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A Study of Refugee Crisis in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* in the Backdrop of Current Afghanistan Refugee Crisis

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Abstract:

Mohsin Hamid's latest novel, *Exit West*, published in 2017, offers significant comments on war, militants, bloodshed, exile and refugitude. Especially in the contemporary world the novel vociferously untangles the Afghanistani refugee crisis in a literary and indirect manner. The novel's protagonists, Saeed and Nadia resemble any of many Afghanistan nationals fleeing their homelands in fear of Taliban and seeking refuge in foreign lands and cultures. The paper intends to explore how Hamid as an imaginative seer had fore seen this in 2017 and prepared the world to make strategies to accommodate such refugees on the basis of human values as he repeatedly highlights that in today's globalised, technologized and postmodern world, no one can be sure that he/she will never be exiled and will never have to experience the refugitude, as experienced by Hamid's Saeed and Nadia in his *Exit West* and fleeing Afghani refugees in the real world today.

Keywords: Refugee, refugitude, identity, home, homeland, mobility.

Mohsin Hamid published his recent novel *Exit West* in 2017, and before this piece of fiction, he had established himself as a best selling and a critically acclaimed novelist with the publication of *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* in 2000, 2007 and 2013, respectively. Hamid has a mastery over specialised narrative techniques which makes him a postmodernist writer. His plots, themes, characters and delivery make him different from the contemporary Pakistani writers and provide him with the strong foundation for taking Pakistani fiction to the global audience. A successful writer, as always, has to pass the test of time and hopefully Hamid, as a successful writer, will pass this test, and will be read, centuries after our generation. A great writer also talks about universal human emotions and makes a comment on the prevailing or foreseeable problems. Such writer uses literature as a tool and a mirror. As a tool, literature is used by such writers to

mend society, discreetly. As a mirror, literature is used by such writers, to open up the hitherto closed eyes of the society towards the problems, being ignored/unaddressed, emphatically. Undoubtedly, Hamid uses his literary craft as a tool and a mirror to comment on the contemporary issues, not so easy to be commented on.

Hamid's *Exit West*, offers an interesting read, especially in the backdrop of recent refugee crisis emanating from Afghanistan, since the collapse of the Afghanistan government and the Taliban's taking over Kabul on 15th August 2021. The world, through the social and the main stream media, has been witnessing the horrific scenes of desperation, from the Kabul airport, where everyone, including infants, children, men and women, is lining up to enter the airport in the hope to leave Afghanistan. The ordinary people, can just be sad by watching such unprecedented scenes, but, a writer is touched, emotionally. And, because writers have secondary imagination, as William Wordsworth has stressed, they can envision such events before they actually take place. Hamid had envisioned this more than four years before today, when he published his *Exit West* in 2017, and tried to prepare the world, through this novel to empathise with the refugees, from Afghanistan today or some other country tomorrow. Today it is Afghanistan, tomorrow it may be any other country, including your and mine. In an interview with CL Chandler, Hamid asserts, "I think that if we can recognize the universality of the migration experience and the universality of the refugee experience – that those of us who have never moved are also migrants and refugees – then the space for empathy opens up" (Hamid Interview).

The problem of refugees, being multi layered, multi-dimensional linked with humanitarian, socio-economic, psychological, geopolitical, and legal undercurrents, is intimately related to world peace and security. Every state offers guarantee to its citizens for basic human rights with dignity and security. But the moment the citizens become refugees, such guarantees evaporate, and, sans legal status in their asylum nations, the refugees become thoroughly vulnerable to all sorts of atrocities including imprisonment and deportation. The refugees have to flee either due to the political, religious, racial, social etc. persecutions or the wars, territorial conflicts and natural disasters. The 1951 Convention defines a refugee as person who, ". . . Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." Regarding abusive and

harmful refugee arrangements, Elizabeth Olson states, “in the context of late liberalism and capitalism in crisis, geographers are drawing our attention to the ways that space and waiting come together to produce and to maintain abusive and harmful arrangements of power and inequality. Lines, lists, rooms and rosters dictate an order of being received, and . . . influence the dignity and safety of those who are required to wait . . . (517).

