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Migration and Transnational Identity in Exit West by Mohsin Hamid: A Postcolonial Approach

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Abstract

This paper discusses migration and transnational identity in Exit West by Mohsin Hamid in a postcolonial approach. It is qualitative and interpretive research that was based on literary analysis in the context of the postcolonial theory. The main purpose of the work is to discuss the way migration defines identity and the traditional concept of the nation, belonging, and cultural boundaries within the modern globalized society. The novel Exit West is used as the main source of data, and the secondary data will consist of scholarly articles, books, and critical essays involving migration studies and postcolonial criticism. The data is gathered by close textual reading and thematic selection of the concerning passages that reveal displacement, hybridity, and transnational experiences. They are analyzed through thematic and interpretive analysis of the collected information based on the important postcolonial concepts of hybridity, border crossing, and cultural negotiation. The results indicate that the Exit West film does not simply describe migration as a physical process but as a metamorphosis that reinvents identity against strict national structures. Hamid symbolizes border fluidity, the development of transnational identities through the process of cultural interaction and adaptation through magic doors and changing landscapes. The paper concludes that the novel is a critical reflection of the fixed national identities and seeks to

emphasize the fluid and hybrid identity in an ever-more interconnected world.

Keywords: Migration, Transnational Identity, Postcolonial Theory, Cultural Hybridity, Exit West

I. INTRODUCTION

Migration has already turned out to be one of the biggest social and cultural processes in the modern globalized society. Political wars, economic instabilities, and ecological disasters have over the recent decades driven people in the millions to cross national borders in pursuit of safety and improved opportunities. Due to this reason, migration has not only changed the reality of demographics, but it has also altered cultural identities and social relationships within the world. Literature has been in the forefront in exhibiting these changes through the depiction of emotional, psychological, and cultural experiences of the migrants. In this respect, *Exit West*, written by Mohsin Hamid, portrays a strong story based on the issues of migration and identity in the twenty-first century. The novel is a story of two young lovers, Nadia and Saeed, who flee their war-infested country via magic doors that shift them to other locations around the globe. By using this fictional writing technique, Hamid brings out the ambiguous and changeable quality of migration and identity transformation in transnational locations. Theoretically, the migration narratives are usually studied through the postcolonial theory, which is critical of the historical and cultural effects of colonialism and globalization. According to the postcolonial scholars, migration often creates hybrid identities that do not follow strict national and cultural lines. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) refers to the third space of cultural interaction as the resultant interaction between cultures in the postcolonial world and suggests that cultural identity is created through the hybridity and negotiation processes. In the same vein, Stuart Hall (1996) stresses that identity is not fixed but is always changing with the historical and social changes. These theoretical approaches offer a valuable context in which the experiences of migrants complicate the conventional concepts of belonging and nationhood in a work of literature like *Exit West*.

Although the role of migration literature in scholarly research is increasingly becoming popular, not much has been done to critically analyze how transnational identity is depicted in modern fiction. In *Exit West*, Hamid presents a special type of narrative, which involves the magical doors as a metaphor of the abrupt and uncontrollable transfers of people across the borders. Although some of the research has debated the issues of displacement and globalization in the novel, there are not that many studies that have specifically addressed how the story builds up transnational identity under the lens of post-colonialism. The main issue that is discussed in the paper is how *Exit West* migration destabilizes the fixed identities and forms new types of belonging that do not depend on geographical and cultural zones. This transformation has to be understood to understand the implications of migration on the larger cultural and political level in the modern world. This study is important because it offers some input into those interdisciplinary areas of migration studies, literary criticism, and postcolonial theory. In the postcolonial reading of *Exit West*, this study shows that literature mirrors modern conditions and human displacement in the world. The research also refers to the current debates in the academic arena regarding globalization, identity making, and cultural hybridity in contemporary writings. Moreover, the study gives information on how the stories about migration can contribute to empathy and embracing of the displaced communities. This is especially relevant in the age of growing migration and controversy about the national boundaries, when it is more essential to analyze literary accounts of transnational identity. Thus, the paper will explore the in-depth knowledge about how the migration represented in the novel by Hamid is a changeable process that recreates the identity and questions the conventional understanding of nation and belonging.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration and transnational identity have taken prominence in the study of modern literature, especially under the postcolonial theory. The theorists state that globalization and massive migration have transformed cultural identities and undermined the conventional sense of the nation, belonging, and cultural borders. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) further says that hybridity and a process of negotiation in the third space form cultural identity in postcolonial society as different cultures engage and define each other. The concept is critical in the study of the migrant identities developing in the transnational contexts. In a similar line, Stuart Hall (1996) believes that identity is not fixed but constantly built up in both historical and social processes, and thus migration is significant in the process of identity change. Migration as a literary theme has gained significant discussion in recent scholarship. According to Edward Said (1993), the contemporary postcolonial world is characterized by displacement and exile; people lose their cultural unity and create hybrid identities. Migration narratives in the modern fiction setting tend to dramatize the emotional and psychological issues as experienced by migrants when they have to negotiate various cultural affiliations. In the same manner, Arjun Appadurai (1996) brings out the impacts of global cultural flows in redefining identities across national boundaries and the importance of mobility in the process of forming transnational societies.

