



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by
Royallite Global

Volume 5, Issue 1, 2024

Article Information

Submitted: 14th November 2023

Accepted: 10th January 2024

Published: 21st January 2024

ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)

ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)

Additional information is available
at the end of the article:

To read the paper online, please scan
this QR code:



How to Cite:

Ismail, K., & Alhaisony, A. (2024).
Capturing reality: Navigating
photographic realism in Mohsin
Hamid's *Exit West* (2017). *Research
Journal in Advanced Humanities*,
5(1). [https://doi.org/10.58256/
mxdsk926](https://doi.org/10.58256/mxdsk926)

Capturing reality: Navigating photographic realism in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017)

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Abstract

This paper aimed to explore the complexities that invoked colonial history and its connection to the contemporary contexts marked by multiculturalism, the war on terror, identity disintegration, displacement, and immigration. It investigated the intricate interplay between photographic realism and contemporary themes within Mohsin Hamid's novel "Exit West." The study delved into the meticulous portrayal of migration, geopolitical landscapes, counterterrorism measures, and the influence of digital technology within the narrative. By drawing parallels between Hamid's prose and photographic realism, the analysis focused on the nuanced exploration of displacement and conflict. The examination of magical doors as a literary device akin to photographic realism revealed their role in capturing the instability of geopolitical structures and disrupting conventional borders. Photographic realism was adopted as a literary theoretical framework. This research contributed to a deeper understanding of how Hamid's novel served as a critical commentary on the multifaceted challenges within the global human experience, emphasizing the relevance of photographic realism in contemporary literary analysis. After a thematic analysis of the primary text, it was concluded that the novel was a critical portrayal of migrant labor as a commodity, cosmopolitanism, contemporary sociocultural and geopolitical dilemmas, the exploitative nature of the state's projects, and interracial integration.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, disorientation, dislocation,
photorealism



Public Interest Statement

The analysis and employment of photographic realism as a theoretical framework in studying *Exit West* provided significant insights into Mohsin Hamid's writing techniques and his ability to visualize the new world order with all its stereotypes, chaos, countercultures, polarity, and geopolitical fragmentation. Therefore, exploring the way Hamid represented and portrayed *Exit West* contributed to and enhanced readers' understanding, adding authenticity, psychological intensification, and enrichment. This research paper also added a new dimension to the examination of this text, as photographic realism had never been used as a theoretical framework in the analysis of *Exit West*. It also aided in a broader understanding of the ongoing discourse about textual analyses of current confronting issues such as migration, sociocultural hybridity, interracial relations, cosmopolitanism, disorientation, empathy, displacement, and coexistence narratives.

Introduction

Exit West was Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel that depicted the life experience of two young lovers who unexpectedly met and were compelled to escape their war-torn city to explore different parts of the world. The novel was a blend of realism and magical realism that pictured the experiences of real-life migrants, love, identity, displacement, culture clashes, and adaptation in a hyper-realistic and photographic writing style.

The novel also explored contemporary geopolitical events through the lens of a near-future narrative: 'flying robots high above in the darkening sky, unseen but never far from people's minds' (Hamid, 2017, p. 83). Polar conflicts and tensions were also evident in the novel's entirety as Chambers, (2019, p. 216) posited, "to some extent, Nadia aligned with the generalizations about the global North and Saeed the global south." The novel also depicted the 21st global problem of migration and refugees and its effects on individual welfare. In this regard, Manzoor stated that "*Exit West* takes on the inevitable migration of people across countries, even across continents, when societies descend into chaos and conflict. It depicts the plight of refugees in their war-ravaged countries by specially focusing on an anonymous city torn apart by civil war" (2011, p. 15-16). Of course, the negative slanderous stereotyping of the different others and the persistent defamation, especially in the aftermath of Brexit and the Immigration Policy of Donald Trump who closed the borders down against what he called "unwanted outsiders" (Middle Eastern, Muslims, Latinos, and Asians) have also resulted in penning counter-discourses such as "*Exit West*."

In addition to Omar's perspective on *Exit West* as an antidote to the present's cruelty towards migrants, the novel's author, Hamid, universalized the refugee experience by keeping the city unnamed, emphasizing that "we are migrants through time." The narrative delved into various themes such as human relations, religion, identity, global cultural hybridity, the metaphor of life through a mysterious gate, and subalternity, as portrayed in Nadia and Saeed's love story, which caused suffering for those left behind. Nadia's provocative statement, "When we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind," encapsulated the profound impact of migration (Hamid, 2017, p. 94). Moreover, despite being labeled a "Brexit novel" (Shaw 2018: 26), *Exit West* predated Brexit and was better understood as engaging with the evolution of hostile immigrant policies from the early 2000s to 2017.

