



World of Porous Borders: Global refugee crisis and Transnationalism in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

Dr. KV Surendran¹, Suhana PA²

^{1,2}. Sree Narayana Guru College, Chavadi, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

The contemporary world is brimming with an unexpected number of refugees and other displaced individuals. Global refugee crisis and migration is one of the greatest problems faced by the world today. At the same time, xenophobia and hostility towards migrants are promoted by most of “privileged first world countries”, who takes different measures to keep them away. Pakistani Transnationalism novelist Mohsin Hamid's fourth novel *Exit West* tries to portray the global refugee crisis and its terrifying consequences. Post 9/11 scenario is characterized by an increasing importance for nation, nationality and purity which results in the exile and death of hundreds and thousands of people. *Exit West* discuss these issues in detail and provides a transnational solution of magical doors which can lead people to anywhere in the world. Hamid hopes for a world without or with porous borders that protects migration as a human right.

Keywords: global refugee crisis, migration, exit west, nation, nationality, magical doors, transnationalism

Introduction

Global refugee crisis is one of the greatest problems faced by the world today. The contemporary world is brimming with an unexpected number of refugees and other displaced individuals. Scores of people are moving from one place to another, from one country to another. People from war prone countries like Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan and Myanmar migrate in search of security, food, shelter; life in every sense. Behind the statistics are human beings with their own unique life experiences and dreams for the future, struggling to fulfill basic needs to live. At the same time, xenophobia and hostility towards migrants are promoted by most of “privileged first world countries”, who takes different measures to keep them away.

Pakistani Transnationalism novelist Mohsin Hamid's fourth novel *Exit West* tries to portray the global refugee crisis and its terrifying consequences. Hamid himself has spent his life in different countries as an immigrant and considers himself to be a “mongrel”, a hybrid. He had spent parts of his life in Lahore, America and London. He considers himself to have a part of all these places within him which makes him a hybrid rather than a Pakistani, an American or a British citizen. He feels home at all these places, but at the same time, foreign. And he considers the feeling of foreign to be common for everyone in life. But his transnational views are threatened by the growing sense of nationalism and purity all over the world which creates different kind of conflicts. “As a mongrelized human being I don't find the world around us satisfactory.”(Milo) In his novel *Exit West* he is discussing these issues faced by the migrants through a love story set in an unnamed city.

The novel begins with Saeed and Nadia meeting each other in a city “swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace or at least not yet openly at war” (Hamid 1). They meet at an evening class on “corporate identity and product branding”.

It might seem odd that in cities teetering on the edge of the abyss, young people still go to class [...] 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)

Saeed is an independent educated young man working for an advertising firm and lives with his parents. Nadia, who always wears a black robe works for a company and lives alone, a very rare thing in their traditional and religious country. Saeed and Nadia falls in love as their city falls prey to terror and violence. In between they lose their jobs, lose all contacts for a while, but still manage to get together and face the difficult times. After Saeed's mother's death with a stray bullet, Nadia move into Saeed's flat, where he lived with his parents. Both of them try to find a way out of the country. They hear about the magical black doors that could suddenly appear anywhere and lead them to other parts of the world. They manage to find an exit through one of them with the help of an agent. But Saeed's father refuses to leave and decides to remain with the memories of his wife. Saeed and Nadia, with great distress, finally leave the country and reaches Mykonos in Greece. They live in the refugee camp, in their made up tent for a while. Life is not easy and during the time their relationship slowly turns bitter. They later leave with the help of a girl from the hospital who had a special attachment towards Nadia. Now they reach London where they are constantly threatened by the natives for a long period. They live in the large house they entered through the doors until the government decides to build in rehabilitation settlements for the refugees outside the city. Both of them work at the camps for construction of settlements but later decides to leave in an attempt to save their relationship which has turned bad over the time. They reach Marin in California, an island city, where

large number of refugees has already settled. They set up their home away from other settlements, on a hill, with a view of the sea. They find jobs and spent evenings together smoking marijuana. They finally decide to separate and one morning Nadia leaves the tent. They keep in touch for some time-calling and meeting once in a week. Slowly the interval grows longer and it gradually stops. Fifty years later Nadia visits their homeland where the unrest had stopped a long time ago and meets Saeed. Saeed promises to take her to the Chilean desert to look at the stars. Through the love story the novelist successfully portray the fast changing world and the effect of these changes in the personal life and attitudes of the people. Geopolitics is a major point of discussion like Hamid's other novels.