As the Taliban has recaptured almost all the provinces of Afghanistan, many Afghan citizens, including religious minorities, fearing prosecution, are seeking refuge, in any country offering it. And the world needs to act compassionately, for which Mohsin Hamid has done his bit through *Exit West* and many statements post publishing his latest fiction. Hamid’s *Exit West*, as a challenging refugee love narrative, has been shortlisted for Man Booker Prize, International IMPAC Dublin Award 2019, has won Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction and The Aspen Words Literary Prize 2017. The narrative traces the journey of two young Muslim lovers, identical to today’s Afghan couple, from an anonymous war ridden country, identical to today’s Taliban controlled Afghanistan, to many host countries like Greece, London etc. The protagonists are named Saeed and Nadia and their unnamed country is engulfed in war and fanaticism ransacking its peace and forcing many like them to self-exile seeking safety and refuge. The lovers represent millions of people escaping their countries for seeking refuge in culturally, linguistically and geographically distant countries. The challenges that they face, represent many homeless, directionless refugees who are displaced, abandoned and doomed. As Saeed and Nadia reach a refugee camp in Manila, Hamid narrates:

The camp was in some ways like a trading post in an old-time gold rush, and much was for sale or barter, from sweaters to mobile phones to antibiotics to, quietly, sex and drugs, and there were families with an eye on the future and gangs of young men with an eye on the vulnerable and upright folks and swindlers and those who had risked their lives to save their children and those who knew how to choke a man in the dark so he never made a sound. The island was pretty safe, they were told, except when it was not, which made it like most places. Decent people vastly outnumbered dangerous ones, but it was probably best to be in the camp, near other people, after nightfall. (58-9)

Hamid endeavours to sketch the psychological disintegration of Saeed and Nadia, the pivotal refugee lovers, who endure the violent forces all around. The violence throws them to bottomless misfortunes and shatters their self-esteem. The war destroys their physical realities

based on entities like houses, landscapes, families, towns, villages, schools etc. The war and violence decimate the concepts like stability, coherence, order and identity. Such violent torrents not only intimidate but also throw them to the far periphery from their centre. "Returning to where they had been born was unthinkable, and they knew that in other desirable cities in other desirable countries similar scenes must be unfolding, scenes of nativist backlash, and so even though they discussed leaving London, they stayed" (75). Under the bombing drones, Saeed and Nadia from the war ridden ambiguous country, undertake escape journey through the magic doors that have appeared across the globe. The first magical door, introduced by the novelist, opens up in Australia's Sydney. The door's darkness is the symbol of uncertainty of their escape, ". . . the closet doorway was dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness. And out of this darkness . . ." (9). Their home country has been captured by militants and rebels and the magical doors are the only possibility to escape from the prosecution. The magical doors in the narrative are identical with Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul, which attracts the Afghan refugees seeking asylum in distant lands. The militants as the Taliban have declared that entering the door like 'attempting to leaving Afghanistan' would be punishable with the capital punishment.

The magic doors, in the fiction, provide instant movement from one place and time zone to another, unlike any such movement in contemporary real world. Out side the door, in a new land, Saeed and Nadia reface the challenge, pain, difficulties and hostility like any real refugee. The doors are nor only magical, they are mysterious too, because of ". . . its darkness, its opacity, the way that it 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 . . ." (57).