While Shaw (2018) labeled *Exit West* a "Brexit novel," we argued that temporal realism revealed a different narrative. The lens adjusted to encompass the temporal spectrum, tracing the development of hostile immigrant policies from the early 2000s to 2017. The novel, viewed through the lens of realism, emerged as a chronicle of evolving policies, each frame capturing the metamorphosis of societal attitudes toward immigration. In the heart of the argument lay the proposition that governments, particularly in the Global North, must confront their reality through the lens of increased immigration. The photographic gaze turned towards a new baseline, urging a shift in strategies from resistance to embrace. The realism etched in each word became a mirror reflecting the imperatives of managing and accommodating refugees, a call for a

paradigm shift captured in the unforgiving clarity of the photographic lens. Expanding upon this exploration, this paper delved thematically and analytically into the practical implications of photographic realism as a literary technique, crafting a worldview and landscape that mirrors the authenticity of a photograph. By adopting photographic realism as a framework, it aimed to provide accurate descriptions that intricately capture the nuances surrounding potential divisions in both class and racial privileges within the concepts of the East-West intersection. Ultimately, scrutinizing *Exit West* through the lens of photographic realism held significance as it invited a nuanced literary response to the migrant crisis. It laid bare the insidious transformation of the ordinary lives of two young lovers into chaos and turmoil in a war zone, complete with truck bombs, sniper rifles, armed militants at checkpoints, and constant surveillance. These characters employed mystical doors to transcend from their unnamed, devastated homeland to a new open and liberal life in the West.

Research Objectives

This research paper tried to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyze the ways in which the reader's engagement, immersion, and understanding of the text in its entirety is enhanced via photographic realism employment.
2. To scrutinize the effect of photographic realism on the representation of the main characters' mystical journey and their and psychological experiences.
3. To explore how the principles of photographic realism are aligned with the descriptive techniques employed by Mohsin Hamid in "*Exit West*".
4. To examine to what extent the overall reading experience of *Exit West* is shaped by the interaction of photographic realism with other narrative elements, such as magical realism and allegory.

Literature Review

Theoretical framework

Exit West a modernist literary text that incorporated multifaceted dimensions of themes, spontaneous overflow thoughts, a mountainous-like plot with its ups and downs, and photographic descriptions of settings, along with a realistic representation of sociocultural, geopolitical, and panoramic events. To encompass all these within the realm of postcolonial and contemporary discourse, photographic realism was adopted as a framework for this study. It was a descriptive analytical study based on the primary text (Mohsin Hamid's novel: *Exit West*, 2017).

Despite the confinement of photographic realism as a concept primarily in painting, sculpture, and cinematography throughout history, some modernist and postmodernist authors intentionally and unintentionally used its techniques in writing novels. Recently, photographic realism has intertwined with art and literature, as evident in the works of Vuohelainen (2018) and Valente (2021). Thus, tracking and pursuing photographic realism was intriguing and had implications in many disciplines, including literature. Consequently, since the ongoing discourse about photographic realism went beyond the mere representation of reality, probing the terrains of aesthetics, cultural modernity, and self-perception, it was adequate to apply it in the analysis of literary texts that vividly exposed realities, such as *Exit West*.

Since photographs, in Walton's words (1984), were "extraordinarily realistic, beyond the reach of paintings, drawings, and other 'handmade' pictures," descriptive words were also capable of painting a realistic mental image in readers. Therefore, this paper primarily focused on investigating the elements of photographic realism by capturing the physical world with precision and providing intricate and specific details about settings, objects, characters, and events. It also deconstructed the vivid imagery and sensory language used by Mohsin Hamid in "*Exit West*" to allow readers to visualize the surroundings, capturing the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of human experiences, characters, and actions as if they were viewing a photograph.

Navigating the Reality: Narration of *Exit West*

Mohsen Hamid's *Exit West* vividly depicted the harsh realities of human life disrupted by violence and destruction. The major characters Nadia and Saeed navigated the challenges of conflict, offering a powerful portrayal of the refugee experience. Against the backdrop of a city in ruins, the novel delved into the intricate details of their struggle, providing a poignant snapshot of the resilience required in such dire circumstances.

In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid portrayed the challenges of displacement in a turbulent world. The war-ravaged, unnamed city came alive through Hamid's detailed descriptions, painting a stark picture of destruction. Hamid's narrative took a fantastical turn with magical doors that defied borders, challenging conventional geopolitical structures. These mystical doors disrupted closed-border policies, providing a surreal escape across continents. Hamid's precise depiction of these doors challenged the rigidity of such policies, rendering them powerless in the face of transcendent transportation. By avoiding specific time references, Hamid universalized Nadia and Saeed's journey, emphasizing the timeless nature of human migration and resilience. The deliberate omission of temporal details transformed the narrative into a photographic montage, capturing the perpetual essence of human displacement. Hamid's careful choice of names for Nadia and Saeed, as discussed by Claire Chambers (2019), added symbolic depth. The initials "N" and "S" aligned with the cardinal points, reinforcing the enigmatic title *Exit West* and turning the characters into archetypes representing broader sociopolitical concepts.

