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## Migration and Identity in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*.

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### Abstract

*Certainly, migration plays an important role in the life of a huge number of people around the world. It can be even said that it has become a part of their everyday life. Migration is, first and foremost, a normal human activity because every minute, many people decide to move from one country, locality, or place of residence to settle down in another one. Of course, this migration can be full of positive issues to these people, but at the same time, it is also associated with various negative points, among which we can talk about identity constructions. The present paper explores, on the one hand, the complex relationship between migration and identity transformation as depicted in Mohsin's Hamid's novel Exit West, and, on the other hand, it attempts to introduce migration not only as a physical journey, but as a profound emotional and psychological experience that reshapes the identities of its protagonists, Nadia and Saeed as well. Further, the paper also tends to shed some light on the possible opportunities for human reformation together with the feelings of loss and dislocation caused by migration.*

**Keywords:** Migration, Adaptation, Assimilation, Borders, Identity Challenges.

### 1. Introduction:

The study of diaspora in contemporary contexts has become multi-directional; the process of diaspora refers to the movement of people migrating frequently from one place to another for various reasons, which resulted in building up several diasporic communities that share a common sense of identity confusion, rootlessness and homelessness in a new foreign land. Therefore, these communities see and feel the difference between living in their homeland and abroad.

Diasporic literature or also called the new world literature by some researchers such as Walkowitz, R. (2006), for example, has been increasingly circulating in the last decades as a new member of the family tree of literature. It is even considered as a scientific discourse of migration and diasporic studies. Migrant literature opens up a window into the diverse human experiences that transcend borders and cultures, whether it is written by migrants or by writers who tell stories of migrants and their migration

experiences. However, although the description of the migration process plays a major role in this literature, migrant writings seem to be very diverse since they are closely linked and related to postcolonial literature. In an attempt to shed some light on the way the literature of migration has emerged and illustrated various narratives, it is believed that “all works that are produced in a time of migration can be said to reflect on migration” (Walkowitz, R, 2006). More significantly, it is even mentioned that tackling such a significant topic would, undoubtedly, be a challenging task because “no person could capture all the related points that require explanation and no dictionary could englobe all the postcolonial concepts and terms” (Childs, P., & Williams, P, 2014).

## 2. A Background on the Novel:

As a matter of fact, the novel *Exit West* explores the theme of migration and refugees through a blend of realism and magical realism; it is regarded as a contemporary fiction written by Mohsin Hamid, who was born in Lahore, Pakistan, and spent most of his childhood there. However, at an early age, he decided to migrate with his family and move to the Western area of United Kingdom and to the United States later. His experience of migration has influenced massively his works especially *Exit West*, in the sense that many critics have been inspired by his novel, which had a major impact on their life. In short, *Exit West* reflects a progressive shift in Asian Anglophone literature since it has earned many recognitions and global awards.

The novel unfolds the story of two lovers, Saeed and Nadia, who fall in love in an unnamed city fallen apart, because of deadly conflict and violence. The fact that the plot of the story is unknown holds a significant importance, since it offers every single reader the freedom to imagine the actions of the story taking place in any city or country. More importantly, the author also justifies the two protagonists, who are the only named characters in the novel to keep the reader emotionally in touch with them and with their feelings of displacement that reflects the life of the writer.

As for the title itself, it includes two terms “Exit” and “West”. This fact holds a significant meaning referring to the crisis of migration and the process of searching for a better life. It also reflects the fact that displacement can be directed towards different locations. The term “exit” means to leave one’s existing circumstances, which, in the novel’s context, refers to the characters’ urgent need to flee a war-torn setting. The main characters, Saeed and Nadia, use magical doors that enable them to travel instantly to various nations, signifying the idea that migration, or the physical escape, is an essential part of human life. According to Hamid, migration is not only a search for new chances and connections, but also a reaction to crises.

Moving to the second term ‘West’, it stands for a specific direction towards Europe and the Western countries, usually associated with success, safety, prosperity and freedom. This directional choice highlights the historical patterns of migration, where individuals flee from conflict in search of better lives and opportunities in Western nations. In fact, the title also evokes themes related to identity and belonging, as characters migrate through foreign countries and societies and keep struggling with their self-identification. It should be stressed that the process of migration does not simply mean moving to another place, but also confronting the obstacles of living and belonging somewhere else.

## 3. Conceptual Framework:

Certainly, the theoretical innovations of prominent scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Chinua Achebe, for instance, have been visualized recently in postcolonial and diasporic studies. The notion of diaspora in particular has been productive in its attention to the real-life movement of people throughout the world, including both migrating by choice or compulsion. Moreover, terms such as hybridity, postcolonialism, identity crisis and migration often appear in diasporic studies.

In an attempt to provide a postcolonial reading or study of a certain novels, it is crucial to start by examining the historical background of colonialism, a period that was marked by massive violence, economic, political and physical exploitation. This means that “a study on postcolonial literature must begin with the historical contexts of colonialism, contexts that are frighteningly shot by violence” (Nayar, P. K, 2008). Bearing this fact in mind, it can be mentioned that the theme of violence in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* seem to serve as the main purpose in shaping the migration journey of the two protagonists, while their story begins in an unknown setting marked by massive violence and civil wars. In other words, this escalating violence forces the couple to flee their home, highlighting the urgent and often brutal realities faced by refugees.