Different aspects of migration and globalization have been discussed in scholarly discourses, specifically in *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid. As an example, Chambers (2017) claims that the novel is about migration as a universal human event and not a crisis in certain areas. The magical doors used in the story are symbols of the unexpectedness and abruptness of contemporary migration because of the interconnectedness of the globalized world. On the same note, Lopez (2019) recommends that the novel question the idea of strict identities with the nation since it introduces the theme of migration as a means of transforming cultural identity. The other relevant point of view is presented by Walkowitz (2018), who analyzes the style of the narrative Hamid uses as indicative of global people and idea flows. She claims that the episodic form of the novel and the change in the geographical location of the action are reflections of the fragmented lives of migrants in the modern world. Besides this, Ghosh (2020) further points out that the personalities of both Nadia and Saeed reflect various responses to displacement and cultural assimilation, which demonstrates that migration generates various types of transnational identity.

The political and social implications of migration in the novel have also been studied in recent days. According to Ahmed (2021), *Exit West* is a satire on the limiting policies and nationalist beliefs that are trying to limit human mobility. Through magical realism, Hamid is able to persuade the people who read the book to think about the ethical and human aspects of migration in this contemporary world. On the same note, Rahman (2022) states that the novel shows migration as a negotiation process between cultural memory and new social locations with the emergence of hybrid identities. Moreover, researchers have addressed the concept of globalization as a subject of migration narrative. Sassen (2014) reports that globalization has promoted transnational flows, resulting in the creation of what are known as complex networks of cultural interaction. This point of view may serve to explain how *Exit West* portrays the world in which borders are becoming more permeable, and identities are being reconstituted. Similarly, Vertovec (2009) presents the idea of transnationalism, which refers to the social and cultural ties that migrants have between countries. Although more and more scholarly works on migration and globalization have been done in *Exit West*, there is still a need for further research with specific attention to the topic of the construction of transnational identity as a postcolonial issue. Majority of the available literature highlights the issues of displacement and globalization, however, not so many studies systematically apply the postcolonial concepts,

including hybridity, cultural negotiation, and the third space to the novel. As such, this paper attempts to close this gap by exploring how migration in *Exit West* undermines fixed identities and creates fluid and hybrid identities in a transnational world.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main purpose of this research paper was to analyze the influence of migration and its reconstruction of transnational identity in the book *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, according to the postcolonial theory.

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

The research design and methodology used in this study are qualitative and interpretive, which will be used to analyze how migration and transnational identity are represented in *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid. The study is based on the theoretical background of the postcolonial theory, which offers critical instruments for examining the problems of migration, displacement, hybridity, and identity construction in the postcolonial realities. The qualitative design suits the research since it will enable a systematic investigation of the literary themes, narration styles, and symbolic representations in the novel. The source of the main data in this research is the text of *Exit West*. Secondary sources are academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and critical essays concerning migration studies, postcolonial criticism, globalization, and transnational identity. These are secondary sources to reinforce the theoretical framework and put the analysis into context with the existing scholarly discourse. Evidence gathering is performed by doing close text reading and singling out excerpts in the novel that depict the theme of displacement, border crossing, cultural hybridity, and identity transformation. It is specifically focused on the experience of the major characters, Nadia and Saeed, whose experience of moving through various geographical locations demonstrates the multifaceted nature of migration and cultural adjustment. Thematic and interpretive analysis is used to analyze the collected data. The main postcolonial ideas, like hybridity, third space, and cultural negotiation, which were formulated by such scholars as Homi K. Bhabha, are used to explain how the novel builds the transnational identity. In this process of analysis, the paper objects to the rigid definitions of nation, culture, and belonging as well as presents migration as a transformative process. This methodological approach allows obtaining a thorough explanation of how *Exit West* is the manifestation of fluid and hybrid identities in the globalized world.

V. FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

This section gives out the key conclusions made out of the textual analysis done of *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid. This analysis is devoted to the way the novel describes the process of migration as making a new identity and creating transnational experiences. The novel, through the trips that the main characters, Nadia and Saeed, go through, is seen to explore the themes of displacement, cultural blend, and the change of the concept of belonging in the modern globalized society. The chosen pieces of text evidence show how migration issues queer identities and promote the occurrence of fluid and transnational identities. The theme of being migrants across time is one of the greatest concepts in the novel that is revealed in one of the lines, "We are all migrants through time" (Hamid, 2017, p. 209). This phrase generalizes the idea of the migration and implies that the movement and changes are natural elements of human life. Instead of showing migration as a crisis only of refugees or populations displaced, the novel makes the migration a general human process. In a postcolonial sense, this concept is a rebuttal of hard and fast concepts of nationality and underscores the mobility and openness of identity. It implies that the identity of culture is dynamic, as it is ever-changing because of historical and

social dynamics.