In this photographic expedition through Hamid's narrative, Nadia and Saeed ceased to be mere characters; they metamorphosed into conduits through which the reader traversed the fraught terrain of global migration, societal upheaval, and geopolitical metamorphosis. The chiaroscuro of their experiences, depicted with the precision of a camera lens, invited readers to witness the intricate interplay of light and shadow on the canvas of human existence. In essence, *Exit West*, viewed through the prism of photographic realism, became a gallery of indelible images – a testament to the power of storytelling to capture the ephemeral and transform it into enduring visual impressions.

The media's portrayal of the refugee influx as a state of emergency, granting the state the authority to bypass the rule of law in the name of public safety, was a recurring theme. Hamid captured this phenomenon when describing Westminster as "the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation" (2017a, 126). The temporary "state of exception" declared by British authorities in the novel (Hamid, 2017a, 55) carried the ominous potential to evolve into a permanent governmental tactic, mirroring the patterns observed in counterterrorism efforts and justifying the use of extreme violence.

Xenophobic rhetoric further exacerbated the situation, fostering overt racism and legitimizing the terrorization of the "Other." The demand to "reclaim Britain for Britain" (Hamid, 2017a, 132) echoed colonial ideologies, evoking a sense of entitlement and exclusion. Consequently, the host community in London, as portrayed in *Exit West*, actively contributed to state terrorism. This terrorism was executed by state forces such as the army, police, and government agencies, constructing a body politic that perpetuated a cycle of fear and violence.

Government Legitimacy Under Scrutiny: Photographic Realism in the Theater of Terror

The London segment of the novel unveils counterterrorism measures as a resurgence of "colonial formations of sovereignty, policing, and surveillance" through the lens of photographic realism (Boehmer and Morton, 2010, 7). The impact of the "*War on Terror*" transcends international borders, manifesting not only abroad but also within national settings. The streets of London become a battleground, vividly captured through photographic realism: "Their street was under attack by a nativist mob with iron bars or knives, and she and Saeed turned and ran, but could not escape" (Hamid, 2017a, 131). Terrorism, portrayed because of various acts of violence by both state and non-state entities, unfolds as a complex narrative within the novel. The initial part of the story, set in Saeed and Nadia's home country, graphically depicts the collapse of an unidentified city due to escalating clashes between the state and militants. Photographic realism captures the grim reality where threats against "a young woman living freely" become unmanageable, funerals become

rushed affairs, and “large bombs... exploded with an awesome power” (Hamid, 2017a, 73-76).

Exit West intricately weaves the threads of state and non-state terror, showcasing citizens as the primary targets in this conflict. The government’s focus appears to be on asserting authority rather than safeguarding those trapped in the conflict zone. Photographic realism exposes the government’s actions, targeting citizens akin to the militants. This representation mirrors the governance of many postcolonial nations marked by corruption and dictatorship. When the “militants” seize control of the city’s stock exchange, and national security is compromised, the government deems it acceptable to sacrifice the lives of hostages (Hamid, 2017a, 40). In a chilling culmination, the government “exterminates” both militants and captives, reinforcing its claim of “complete control” (Ibid.). Photographic realism immortalizes this grim tableau, offering a stark portrayal of the brutality inflicted by those in power, blurring the lines between state and non-state actors in the theater of terror.

The state’s authority, when wielded disproportionately, can give rise to a necessity for violence as a means of control and regulation. The photographic realism lens sharpens the focus on these power dynamics, capturing the intricate dance between trust, authority, and violence. In a striking reflection of reality, Hamid’s exploration in Exit West illustrates how a government, in its quest for control and regulation, can directly victimize citizens. The lens of photographic realism immortalizes these moments, emphasizing the consequential sacrifice of the people’s well-being for the purported protection and assertion of the state’s authority. The secondary consideration of the citizens’ welfare becomes a stark and unsettling reality depicted through the lens of realism.

In delving into sudden displacements and the fusion of virtual reality in our globalized world, Exit West intricately weaves the opportunities and challenges, employing a narrative lens that captures the essence of the digital age. The novel conceptualizes phones as metaphorical doors to distant lands, dissolving the conventional borders of nation-states and weaving connections across vast distances. Hamid’s vivid language encapsulates the enchantment of this digital realm: “the phones’ 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’” (Hamid 2017a, 35).