The story of Saeed and Nadia are paralleled by narratives from different parts of the world like the man who comes out of the bedroom of a sleeping woman in Australia or the two old men who build up a relationship by meeting each other passing through the doors every day. These parallel narratives suggest that life is the same in different parts of the world and people are coming from all parts of the world and making new hybrid cultures. The influx of strangers of various ethnicities into Saeed and Nadia's daily lives, the politics surrounding such interactions, the dilemma of faith in such a diverse community all become factors in the development of their identity.

The city in which the novel opens remains unnamed till the end. It could be anywhere on the planet. "It could be about the places you've been, or the places you're from, or the places you've heard about" (Hamid). Hamid tries to portray the universal nature of migration. It is a human phenomenon since the origin of mankind. We evolved as species in Africa and have travelled to all other places. In that sense all of us are migrants.

But this is geographical migration. There is a kind of migration through time too according to Hamid. The city of our childhood does not exist anymore when we are forty or fifty. We then live in a different place. In that sense again "We are all migrants through time" (209) like the old woman at Palo Alto who had lived in the same house her entire life but found herself foreign "...when she went out it seemed to her that she too migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same house all our live, because we can't help it"(209).

The journey of the migrants is not given much importance in the novel. It is the hard journey of the migrants that generally gains attention and are widely discussed by the media and public. But this aspect of migration is given least importance by the author. He just mentions that moving through the door was like "both like dying and like being born" (98). It seems extinguishing from the suggestions. But Hamid considers the journey as only a small moment in the life of refugees. For him, how they manage to live later is more important. Hamid discusses the resultant cultural transmission with greater importance.

Refugees are common sight from the beginning of the novel. There are large number of them in Saeed's city when the novel begins.

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 recreate 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. (26)

It is explained without any sense of awe or despair as if it is a common place truth of the world. Refugees are a part of their life much before they themselves turn into refugees. But the act of leaving behind ones land, family and friends is not an easy task. The emotional trauma associated with migration is portrayed through Saeed and Nadia's distress in leaving behind Saeed's father who refuses to join them as he cannot leave his country with the memories of his beloved wife, even though he realises that it is only death that remains for him there. He forces Saeed and Nadia to leave and make Nadia promise not to leave Saeed until they are completely safe. It is difficult for Nadia to give the promise because that makes her feel like they are abandoning the old man even though he had his friends and cousins there. Hamid adds "... and so 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)

Saeed is the one deeply affected by the departure. Saeed desperately wanted to leave the country, he always had, but he never contemplated leaving it forever. The impending departure does not carry any promise of coming back to his friends and relatives which struck him deeply sad. He is always the one greatly affected by nostalgia and this is the reason why he turns bitter once he leaves his land. Nadia is much more comfortable with all varieties of movement in life and Hamid suggests that the reason may be because she never had a childhood as idyllic as Saeed. She has been an "other" in her own country and therefore is comfortable with the identity even when she is a refugee. Saeed on the other hand defined his identity with reference to his state and society. For instance he went for prayer on Fridays because he felt that connected him to adulthood and being a particular sort of man who was accepted by his society. This is the reason why he always has a tendency to build up relationship with people of similar national, religious or cultural backgrounds.

The doors bring in elements of magic into the novel. "Rumors had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often places faraway, well removed from this death trap of a country."(69). These doors take you away from the country. But it could be to anywhere in the world. You never know where you will reach once you enter them. And any door could turn magical suddenly. So people are constantly on look for dark passages. Militants in Saeed's country, guards these doors to stop people from moving out of their country. Many of the militants actually came into the city through the doors. Doors to wealthier places can always be seen guarded by forces in the novel. But nothing prevents people from using the doors as new and new doors appear in unpredictable places. The doors first take Saeed and Nadia to Mykonos in Greece, then to London and finally to Marin. These doors are actually a symbol for porous borders, a hope for the future where people can move around freely regardless of nations and borders.