Just like Saeed and Nadia, ordinary refugee too have 'waiting' predominating their uncertain existence. After passing through their first door, Saeed and Nadia, exit into Mykonos' refugee camp. They rigorously attempt to join the crowd rushing toward a new door supposed to be linking to Germany, a better country. They are not allowed to enter by the guards, as all the doors to places in richer countries are heavily guarded and restricted. Hamid elaborates, "Days passed like this, full of waiting and false hopes, days that might have been days of boredom, and were for many, but Nadia had the idea that they should explore the island as if they were tourists" (62). Bridget Haas, in his study shows that while many refugees use their waiting time for productive activities like building the social network, filing legal paperwork, learning local languages and culture, working where ever possible for livelihood, Nadia, in the novel, reclaims this unproductive time for herself, as leisure, only. Being unable to utilise this

time productively, Nadia treats time as a protracted and uncertain waiting. Even, being safe and secure, though temporarily, in a house in London, where refuge is enjoyed by a diverse group from various countries like Guatemala, Nigeria and Indonesia, Nadia and Saeed hear rumours about nativist extremists, and find “soldiers and armored vehicles’ and ‘drones and helicopters’ circling the ‘ever more dense zone of migrants’ (74-5). As Saeed’s and Nadia’s mobility outside the house and in the neighbourhood constricts more, Nadia and Saeed, ‘who had run from war already, and did not know where next to run’, find themselves ‘waiting, waiting, like so many others’ (75). Later, when the tension between the refugees and nativists, in London escalates, Nadia and Saeed experience a sense of calmness while waiting, what Hamid describes as, “. . . the calm that is called the calm before the storm, but is in reality the foundation of a human life, waiting there for us between the steps of our march to our mortality, when we are compelled to pause and not act but be” (75).

Hamid has beautifully matured Saeed’s and Nadia’s relationship which does not remain stable throughout the narrative. Like in real life, their personalities are also unique. In exile, Saeed always remembers the militants that they have fled from. Saeed is nostalgic and longs for familiar, but Nadia constantly counters Saeed’s emotionalism and is more practical in attuning to the realities of the changing world around. Whereas Saeed is heartbroken in new culture and remains depressed, Nadia on the other hand, accepts the new realities along with the new challenges, she is destined to face as a refugee. This significant personality difference is conspicuous in the London house, where Saeed feels depressed and longs for his countrymen, but Nadia observes logically that the Nigerian refugees living with them reject the very concept of homogenous group as Nigerians, they are in fact heterogenous.

Saeed’s many traditional assumptions about the similarities that are expected to relate them to their countrymen in London house, their place, space, location, language, culture and religion are modified in this house in the face of cosmopolitan culture kept by global residents. By invoking the borders that separate communities on the African continent, the novelist offers that the absence of such traditional boundaries in London house materialises in creation of less rigid or strict sense of community. Nadia comprehends this new and globalised culture and realises that, “They represented something new in her mind, the birth of something new . . .” (80). So, through creating the sequence in the London house Hamid has made the reader think about the concept of community as changing in different time and space.

Hamid in this novel has not only woven the refugee crisis, but also, the dialectical undertones on the concept of natives. In order to understand the definition of the native the novel tries to fathom root of nativism with the issues like who exactly qualifies to be a native of a particular place at a particular time? The novelist offers possible answers to this question, indirectly, through Nadia and Saeed's arrival in Marin, California, USA. It is their final trip through the doors that both of them take together before parting their ways. In Marin, California, USA, "there were almost no natives, these people having died out or been exterminated long ago", but the few who still inhabit Marin "seemed not infrequently to be possessed of a limitless patience that was matched by limitless sorrow" (106).

Hamid stresses on patience and its language symbolising active waiting or endurance to persevere despite the oppressing time and disparity of power. Through Saeed's and Nadia's love story *Exit West* also deals with other representations of refugees, in ethnographic studies and works of cultural production alike, which portray refugees in terms of ". . . the most sensational aspects of their lives' and overlook 'the activities and commitments . . . routinely seen as mundane' (Marlowe, 2). Hamid through this novel succeeds in suggesting that the movement of people as refugees or migrants would be the foundation of future solidarity and brotherhood. Sheller and Urry stress that the new mobilities paradigm demands that we go ". . . beyond the imagery of "terrains" as spatially fixed geographical containers for social processes" and "question scalar logics such as local/global as descriptors of regional extent' (Sheller and Urry, 209). Still the fact remains that a home is a home, and the absence of homeland symbolises the fractured identity and rootlessness. In *Migrant Voices in Literatures in English* Sheobhushan Shukla and Anu Shukla state:

Home is a very complex and multivalent concept. What is home for one may be homelessness for another. For most people. . . home is where they are themselves, where they are at home and where their heart is and not where only their feet are. It is not just a building, a geographical location, a region, a religion, a nation, a cultural or spiritual or imaginative refuge. But it is a home that determines one's identity, defines or redefines one's belonging and endeavours. (8)

The response to homelessness is different, that of Saeed's and that of Nadia's, as both are different individuals, Saeed being emotional and sentimental, Nadia being practical and mindful. Homelessness brings disintegration to Saeed and he goes into procrastination and

endless waiting, being unable to control his life and circumstances. Nadia on the other hand actively tries to find a way forward and to sustain.

Nadia is an altogether different personality, especially in comparison to Saeed, who worked in an agency that sold the outdoor advertisement, back home. Before leaving as a refugee, he lived with his elderly parents in a sumptuous part of the town, vulnerable to militants' attack. Nadia unlike Saeed is lively. She looks religious and conservative, but ironically carries unconventional and progressive outlook. Hamid elaborates:

He watched as she walked out to the student parking area and there, instead of covering her head with a black cloth, as he expected, she donned a black motorcycle helmet that had been locked to a scuffed-up hundred-ish cc trail bike, snapped down her visor, straddled her ride, and rode off, disappearing with a controlled rumble into the gathering dusk. (8)

Saeed comes to know that Nadia's garb of being a religious and orthodox woman is her strategy to keep the lusty men away from her. Ultimately, they fall in love, and with time Saeed becomes passive and both experiences change in their personalities at individual level. Stuart Hall links these changing identities with postmodernism:

Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in process of change and transformation . . . in relation to the processes of globalisation.

Hall argues that the fluidity in identities is a universal phenomenon in the globalised world but the fluidity is more aggressive in the exiled identities seeking refuge in foreign lands. Consequently, living in a foreign land, being emotionally and psychologically shattered due to violence, war and threat, Saeed begins to keep beard and emulate the basic tenets of his religion. He is heartbroken with the death of his mother and later his father. His passiveness is reinforced and he accepts his being as a matter of destiny. He does no more enjoy the worldly affairs and even the company of Nadia. He remains depressed, idle, always thinking about his past and his parents. Nadia on the other hand is a realist and futuristic.

Hamid has also created the militant's terror in civilians' life in the nameless country to which Saeed and Nadia belong, and such terror in the novel, takes us to feel what civilians in Afghanistan are feeling being threatened by the Taliban fighters.

Despite such a terror, Saeed's father decides to stay back amidst the threat to life and property, due to ongoing war, as he feels that he can not leave his native city and the memory of his diseased wife. Hamid's character, who is the father of Saeed in the novel is identical to the real man, Pandit Rajesh Kumar, the last Hindu priest of the Rattan Nath temple in Kabul, Afghanistan, who like Saeed's father has decided to stay back, even amidst the sure threat to his life. The pandit argued, "Some Hindus have urged me to leave Kabul & offered to arrange for my travel and stay. But my ancestors served this Mandir for hundreds of years. I will not abandon it. If Taliban kills me, I consider it my Seva" (News 18).

Hamid's *Exit West*, in today's contemporary world comments vociferously on the Afghanistani refugee crisis. Saeed and Nadia are any of many Afghanistan nationals fleeing their homelands in fear and seeking refuge in foreign lands and cultures. Hamid as an imaginative seer had fore seen this in 2017 and prepared the world to make strategies to accommodate such refugees on the basis of human values as he repeatedly highlights that in today's globalised, technologized and postmodern world, no one can be sure that he/she will never be exiled and will never have to experience the refugitude, as experienced by Hamid's Saeed and Nadia in his *Exit West*.

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