Cultural identity crisis and migration in postcolonial literature are two related themes and can never be separated. This implies that, most of the times, when a novel that explores the events of migration, the issue of cultural identity is present in the same story. Understanding the history of migration shows the way the notion of diaspora is connected to identity confusion and hybridity. This is why it is strongly believed that “Understanding the history of migration allows us to better appreciate the world we live in today” (Bertossi, C. 2020). Migration and diaspora are widely explored and highlighted in literature; they are frequently related to sadness and suffering since they describe the experiences of migrants and their journeys of crossing borders. *Exit West* essentially sheds light on different people, who can react to displacement in several ways. For instance, the two protagonists of the story have a different view; Saeed misses his homeland and craves to go back, whereas Nadia seeks liberation and tries to stay away from home as possible as she can. In fact, these events tend to provide the readers with an idea about the extent to which migration can have a strong impact on people’s identities and lives.

## 4. Migration: Towards a Definition:

Nowadays, the majority of people seem to use the two terms immigration and migration interchangeably. The reason behind this fact is that both terms refer to the movement of people. However, this does not mean that the two words have different meanings and implications. Immigration explicitly refers to the act of entering a foreign country by individuals or groups of people to live there and reside there, either permanently or for a considerable amount of time. Immigration includes crossing international borders in legal ways such as getting visas, for example, and permits to enter the country and stay in it in order to get an employment contract. Immigration can also take place in illegal ways such as aspects of illegal immigration, where immigrants look for better opportunities for their lives. Nevertheless, migration seems to be different in that it is, most of the times, not with the aim of settling down in the new place permanently. It is true that people may migrate for several reasons such as education, climatic conditions, personal preferences or employment; it includes both internal migration and

external migration, but the migrant always has in mind that he or she will come back to his or her country of origin. To pave the way for understanding the distinction between these interrelated terms, we read that to “divide between the one who moves by choice, and those who move by force” (Hom, S. M. 2019).

However, the term ‘immigrant’ is clearly differentiated from the term ‘refugee’, because the latter is “a person seeking asylum in a foreign country because of persecution, war, extreme poverty or natural disasters... asylum claims are usually only granted for political or religious reasons” (Hron, M. 2009). In other words, the UN Refugee Agency defines refugees as “people who have been forced to flee their homes and have crossed international borders to find safety in other countries” (The UN refugee agency global website).

To put it differently, an immigrant is someone who chooses to move to a new country for a variety of reasons, such as seeking better opportunities or simply looking for a better life. On the other hand, a refugee is someone who is forced to flee his home country due to persecution, violence or war. Nevertheless, in literary and cultural criticism, the figure of the immigrant is usually highlighted by that of the ‘exile’, in this sense, the term ‘exile’ must be added to the lexical jargon of immigration, since this term includes certain political and class connotations, and it refers to “a person forced to leave his or her country because of repressive political circumstances such as political exile” (Hron, M. 2009).

## 5. Adaptation VS Assimilation

Definitely, the crisis of migration is a major theme in *Exit West*, as the author examines the reasons behind displacement and their impact in an unnamed setting marked by violence as described at the beginning of the novel “in a city swollen by refugees” (Hamid, M. 2017). This unnamed city is implicated in civil wars and massive violence, forcing many natives to flee their homes and search for safety in other places. Despite the brutality of the war that serves as the main reason for migration, economic instability and the lack of opportunities have also driven the protagonists to migrate in search of a better future, leaving their homes and families behind.

In the novel, the author speaks out about migration in an unusual way; the term magical realism consists of two contrastive parts, magic and reality, which might sound like a weird word combination; however, it is one of the most prominent themes in the novel and literature of migration in general. In other words, the novel is a migration story, and magic realism is an important part of the migration journey of the two protagonists. It should be noted that the term magical realism was first coined by the German historian Franz Roh in 1925, referring to a new artistic tendency he observed appearing in European paintings. While the concept existed earlier, it was the German Historian who named it, when he “described a group of painters whom we now categorize generally as Post-Expressionists in his *Post-Expressionism: Magical Realism*” (Zamora, L. P. 2005). From that period, it has formed part of Latin-American literature, Postcolonial studies and Literary Criticism related to African and Asian works of literature. Magical realism or ‘the marvelous real’ as it is called by some researchers such as (Zamora, L. P. 2005), for instance, is “a contradictory term but a very important mode of expression worldwide mostly in postcolonial literature because it provides the literary ground and combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary.” (Faris,

W. B. 2004). In other words, magical realism is the factionary way to tell a real story. But, despite this metaphorical way of crossing borders, the cruelty of this act can never be denied, in the sense that the author still describes them as dark magical black doors, which highlights the amount of violence produced by the entire process of migration.