Technology too provides similar doors or 'windows' through which people cross all kind of borders. Internet and social

media provide immense access and people could be anywhere they wish to be in fractions of a second. They can even travel to places which do not really exist at all. "In their phones were antennas and these antennas sniffed out an invisible world as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be"(39). Saeed and Nadia also make use of the technology to emotionally be at places they want to be and is not physically possible. They keep in touch with home and understand what happens in other countries through the same means. Thus phone act as a prototype of the doors as such.

The experiences they have in London clearly portrays the life of refugees in the countries they migrate to. They are often seen as enemies, who have come to take away the resources, jobs and other facilities from the natives rather than as people who had lost everything in life and are in search of life. Xenophobia and hostility towards the refugees have made life terrible for these already suffering groups. It is the fear of refugees which make the people of the privileged countries protest against them and even unleash attack on them with governmental support. This fear is purposefully created by certain groups to fulfill their vested interests. At the same time this fear can force the native people to go to any extent to get the refugees off their land. This is what happens in London in the novel. " They sat on their bed and watched the rain and talked as they often did about the end of the world and Saeed wondered aloud once again if the natives would really kill them, and Nadia said once again that the natives were so frightened they would do anything"(161).

The first step taken by the native government is to deny the refugees all facilities enjoyed by the natives like water, electricity, transportation etc- all those facilities the refugees dreamed of when they left their home from an unknown land. Terror is another method used to make the refugees go back to the lands they have come from. They are constantly terrorized on racial and national grounds by the different native groups and governmental agencies like the Police.

From dark London Saeed and Nadia wondered what life must be like in light London, where they imagined people dined in elegant restaurants and rode in shiny black cabs, or atleast went to work in offices and shops and were free to journey about as they pleased. In dark London rubbish accrued, uncollected and underground stations were sealed. The trains kept running, skipping stops near Saeed and Nadia, but felt as a rumble beneath their feet and heard at a low powerful frequency, almost subsonic, like thunder or detonation of a massive distant bomb. (142)

They tries to make life difficult for the refugees as it was at their home countries or even more, so that they would go back. Hamid discusses about these various measures taken in the refugee camps all over the world in his interviews. The only way according to Hamid to stop migration is to militarise borders and to "mete out on the migrants a level of horror that counter balances the horror facing them wherever they are from so they don't come any more" ().

Most migrants are kept at bay in camps, in an attempt

according to Hamid to "impose a condition that humanity has never known before, which is an end to migration." But the refugees sticks on in the novel. In spite of everything they face they refuse to go away. Finally the natives have to accept them as one among themselves.

Perhaps they had decided they did not have it in them to do what would have needed to be done, to corral and bloody and where necessary slaughter the migrants and had determined that some other way would have to be found. Perhaps, they grasped that the doors could not be closed and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not have been able to look their children in the eye, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done. Or perhaps the sheer number of places where there were new doors had made it useless to fight in anyone. (164)

Electricity and water came in and negotiations were discussed which resulted in the decision to create settlements for refugees outside the city.

The natives are hostile towards the migrants as they look at them as the "other" who has intruded into "their country" to take away their fortunes. In fact, it is this sense of superiority created by nationalism that makes them devoid of human compassion and treats their fellow beings as enemies. Hamid refers to the violent protesters in London who want to push out the refugees using the term "nativist", a word that refers to people who believe that the interests of a city's natives should be protected against immigrants, who believe that the newcomers will somehow diminish or negatively alter something about their country. It is the same sense of superiority of one's kind that created the civil unrest and violence in Saeed's country.

The nativists are not the only people with nationalistic thoughts in the novel. The migrants divide among themselves according to national or cultural affiliation. Nadia feels comfortable with people from other countries but Saeed always desires to unite with people from his country. "Here in this house he was the only man from his country, and those sizing him up were from another country, and there were far more of them and he was alone. This touched upon something basic, something tribal and evoked tension and a sort of suppressed fear" (146) Saeed joins a group from his country, who lives in another place, in prayers and even wishes to shift to their place. But Nadia disagrees claiming that she is different from them. The real danger is realized when this group begins to speak about martyrdom and violence, the same things militants in their country spoke about. Communities formed out of sameness turns dangerous when they try to assert their superiority through violence, which is happening today all over the world.

Out of the two, Nadia is always the one who adjusts with change and movement easily. In her days in London she is able to become part of the largely Nigerian group of their settlement easily unlike Saeed. She is also not as emotionally affected as Saeed about their leaving the country. This may be

because she has always been an “other”, even in her homeland, being an out of the box woman.