For instance, the government in Saeed and Nadia’s home country enforces counterterrorism measures that sever their communication via cell phones and the internet, plunging them into feelings of isolation and fear in the unmade city (Hamid 2017a, 55). The government’s well-intentioned efforts to combat terrorism, however, backfire, leading to an escalation in terrorist activities. The lack of internet access not only stifles the dissemination of information but also impedes citizens from forging connections with one another. The lens of photographic realism captures the stark reality of a populace cut off from both communication and communal bonds. Similarly, Hamid’s portrayal of London depicts a government equipped with advanced counterterrorist troops endowed with exceptional powers, enabling them to surveil and terrorize targeted communities. Iconic landmarks like the London Eye and other surveillance devices operate within an “invisible network of surveillance” that meticulously captures and logs every detail (Hamid 2017a, 188-89). In this environment, a nativist mob, fueled by official encouragement, targets those perceived as threats to London. Consequently, both the promotion and repulsion of terrorism become essential for survival in Hamid’s depiction of London (Ibid., 132).

The lens of photographic realism encapsulates the chilling atmosphere of a city under constant surveillance, where the fine line between security measures and terror blurs. As the government reinforces counterterrorism measures and resorts to extreme violence against defenseless refugees, including children, the legitimacy of the government’s authority comes under scrutiny. The lens of photographic realism captures the chilling consequences of these actions, exemplified by rumors in the novel suggesting over two hundred migrants, including women and children, were killed in a cinema fire (Hamid, 2017a, 160-61). These rumors underscore the violent aftermath of employing force against unarmed refugees, emphasizing the frightening notion of using “counterterrorism” measures against civilians.

Fragility of Existence: Photographic Realism and Human Vulnerability in *Exit West*

Exit West echoed Butler's (2004) perspective, portraying how a humanitarian crisis, when framed as a national security issue, allowed the state to justify the denial of human rights by citing "self-defense." In the narrative, the British government's use of force endangered refugees and inadvertently encouraged terrorism from the host community. The photographic realism lens captured the human cost, with "three lives lost" and numerous injuries during attacks by the host community (Hamid 2017a, 131-32). The novel, in this context, portrayed instances of state-led or state-sanctioned terrorism, where the state controlled the rhetoric during periods of conflict. The authorities in the novel employed what they termed "a temporary anti-terrorism measure," leaving its meaning ambiguous and without a specified end date (Ibid., 55). Photographic realism revealed how counterterrorism measures were exploited to legitimize the government's actions against refugees perceived as a threat, underscoring the manipulation of rhetoric during times of crisis.

The deliberate avoidance of terms like "Islam" and "Muslims" in the novel served as a strategic response to the pervasive overuse and exploitation of these terms in Western narratives. This narrative strategy, akin to photographic realism, enhanced the storytelling by steering clear of simplistic categorizations and fostering a more authentic portrayal of the complexities inherent in the themes of terror and migration. Moreover, Hamid consciously refrained from employing specific terms such as "Islam" or "Muslims," and "terrorism" or "terrorist" in delineating events and characters related to themes of terror and migration. The central figures, Saeed and Nadia, hailed from a Muslim-majority country, yet Hamid deliberately omitted references to their religion or the nation's name. This narrative approach, deeply rooted in photographic realism, sidestepped sweeping generalizations and instead offered a nuanced and intricate exploration of the underlying issues.

Drawing inspiration from Edward Said's observations in "Covering Islam" (1981), Hamid's choice aligned with the critique of "malicious generalizations" prevalent in Western discourse regarding Muslims and Islam. Said asserted that such generalizations represented "the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West." He noted that what could be said about the Muslim mind, character, religion, or culture was no longer admissible in mainstream discussions about other cultures like Africans, Jews, or Asians (xii). In the wake of 9/11, Islam was often misconstrued in the West as diametrically opposed to Western values. Hamid's novel became a distinctive voice in these debates, presenting an alternative perspective. The deliberate avoidance of terms like "Islam" and "Muslims" in the novel served as a strategic response to the pervasive overuse and exploitation of these terms in Western narratives. This narrative strategy, akin to photographic realism, enhanced the storytelling by steering clear of simplistic categorizations and fostering a more authentic portrayal of the complexities inherent in the themes of terror and migration.

The novel captured a period of relative calm preceding the escalation of conflict between the government and "fighters" or "militants" into a full-fledged civil war. During this phase, the city experienced minimal violence, marked by sporadic shootings and car bombings. Mohsin Hamid's narrative technique, resonating with the essence of photographic realism, aligned with Judith Butler's concept of "moral equivalence," wherein acts of violence were portrayed in a neutral and unbiased manner, devoid of consideration for the cultural or ethnic backgrounds of the individuals involved (2004, 14).

