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Mohsin Hamid's New Paradigm of Travel via Doorway

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Traditional travel narratives prioritize the time between a character's departure and destination. The very act of travel, whether by automobile, foot, or plane, is often the focus of study for literary scholars of this particular genre. Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel *Exit West* diverges in a curious way from this norm; the characters in Hamid's acclaimed novel about emigration and refugees features characters who bounce around the world via magical doors, which are themselves hardly discussed in the larger narrative. I propose that through his use of otherworldly doors as the method of travel, Hamid highlights how the danger refugees face does not end when their travel concludes. By minimizing their journey to simply walking through a doorway, he prevents readers from hyper-focusing on refugee travel and directs attention to the struggles that exist beyond the physical trials of migrating. My argument will make use of the theoretical lens of ethnic studies, which reveals power structures in place that influence the lives of marginalized subjects and precarious travelers. By considering the power dynamics at play in *Exit West*, it is apparent that the non-traditional aspect of Hamid's travel narrative influences how the novel's refugee protagonists are perceived. Hamid's work ignores both the formal expectations for refugee narratives, and offers a new paradigm (via his magical door) to show that lifechanging experiences for refugees exist beyond their physical journey.

Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel *Exit West* is a travel narrative where hardly any travel occurs. The protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, migrate from a purposefully unnamed city in the Middle East to various other countries, eventually arriving in San Francisco, but they do so simply by walking through a magical door. There is no long voyage across the ocean, no cramped spaces in the air, no long drives – they merely step through a doorway and emerge in a new world. This unusual mechanism for travelling is compelling as it diverges from traditional travel narrative conventions. But the concept of a magical door is not foreign to modern culture. Indeed, portals that take the shape of doors, mirrors, wardrobes, and other mundane objects are plot devices in narratives ranging from *Alices Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) to *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950); the door itself has emerged as a portal in *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) and *Monsters Inc* (2001). In these stories, however, fantasy elements are already at play and are integral to the plot. The magical doors are decidedly not out of place, and so they fit with the genre expectations rather than standing out as in-world curiosities. In *Exit West*, magic only exists within these small doorways. Outside, the world is brutally real. Saeed and Nadia escape war and search for safety. There is no fantasy. Why then, are the doors magical at all? And furthermore, why is so little attention brought to them? An answer to these questions can be found when we contextualize the magical door within the world of the book and within the minds of the readers.

Saeed and Nadia are refugees who leave their family behind as they struggle to find safety, and travel around the world. Within the world of the novel, magical doors break down borders between countries, facilitating quick and

easy travel. Even after finding new cities to live in, Saeed and Nadia continue to face hardship through discrimination and hatred from locals simply because of their status of refugees and their ethnicity. This is where the role of the door is connected to the world outside the book. Traditional narratives about refugees tend to focus on the physical journey (walking long distances, drifting in the ocean, etc.), whereas this story deemphasizes the journey entirely. Instead, readers are urged to focus on the people behind the journey and see the struggles refugees face during upheaval and integration, struggles that are separate from travel. In this way, the doors challenge reader's expectations and show that the lifechanging aspect is not only the physical journey but the events that happen in the lives of migrants before and after immigrating.

Before considering how the novel's doors complicates stereotypes of refugees, we can consider the method of travel itself. Why would this magical travel device be as mundane as a door? At their base level, doors function as a good symbol for travel. This is because we already use doors to travel through spaces: although we are not opening doors to places on the other side of the world, we are still transported by them. Doors themselves even symbolize change in our language; the phrase *when one door closes another one opens* is meant to show people that change is okay and relies on doors to convey this message. In *Exit West,* Hamid draws attention to an ultimate change when he compares the doors to birth and death. He writes, "It was said in those days [the] passage was both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness" (104). By comparing walking through these magical doors to birth and death, Hamid highlights how significant they are in enacting change. The door *itself* doesn't change them – change is simply on the other side of the door, whatever it may be. In this way, Saeed and Nadia walk through these doors, and emerge in a new stage of life.

Although the doors in this story are magical, the mechanics of their magic is never explained. This is because if the way they worked was explained or if their origin story was outlined, all the attention of the readers would go towards the magical doors themselves. The same is true if the magic were to be present in other aspects of the story. Instead, however, the doors seem irrelevant, and so their magic is relatively unquestioned. As Michael Perfect argues in his essay "'Black Holes in the Fabric of the Nation,'" by not explaining the magic, Hamid "naturalizes the supernatural, presenting real and fantastic coherently and in a state of equivalence with one another" (196). The doors are further normalized by the fact that Saeed and Nadia encounter one of them in a dentist's office. Instead of locating the doors in some fantastical place, Saeed and Nadia simply sit in the waiting room, and listen for their names to be called. The doors are unremarkable and mundane, allowing them to remain a backdrop to the story. In this way, they function as a plot device, not a world-building strategy, thereby facilitating character development.

