob looked to Nadia like a strange and violent tribe, intent on their destruction, some armed with iron bars or knives, and she and Saeed turned and ran, but could not escape. Nadia's eye was bruised and would soon swell shut and Saeed's lip was split and kept bleeding down his chin and onto his jacket, and in their terror they each gripped with all their might a hand of the other to avoid being separated, but they were merely knocked down, like many others, and on that evening of riots across their part of London only three lives were lost, not many by the recent standards of where they had come from. (79)

The violence depicted in that scene highlights the rejection of the natives to accommodate those refugees as they are considered by the nativist mobs to be a threat to the national security of England. Despite how horrific the attacks are an ironic remark is made that says that in any case the number of lives lost in this battle is considered very insignificant according to the standards of the countries of origin of refugees. These confrontations between the nativist mobs and the complicity of the government authorities is a reminder of what critic and thinker Judith Butler wrote in her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* in 2004 that when a humanitarian crisis is perceived as a matter of national security, the state might rationalize the violation of human rights by using the premise of "self-defense." In the novel, the British government resorts to the use of force, endangering refugees and even encouraging the terrorism perpetrated by the host community. As a result, "three lives were lost" and many people were wounded during such attacks by the host community (Hamid, 131-32). In this sense, the novel depicts forms of state-led or state-sanctioned terrorism. The state controls the rhetoric used during periods of conflict. As the novel indicates, the authorities apply what they call "a temporary anti-terrorism measure," it was said, but with no end date given", and without clarifying what it means (55). In this sense, counterterrorism measures are exploited to legitimize the government's actions towards refugees who are perceived as a threat.

The story further blurs the concept of 'native' by depicting British protesters opposed to the flood of refugees. These protesters come from a variety of different ethnicities and origins. In addition, the narrator mentions that at the refugee camps located in Marin, California, "there were almost no natives," which is a reference to the exclusion of native Americans throughout the process. Having said that, the narrator concedes that the concept of being native is a relative one, as seen by the various responses of the natives of Britain to the inflow of refugees. A project known as the "London Halo" has been

initiated by the state as a response to worldwide migration. The purpose of this project is to extend the city by establishing a surrounding region that is not technically a part of the metropolis (167). This project is carried out with the assistance of refugees, who are offered a meager compensation consisting of a tiny piece of land and access to modern amenities in exchange for their unpaid labor. With their assistance, this project is realized. As Claire Chambers points out, the promise of "40 square meters and a pipe" (Hamid 167-168) is a reminder of the promise of 40 acres and a mule that was made to African Americans once they were emancipated. This highlights the vulnerable situation that the refugees are in as well as the exploitative character of the initiative (239). This portrayal of migrant labor as a commodity is especially significant in light of the reference to bloom in London resembling cotton waiting to be picked by brown bodies, which highlights the racist connotations of the project (239). This is because the allusion highlights the fact that the project has racial undertones.

To conclude, *Exit West*, in this context, deviates from the conventional narrative of a refugee story. Hamid's characters are a product of the ongoing refugee crisis, and their narrative resonates with the experiences of many migrants on today's globe. In an interview, Hamid reflects on these fragmented narratives/vignettes he included in the story in his interview with Amy Gall for Barnes and Noble and says: “I wanted to open up lots of different models so that readers would see some part of themselves in those characters’ particular stances on the doors — and therefore, hopefully, on migration” (Gall 2017). In an effort to elicit empathy and incorporate both the rich and the underprivileged in the novel, Hamid endeavors to reinstate the fundamental human right of mobility, purposefully disregarding the growing rhetoric of animosity and separation. Hamid's method does not revolve around emphasizing the refugees' trip. Instead, the story's main focus is on displacement and its

consequences. This approach aims to highlight the transient nature of human life, delivering a profound message.

Hamid carefully highlights the lack of empathy towards the refugees throughout the text by everyone else. Even though Saeed and Nadia do not clearly resent the existence of the refugees, they still cannot relate to them on any level. This lack of empathy as mentioned by Hamid in most of his interviews is stressed throughout as one of the main aspects of the novel, if not the main objective behind it. Even though Hamid does provide Saeed and Nadia with a "Return" phase for their journey, "Half a century later Nadia returned for the first time to the city of her birth, where the fires she had witnessed in her youth had burned themselves out long ago, the lives of cities being far more persistent and more gently cyclical than those of people, and the city she found herself in was not a heaven but it was not a hell, and it was familiar but also unfamiliar" (123); both characters seem entrapped in their liminality marking the impact of displacement on humans, they are doomed to never feel at home.

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