Moreover, Saeed and Nadia, in their quest for a safe haven to live freely, grappled with the loss of this "luxury" due to the extreme violence in their home of origin (Hamid 2017a, 1). The pervasive themes of violence, oppression, and fear drove them, along with countless others from different countries, to flee and assume the identity of refugees. This migration transformed the dynamics between immigrants/exiles and the host society, reshaping the concepts of home and identity over time.

The novel not only challenged conventional notions of home but also disrupted the significance of location. Geographically, one's location could become a matter of "life and death." In an interview with Hamid, he noted, "When relations between people started to break down, when suspicion and xenophobia grew, and when schisms started manifesting themselves, the exact location where you are from could take on deadly forms" (Hamid 2017b). Hamid observed that the traditional notion of "home" as a stable location

was rendered obsolete by the “uprootedness” of modern life and its disquieting impact on individuals (Ibid.).

Employing episodic chapters, often referred to as “cut-piece scenes” by Claire Chambers (2019), Hamid deliberately disrupted the sense of one’s current location and transported the reader to diverse contexts beyond Saeed and Nadia’s situation (236). These vignettes shared similarities with cut-piece films in Pashto and Bangladeshi cinema (Chambers 2019, 236). Marked by sudden shifts to different settings and characters, sometimes featuring nudity or sexual encounters, these scenes provided a temporary departure from the main narrative before seamlessly returning (Chambers 2019, 236). The use of pronouns was also noteworthy, as the narrator employed “we” and “our” instead of “them” and “there,” emphasizing the universality of migration (Hamid 2017a, 94). This shift between first- and third-person plural pronouns created a shared experience of the struggles faced by migrants, emphasizing that Saeed and Nadia’s journey was not unique.

Refugee Realities: Beyond Borders in *Exit West*

The novel emphasizes shared experiences, illustrating that migration impacts not only Saeed and Nadia but also others less fortunate. Indeed, “the whole planet was on the move” (Hamid 2017a; Chambers 2019, 237-8). For instance, Hamid strategically placed the first vignette in Australia, where a black man, attempting to escape death in his homeland, materialized through a magical door in a white woman’s bedroom closet. The narrator noted the man’s awareness of “the fragility of his body,” conveying the refugee’s “perilous circumstances” (Hamid 2017a, 6-7). Understanding how easily “to make a man into meat” reflected the violence he had endured, highlighting his vulnerability. This initial chapter illustrated how exposure to violence heightened one’s awareness of the precariousness of existence.

According to Butler (2004), focusing on “a primary vulnerability to others” is a fundamental aspect of human existence (xiv). The novel portrayed life as fragile, subject to loss, as it depended on the human body’s capacity to endure and survive in a hazardous environment. Conversely, the image of the sleeping woman alone imparted a sense of security in her surroundings. In an interview, Hamid (2017c) discussed the doors as symbols, stating they “already exist” and represent “the technological reality” we live in.

In the novel, the doors served as a magical solution for individuals seeking relocation, allowing Hamid to sidestep detailing the migrants’ perilous journeys, fraught with tragic stories. Notably, Hamid didn’t diminish the dangers of migration, recognizing that it could be a story. Instead, he focused on “what makes someone want to leave [...] and what happens to them in the new place, which is the life after migration? [...] so the doors allowed me to focus on parts of the migration narrative that often get de-emphasized” (Ibid.). Thus, the novel centered on portraying aspiring migrants as ordinary individuals with families. Before being reduced to refugees, they had dreams and everyday challenges, reminding readers that there are adversities beyond the terror resulting from forced migration. The deplorable conditions experienced by migrants and refugees may alter how they are perceived as humans, preventing them from being transformed into something different—the Other.

In addition, the doors in the novel served as an analogy for past global practices, where refugees and asylum seekers were given asylum irrespective of the legality of their entry. However, Hamid did not depict a utopian society in *Exit West*. Instead, he explored the processes and effects of surveillance in London, utilizing a third-person narrator as an observational tool with access to the emotions, thoughts, and daily activities of characters, minor and major (Hamid 2017a, 88). Surveillance devices such as drones and cameras were pervasive, not only in London but across the country, aiming to control the influx of people through “the doors from poorer places” (Ibid., 101).

As a result, Hamid envisioned the disintegration of the gap that divided individuals. The avoidance of depicting the journey itself raised questions about concepts of prejudice towards migrants and challenged the binary of “us” and “them” (Hamid 2017a). For instance, Nadia and Saeed lived in their country of origin, facing aspirations and obstacles comparable to those encountered by other adolescents in the West.

Their relocation through the magic doors was a mere shift in location to escape unrestrained violence. The doors, serving as portals, enabled Hamid to change the narrative's locations through vignettes. Crossing the doors was immediate, and transitions between different scenes, settings, and characters occurred instantly, explicating the dynamics of the doors while emphasizing their magical aspects.