Another way these doors dramatically change the story is that they allow for travel experiences to take place in the blink of an eye. Hamid does not have to describe the tolls of travelling; he must only have his characters walk through a door and they are then ready to experience the new city they entered. This dichotomizes the "before" and "after" linked to voyaging, and gets rid of the liminal space of travel. Any anticipation of the new destination takes place in the before, and any nostalgia or reminiscing takes place in the after. In traditional travel narratives, anticipation and remembering both occur during the time where characters are in transit, in an in-between space. In this novel, there is no room for that. We see this with how Hamid describes doors as "on/off switches in the flow between two adjacent places, binarily either open or closed" (73). There can be no in-between. This point is emphasized further by the fact that the doors themselves are impossible to see through. They appear like a black hole, highlighting further how separate *here* and *there* are. When Nadia first encounters a door, Hamid writes: "drawing close she was struck by 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" (103). There is no way to see into future or past places, and when someone steps through the door, they enter a new part of life – it is a beginning and an end. Contextualizing this aspect of the novel's doors with the fact that the characters are refugees, we can see how it becomes impossible to hyper-focus on travel. The doors remove the possibility of blaming change on travel experiences.

Saeed and Nadia are refugees, and the way this story refuses to focus on their travel demonstrates how the novel strays from typical refugee narratives. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees released an article entitled "Refugees Are Not the Crisis. It's the Narratives We Tell about Them" that urges writers and readers to reconsider typical depictions of refugees in media. The article opens with a call to reject typical framing methods: "Don't start with a boat. Don't show it lurching on the waves, a crush of terrified people packed elbow to ribcage, a baby crying. Don't focus on their past: the homes they left, the loved ones lost, the bribes paid, the calculations made and agonized over" (United Nations). Readers get caught up in this narration of trauma and fail to recognize how much hardship comes from adjusting to a new setting. Even though many people do have traumatic experiences while traveling as refugees, there are still traumas that occur during integration. The subject of this article, Shahm Maskoun, left Syria as a refugee only to be confronted daily by "pernicious stereotypes faced by many refugees" (United Nations). He encountered stereotypes and hatred long after his physical travel was finished. A study titled "Sense of Place and Mental Wellness of Visible Minority Immigrants in Hamilton, Ontario: Revelations from Key Informant," by Boadi Agyekum and Bruce Newbold found that immigrants face significant challenges related to belonging and wellbeing during their integration, particularly if they are visible minorities. This research even observed "a significant association between discrimination and declines in

health" (110). The study asserts that "prejudicial and discriminatory treatment within the media, school, labour market and other settings impedes [ones] sense of belonging" (114). This finding is important because it reveals how much people are affected by stereotypes and discrimination. It further demonstrates how important it is for writers to depict, and thus challenge, the narrative that the trauma for refugees ends once their travel is over.

Hamid reflects how discrimination and rejection affect his characters by showing migrants who no longer speak to each other in their native language. He writes, "they were ashamed, and [they] did not yet know that shame, for the displaced, was a common feeling" (184). One of the novel's two protagonists, Nadia, faces discrimination at her work and even experiences a hate crime. After working in Marin County, California for a while, she learns that "her black robe was thought by many to be off-putting, or self-segregating, or in any case vaguely menacing" (215). She becomes an outsider and is treated differently because of her decision to cover herself. While at her job, a man places a pistol on the counter in front of her and threatens her. This aggression against her is driven by hatred of her ethnicity and religion. She is threatened at her own workplace for nothing other than her appearance. The danger refugees face does not end when their travel concludes. By deemphasizing travel, Hamid shows that trauma can come from living in a new setting where refugees face discrimination. Hamid even uses the doors themselves in his writing to directly address the disparity that refugees face: "The doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from the poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back where they came from" (106). This shows from the eyes of refugees the way that travel options are inaccessible to them. Saeed and Nadia's safety is found through these doors, but they cannot get to them because the doors are heavily guarded – they are immobilized.

Finally, by deemphasizing travel, Hamid allows readers to focus on the people experiencing upheaval. In the article cited above, "Refugees Are Not the Crisis," Maskoun goes on to explain that "The real crisis right now is that the media and politicians are focusing only on negative examples... Refugees are not the crisis. This is the crisis" (United Nations). Because of the negative stereotypes and depictions refugees face, writing a book that focuses on a refugee's life in a new country rather than their travel experiences is crucial. Hamid provides room for the characters to be developed outside of their title of refugee; the fictional element of his narratives drives home that Saeed and Nadia are people first and foremost. They have desires and fears, they have a relationship drives the plot, and they even grow apart and learn about themselves. Because *Exit West* includes an intriguing form of travel that it then purposefully pays less attention to, there is more room to develop the story of the before and after, and in this way, readers can sympathize with and understand how immigration changed the characters' lives.

Exit West and its depiction of refugees is important because it highlights how issues that refugees face do not only come from physical travel. Oana-Celia Gheorghiu's article "As If by Magical Realism: A Refugee Crisis in Fiction," states of this book that "In today's world, migration, a phenomenon as old as human civilization, appears to lead to the redefinition of borders as we have known them since the formation of national states. It is probably in this key that Mohsin Hamid's latest opus should be read...not to the identification of a solution to a world crisis, but to a new understanding and acceptance of the Other" (91-92). The doors allow Saeed and Nadia to be seen as people with real lives. They become a recognizable face in a crowd for readers who do not understand or have never learned about the trials that refugees face.

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