Hamid indirectly suggest that most of the refugees do not belong to the white imperial world but to Asian, African continents referring to their skin colour as various shades of brown when he speaks about the refugees in Mykonos. “They walked away from the beach club and on the lee of a hill they saw what looked like a refugee camp, with hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colours and lives-many colours and lives but mostly falling within a band of brown that ranged from dark chocolate to milky tea...”(100).

Hamid considers the hostility towards immigrants in the first world countries especially since post 9/11 as the failure of western humanist notion. In his interview with *The Guardian* he says

We believe that if you're black or white you are equal. Or if you're male or female you're equal; if you're gay or straight, you're equal. But one of the subversive questions that fiction can ask, and that this book in particular tries to ask, is why are the child born in Mogadishu, and the one born in Milan or Minnaeapolis, not equal? The whole system of nation state, global governance, democracy has this huge lacuna at the heart of it.

Hamid strongly believes that in near future there will be a great movement for the rights of the refugees like the ones for women, African Americans and gay people. He believes that the final consequence of denying human dignity and equality will be that people in the west will eventually give up these values and turn to tribalism. But tribalism is in opposition with the concept of modern nation state and will eventually lead to separatism. He puts forward Pakistan as an example to what will happen to the west if they promote tribalism, when purity is made predominant in the society – a fundamentally diverse society growing increasingly fragmented between various communities who all define themselves based on ideas of pure identity.

Although the novel discusses the large threat of the increasing divisive nationalistic thoughts and xenophobia, it is not a dystopian novel. The novel actually brings in a sense of hope for the future world. Hamid discuss about how people from different countries live together in the refugee camps irrespective of their racial, cultural, linguistic differences. Such places provide great means for cultural transmission and enable human beings to be more compassionate as it reminds that all people irrespective of their differences are human beings in need of a comfortable peaceful life.

Hamid's dream of a world without national divisions is actually materialized in these places where people live together. In the refugee camp in Mykonos where in Saeed and Nadia are variously relieved, frightened, outraged and threatened they plunge more and more into the questions of their identity and nationhood. Hamid says in the refugee group in Mykonos “every one was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was.” The mansion in London where Saeed and Nadia lives is largely occupied by Africans. They very soon create a committee to look into internal matters of the settlement in which Nadia finds a place even though she is different from

all the other members. She very soon makes personal relationships with these people. At the labour camp where the refugees worked for the construction of housing settlements they communicated largely in English with influences of their native languages and irrespective of the linguistic differences they manage to communicate and understand each other.

Together in this group they conversed in a language that was built in large part from English, but not solely from English, and some of them were in any case more familiar with English than others. Also they speak different variations of English, different Englishes, so when Nadia gave voice to an idea or opinion among them she did not need to fear that her views could not be comprehended, for her English was like theirs, one among many. (144)

The novel portrays the microcosm of the contemporary, fast changing world. With the portrayal of Marin as a new city inhabited by refugees without facing any threats from the natives, the novel ends on a positive note, hoping a better tomorrow for migrants. Hamid believes that whatever the obstacles may be, people will finally survive. “People will find a way. They always have. In the novel, I think the doors functions to make what is already an emotional reality: the people are going to move and they will move physically and mentally”.

Hamid believes that migration itself forces hope for a world without borders or with porous borders, where people will move around freely in spite of their nationalities. “ The hope is that new cities are born, people move, new stuff begins to happen, better food is created, there's better music, people having sex who wouldn't be having sex before and enjoying it more now”(Hamid)

Global migration and refugee crisis are result of the growing obsession with nationality and other puritanical divisive thoughts all around the world. These ideologies were proven dangerous very early even though they were widely promoted during various anticolonial struggles. These imaginary borders only help in increasing the conflicts in the world and needs to be remedied and replaced with a more inclusive ideology. But the post 9/11 scenario actually witnessed a reinforcing of these principles in different countries, especially the first world. Hamid tries to bring in the danger of it through his novels *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West* and the latter one actually propose a solution of a borderless world. The refugee crisis can only be dealt with a direct confrontation of the realities of neo colonialism and nationalism. *Exit West* is a fable of deterritorialisation. Hamid believes that it is what the world and the future generations demand of us now – a world without borders.

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