The novel's doors embodied what Wendy B. Faris (2005) deemed an "irreducible element" of magic (167). Hamid's refusal to rationalize the doors accomplished the "normalization of the supernatural," presenting both the real and the magical in a unified and equivalent manner (Warnes 2005, 6). Suzi Feay (2018) viewed the doors as a potentially problematic element, characterizing them as an "ingenious conceit" that paralleled the actual journey of migrants by "merely eliminating the time-consuming travel part" (31-2). Feay's use of "merely" in her statement, however, obscured a critical issue. Although no character in the novel died due to traveling through the doors, the real-world journey to Europe was perilous, leading to the deaths of many refugees. Despite the novel's emphasis on the doors' darkness and their "ingenious conceit," there was a risk that they might downplay the significance of the extremely hazardous, traumatic, and sometimes fatal journey. One could argue that *Exit West*, presented as a novel about the "European migrant crisis," used magical doors to effortlessly sidestep the suffering of individuals at the heart of the crisis.

Alternatively, Hamid's persistent focus on the doors' darkness might be seen as his acknowledgment that such unimaginable agony could not be adequately represented in narrative fiction. Nevertheless, Hamid did depict the harsh realities of migration and border crossings by exposing the hazardous journeys of the migrants. As Nadia approached the door with trepidation, she was "struck by its darkness, its opacity" (Hamid 2017a, 98). The portal's fundamental darkness, unfamiliarity, and mystery created a dramatic and horrifying experience even before stepping through it. The crossing was abrupt and arduous, akin to undergoing the process of rebirth (Chambers 2019, 236). The novel portrayed the immediate experience of migration as "both like dying and like being born [...] she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it" (Ibid.). Nadia and Saeed's physical struggles underscored the hardships faced by migrants and refugees. The doors in the novel didn't provide a miraculous solution; instead, they offered an escape from one perceived threat to another (Hamid, 2017a). However, the characters found hope through the portals and started viewing ordinary doors as potential gateways (Ibid., 70). This emphasized the idea that refugees would go to great lengths to survive and suggested that closing borders would not deter migration.

Cosmopolitanism and Interracial Immigration

The rapid transference of individuals to different locales significantly shaped the narrative's causal effect, providing the novel with a universal perspective on varied viewpoints regarding migration and its impacts on individuals, countries, and communities. In the first vignette, Hamid presented the magical door in the form of a closet door, opening to a location in Sydney, Australia, where an Australian woman slept in darkness, and a dark migrant entered her bedroom through the wardrobe door and exited through the window (Hamid 2017a, 6-7). Hamid emphasized the stark contrast between the two worlds connected through migration. The man entering the bedroom was described as having dark skin, while the woman in bed had pale skin. Despite his wish to remain unheard, the narrator empathized with the struggles and difficulties faced by "the migrant plight": "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" (Hamid 2017a, 7, Chambers 2019, 241).

Claire Chambers (2019) noted in her analysis of the novel that Hamid portrayed the dark man "as the victim of structural inequality, while the white woman was oblivious to his suffering and remained unharmed" (2019, 241). Notably, Hamid's narrator refrained from displaying clear judgment, reflecting a reassessment of ideas, as evident when the narrator shifted from initial certainty about the man's eyes to uncertainty: "His eyes rolled terribly. Yes: terribly. Or perhaps not so terribly" (Hamid 2017a, 7). This literary technique, akin to Joseph Conrad's "delayed decoding" as described by Ian Watt, combined the mind's forward temporal progression with the slower reflexive process of making out meaning (quoted in Poyner 2020, 249). In *Exit*

West, this certainty about the stereotypical portrayal of the Other served to highlight the actual ambiguity that defined unexpected encounters (Parry 2004). Hamid's narrative prompted a reassessment of ideas, challenging readers to question their assumptions and judgments.

In a sense, Hamid's portrayal of darkness and paleness challenged colonial notions of the Other. The dark man posed no threat to the helpless, sleeping woman. The second depiction of his eyes, which only observed the room, revealed the influence of colonial stereotypes of the Other in the West. In Norridge's (2015) critique of colonial ideology, she noted that certain types of fiction could be "destructive" in normalizing imperial ideologies by adopting a specific point of view and persuading readers that it was "the only plausible viewpoint" (63-4). In this context, postcolonial critique was wary of individualistic points of authority. Hamid's novel presented diverse views of the world while challenging colonial images of the Other in the West.

Throughout the narrative, the experiences of Saeed and Nadia underscored a transformative process, intertwined with considerations of culture and gender. Both characters found themselves immersed in unfamiliar cultures, navigating distinct paths. Saeed was characterized by passivity in the face of various forms of persecution. In the refugees' house in England, populated by Nigerians and other communities from the Global South, Saeed felt "less comfortable" as the sole representative of his country (Hamid 2017a, 145). Consequently, he relocated to a nearby house occupied by individuals from his country, attempting to persuade Nadia, whom he referred to as his wife, to join him, but she refused (Hamid 2017a, 148).