The use of the magical dark doors in *Exit West* as the main and only solution for the two characters’ wish to migrate made the author escape the entire physical process of crossing borders, since the concept of magical migration is central to Hamid’s portrayal of movement across borders. These doors symbolize a metaphorical portrayal of migration, where individuals can traverse physical and cultural boundaries effortlessly just by entering a door that suddenly appears in their apartment. This contrasts sharply with the harsh realities faced by many migrants today, who endure tough journeys and several obstacles. In this sense, “the act of leaving the city by the characters without their conscious wish highlights the involuntary nature of migration in a collapsing society, emphasizing both the urgency and desperation that often accompany such decisions.” (Hameed, & Batool, 2024).

The choice of skipping the physical process of crossing borders, which is usually the main part of the entire process and a complex act that gives hard times to either people who choose to migrate, or those who find themselves forced to flee away, might have a significant purpose such creating the bond of empathy between the two protagonists and the reader. This means that instead of focusing on the journey, the reader is supposed to be emotionally connected to their story from home to homelessness. Of course, by transforming the act of crossing borders into a magical experience, Hamid focuses on the journey of migrants, who navigate their way through unfamiliar words and find ways to reflect on the hope and possibility of rebuilding their identity, reflecting new beginnings that might lead to the confusion and re-definition of identity.

## 6. Crossing Borders: Identity Challenges

Definitely, the meaning of identity, as we tend to use it, seems not to be well understood as it should be. In fact, even though everyone feels that he or she is aware of how to use the word properly in his or her everyday interactions, it is still very difficult to give a clear and adequate definition for the word. This difficulty is due to the fact that identity has multiple meanings, and it is dealt with from different perspectives such as sociology, sociolinguistic, psychology (Ting-Toomey Stella, 1999). In general, identity has to do with the different criteria by which a person is recognized. This implies that “identity is a particular form of social representation that mediates the relationship between the individual and the social work” (Chrysochoou, X. 2003). Thus, identity constitutes the organizing principle of the relationship between knowing (identification) and recognizing (self-categories). As for the term identity crisis, it is a complex concept mostly related to the postcolonial era, it can be defined as “uncompromising cultural and political conflicts among polarized groups, which struggle with each other over the definition of a national identity” (Kaul, V. 2014).

In *Exit West*, the protagonists Saeed and Nadia reveal the way displacement can manipulate a person’s life, identity, religion and beliefs. Saeed, who is portrayed as more traditional, deeply rooted and attached to his family, culture and beliefs, his identity is deeply connected to his origins. While on the other hand, Nadia who breaks free from social norms and traditions to become a



fiercely independent and self-reliant character; her unstable identity is marked and shaped by her own experiences and choices rather than other forces, representing the individualism and modernity sides that symbolizes a break from the traditional identity. Therefore, the relationship between these two characters highlights the issue of identity crisis in the postcolonial context.

While describing the main character Nadia, the author points out that “she did not pray, and she avoided speaking their language, and she avoided their people” (Hamid, M. 2017). So, there is no doubt that the author has created a rebellious Nadia because latter, during the journey, she gets more confused about her identity, which pushed her to question herself and isolate herself more from her previous identity.

On the other hand, Migration profoundly impacts the other protagonist, Saeed's identity, forcing him to navigate a complex process of adaptation and loss. Saeed's sense of self-identification is deeply tied to his home city, traditions and his relationship with his parents. But, as he moves through the magical doors and relocates to vastly different environments and locations, his identity begins to shift. In places like Greece and the United States, Saeed experiences a sense of disconnection not only from his homeland, but also from the version of himself that felt secure and deeply connected with his origins. Moreover, His increasing attachment to religion, particularly in seeking community among fellow Muslims, reflects his efforts to hold on to a piece of his past. Yet, this also highlights his struggle to reconcile his old identity with the new realities of migration.

Indeed, the question of identity came to the surface in the modern world with the increase of migrants, hybrid cultures and the constitution of countries with several cultural diversities. In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, the crisis of identity is highly regarded as one of the main issues in societies, where people often flee their home country and get away from their cultural identity in order to adapt and accept a new culture or a hybrid mixed one.

## 7. Conclusion:

*Exit West* illustrates the idea that migration is not just a physical transition, but rather a profound transformation of identity and belonging. As Nadia and Saeed traverse through various "magic doors," they experience the dislocation of their former identity, grappling with feelings of homelessness that extend beyond the geographical to the psychological. This duality of homelessness both physically and mentally reflects the complex crises faced by migrants in contemporary societies. In *Exit West*, Hamid explores the profound impact of migration on identity, illustrating the loss of home that leads to transformations and changes in the lives of his characters. Furthermore, Through the journeys of Saeed and Nadia, the novel captures the tension between holding onto one's roots and adapting to the fluid, reflecting the realities of displacement. Thus, the magical doors serve as a powerful metaphor, collapsing time and space to emphasize the emotional and psychological events and experiences that migrants endure. It should be acknowledged that the story represents a real challenge to the readers, who need to reconsider some notions of identity and home, creating a deep bond and empathy for those whose lives are shaped by displacement. This exploration reflects profoundly our globalized world, where the process of migration and identity crisis remains a defining issue of our contemporary time.

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