Nadia, with her more independent spirit, underwent a positive adaptation in her living environment and developed her own social agency. This was evident in her relationship with the Nigerians in the refugees' house, where she had "acquired a bit of a special status" (Ibid., 145). The author noted that "Nadia looked forward to them. They represented something new in her mind, the birth of something new" (Ibid., 144). Unlike Saeed, Nadia was not driven by a desire to return to her homeland. Instead, she took incremental steps toward deeper communication in the new community. Importantly, Nadia did not completely forsake the values of her cultural origin. Without veering to extremes, she retained elements central to her sense of self while remaining open to new experiences, exemplified by her intimate relationship with the female cook in Marin.

Nadia and Saeed found themselves as victims of forced displacement, a reflection of Boswell's argument that the degree of violence in one's homeland correlated with the extent of displacement (Boswell 2002, 5). These challenges and xenophobic clichés suggest that refugees actively chose their destination; instead, they fled the horrors of war, seeking the next safe exit, irrespective of where the magical doors took them. Saeed's father's plea for them to leave him behind, equating migration with murder, underscored the profound agony of leaving loved ones behind (Hamid 2017a, 92-4). The narrative presented a poignant exploration of the disastrous consequences of migration on refugees' identities, physically separating them from their previous lives. According to Hamid, identity encompassed the notion that England was a temporary home, pushing refugees to continue migrating until they found a true sense of belonging. The novel's fragmented nature and diverse locations left open the question of whether a sense of home and identity was only possible through the narrative's uncertainties and gaps.

The challenges faced by migrants' post-arrival, including survival, and combating societal fears fueled by chauvinism, were explored in the novel (Young 2010). Saeed and Nadia, as refugees, carried a tent for shelter and expressed fears of being "trapped here forever" when they ran out of money (Hamid 2017a, 113, 110). Their experiences paralleled those of pre-conflict migrants in their city who were not viewed as threats but rather sought normalcy or displayed various emotions (Hamid 2017a, 23). The novel vividly portrayed the lack of necessities, exacerbating the trauma and terror of displacement. When Saeed and Nadia found an empty house with other refugees, the importance of the human right to adequate housing became evident (Ibid., 128).

Exit West envisioned London as a cosmopolitan metropolis transformed by refugees who turned abandoned spaces into makeshift homes through magical doors. The novel presented a disturbing portrayal

of London where migrants and refugees outnumbered legal residents, creating a sense of alienation and fear among citizens (Hamid 2017a, 126). The mere presence of migrants and refugees in London's "empty spaces" was portrayed as a threat, reinforced by media labeling the area "the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation" (Ibid.). This depiction was used to justify hostility toward the Other, normalized through a colonial mindset seeking to "reclaim Britain for Britain" (Kundnani 2001). The rhetoric of reclaiming the nation fueled a belief that asylum seekers planned to invade the country, resulting in violence against refugees like Nadia and Saeed. This violence became self-perpetuating, pushing London to the brink of war, echoing the conditions in Nadia and Saeed's unnamed city in their home country.

The people in London, gathering in solidarity with the refugees, challenged the anti-terrorist rhetoric promoted by the media, advocating peace instead of hostility toward migrants. This suggested a recognition within the host community that newcomers were not terrorists and that violent attacks only perpetuated the cycle of violence.

In the novel's unnamed city, a militant described as a "brave man" was portrayed as someone "ready to die" but with aspirations to live and accomplish great things (Hamid 2017a, 64). Through complex characters, including militant fundamentalists, Hamid depicted their atrocities alongside agreeable aspects of their personalities, offering them a voice to explore their minds and motivations. Their pursuit of "great things" was driven by a belief in a "righteous" purpose (Ibid., 49). The monopolization of morality justified both state and non-state terror while overlooking the underlying causes of violence and hatred, such as fear and the misuse of power. A similar rationale was applied to explain the violence in Hamid's London, where the state and anti-migrant nativists justified terrorizing refugees based on negative media representations, fostering anti-immigration sentiments, British nationalism, and heightened national security measures.

London had evolved into a focal point of hostility towards migrants, as evidenced by the narrator's explicit reference to the consequences of conflict and the turn to violence by both sides (Hamid 2017a, 164). Regardless of the reasons for the retreat of the nativist mob, the acceptance or management of newcomers seemed to be taking root, highlighting a potential shift in attitudes (Ibid., 164). The exploration of identity concerning the anti-migrant mob and state authorities suggested that the cessation of attacks may stem from moral considerations, where "decency" and "bravery" prevailed (Ibid., 164). The novel's "dialogic mode" introduced multiple perspectives on the conflict, preventing readers from embracing a singular viewpoint (Gauthier 2015, 7).

In depicting the ceasefire in London, Mohsin Hamid employed a literary device that allowed for the presentation of various perspectives without imposing a singular stance, challenging truisms associated with violence during the refugee crisis (Hamid 2017a, 126). The term "perhaps" introduced an element of tentativeness, encouraging a reconsideration of clichés. Moreover, the novel revealed a balanced migration pattern, with as many people "venturing out" of London as those "pouring into" it, offering doors to countries in the Global South as exits for those in the Global North seeking different or improved lives (Ibid., 126). Exit West disrupted the binary notions of "migrant" and "native" by exposing the contested nature of both concepts. The novel illustrated that culturally entrenched imperial ideologies persisted in Britain and London, where even legal inhabitants and immigrants may be considered "natives" by some, challenging the strict definitions based on birth (Oyedeji 2013, 51).

The complexity of the notion of "native" was further explored in the novel, with British protestors of various races and backgrounds depicted opposing the influx of refugees (Hamid 2017a, 125). The narrator noted the absence of "natives" in migrant camps in Marin, California, highlighting the exclusion of native Americans (Ibid., 195). However, the relative nature of being "native" was acknowledged, demonstrated by diverse reactions among the "natives" of Britain to the refugee influx (Ibid., 196). An additional "layer of naiveness" emerged from Africans transported to the United States as "slaves," influencing the construction of American collective and individual identity (Ibid., 197). This political connotation of "naiveness" was linked to specific rights, such as the right to "exercise suffrage," with an aspiration for greater justice in the long term (Ibid., 219).

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Exit West* contemplated the impact of migration on a country's demographics, blurring the distinction between being a native and a migrant, challenging the notion that anyone was genuinely native or migrant in any given locale. In Hamid's novel, the state's authoritative control over migrants was starkly evident as they were systematically segregated, controlled, and subjected to violent attacks within their neighborhoods. Additionally, the state employed strategies to assimilate refugees into the city's labor force through its agents. Hamid's narrative unfolded a state response to global migration known as the "London Halo" project, aiming to expand the city by annexing a surrounding area (Hamid 2017a, 109). These initiatives recruited refugees who, in exchange for their unpaid labor, were promised a meager reward of a small plot of land and access to modern utilities, reminiscent of the exploitative undertones associated with the historical promise of "40 acres and a mule" to African Americans after emancipation (Chambers 2019, 239).

Hamid's narrative skillfully intertwined the socio-economic dimensions of migration, illustrating how the state's actions perpetuated historical injustices and economic exploitation. In the context of terror and violence faced by newcomers in London, the novel drew parallels with colonial practices, such as segregating migrants through their allocation to various work camps supervised by "nativists." The intricate shifts and inconsistencies in the collective social behavior of the South Asian community, as portrayed in *Exit West*, resonated with the novel's apparent absence of a clearly defined social structure. This observation underscored the degree to which migrant laborers and refugees were marginalized as social agents, a theme emphasized in the aesthetic structure and social configuration of both novels. The journey undertaken by Saeed and Nadia through the magical doors was mirrored in the narrative form, as Hamid noted, "so the doors allowed me to focus on parts of the migration narrative that often get de-emphasized" (Hamid 2017b).

The structure and aesthetics of the novel were intricately intertwined with the real and surreal journeys of their characters, accentuating how migration and forced displacement could disrupt established social conventions and hierarchies. This illumination of disruptions not only challenged the principles of multiculturalism but also exposed gaps in the international political economy, where migrants and refugees laid bare the inherent divisions within society. The examination of these literary works within the realm of realism brought to the forefront the societal repercussions and structural intricacies associated with the experiences of migrants and refugees.

Hence, it remained uncertain whether Hamid perceived the adoption of "Western" cultural elements by Nadia as indicative of progress or improvement. Simultaneously, Hamid vividly illustrated the potential for an intersection between the East and the West. Nadia navigated choices that transcended the boundaries of the Global South and the Global North. Perhaps Hamid's most noteworthy contribution to the discourse on home and identity lay in Nadia's autonomous decision-making, detached from external influences and distinct from that of other migrants. Adversity prompted a reassessment of values, such as wealth and marriage, within the South Asian community in England.

Funding:

This research was funded by The Deanship of Scientific Research, Prince Sattam ibn Abdulaziz University; University project number (PSAU/2024/R/1444).

Acknowledgements:

This study was supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University project number (PSAU/2023/R/1444).

Conflict of interest:

There is no conflict of interest, and the entire work is the responsibility of the authors. None of the authors are editorial board members or staff.

Disclaimer Statement:

This research paper is entirely original; and has not been submitted to any institution for a degree or journal for publication.

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