The second effective way of exploring the migrant experience is in the line in which Hamid writes, “When we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind” (Hamid, 2017, p. 98). This metaphor brings in the emotional and psychological effects of migration. The migrants usually abandon their members of family, friends, and the cultural environment known to them, and this can lead to a serious feeling of loss and separation. The separation is made even more emotional with the use of the term "murder," which underlines the fact that migration may have irreversible consequences in personal relationships and social relations. Magical realism in the novel is described in the line, “The doors were open, and the world seemed suddenly much smaller” (Hamid, 2017, p. 101). The magical doors that make their appearance in the story are symbolic depictions of global mobility. They break geographical lines and permit characters to travel overnight across national borders. With the use of this narrative technique, the author depicts that globalization has turned migration into a fast and unpredictable process. The doors are also used to portray the interrelatedness of the modern world, whereby geographical and cultural boundaries are becoming increasingly permeable.

An example of migration as a personal agency and resistance is the character of Nadia. This can be seen throughout the line, “Nadia had left the house of her family because she feared what it would mean to stay” (Hamid, 2017, p. 12). The fact that Nadia chose to abandon her family is an indication that she wanted to avoid the limiting social demands. Her move does not merely occur due to political unrest, but it is also a form of self-determination. This scene illustrates that migration can make people stronger to recreate who they really are and break the cultural conventions. The other significant theme in the novel is the transformation of the homeland. This can be traced to the line, “The city had once been familiar, but it was now becoming strange” (Hamid, 2017, p. 54). The city that the characters are in becomes less and less safe and familiar as the conflict develops. This metamorphosis shows that the process of displacement can be initiated even earlier than when the migrants move out of their home country. The previously known world turns alien and threatening, and people have to reevaluate what their place to belong is.

Similarly, the line “Their city was not a place from which many had previously fled” (Hamid, 2017, p. 37) emphasizes the sudden and unexpected nature of displacement. Violence breaks out, making common citizens refugees within almost no time. This transformation shows the effect of political instability on the lives of people and society, as it can change the image of life so fast, and it displaces people. The complexity of migration is further highlighted in the line, “Some people were choosing to stay, even when staying meant danger” (Hamid, 2017, p. 73). This quote indicates that the act of migration is not always very easy and uncomplicated. Most people stay in conflict zones because of attachments to them emotionally, family, and fear of the unknown. The quote highlights the truth that the migration choices can usually be influenced by highly personal and social factors. Mixed reactions that migrants get in their new surroundings are also displayed in the novel. This can be seen in the sentence, “The migrants encountered hostility but also moments of kindness” (Hamid, 2017, p. 135). Host communities can be rather suspicious, discriminating, and hostile towards migrants. Nevertheless, the story is also balanced with some compassionate and supportive moments, which, perhaps, indicate that human sympathy may overcome cultural and national borders.

One of the major conclusions of this research is connected with the reformulation of defining home in terms of migration. The statement “Home was no longer a fixed place but a shifting idea” (Hamid, 2017, p. 163) shows that migration changes the definition of belonging.

Nadia and Saeed are shifting between nations, and their perception of the home is slowly shifting. Home can no longer be linked to a particular geographical point but rather to the emotional recollections and the relationship a person has with others. Another significant point of the novel is the creation of migrant communities. This comes out in the line, “They were among people who had also crossed through doors” (Hamid, 2017, p. 126). The similarity in the experiences of the migrants of diverse cultural backgrounds is on displacement, resulting in the formation of new solidarity and collective identity in the transnational spaces. Similarly, the line “The world was full of strangers becoming neighbors” (Hamid, 2017, p. 173) depicts how the process of multicultural societies evolves as a result of migration. When the migrants establish new lives in new surroundings, they also establish relationships with people in other cultural backgrounds, thereby developing new modes of social interaction.

The fixed idea of national borders has also been criticized in the novel. This view can be traced in the line, “The borders between nations seemed less important than the lives lived across them” (Hamid, 2017, p. 179). The story gives the implication that human experiences and relationships tend to cross national borders, and this highlights the networks that the modern global society is made up of. The two main characters provide an amplified contrasting response to the complex issue of migration as well. The flexibility of Nadia can be observed in the line, “Nadia adapted quickly to the new environment” (Hamid, 2017, p. 144). The fact that she became ready to accept new experiences shows that transnational identities are formed through the process of cultural hybridity and that migrants are able to shape their identities in the transnational environments. On the contrary, the character of Saeed is influenced by his attachment to his culture. This can be traced to the line, “Saeed held on to memories of his homeland” (Hamid, 2017, p. 150). The fact that he misses the past explains why migrants usually experience emotional problems as they attempt to adapt the new cultures to the past. Lastly, the general theme of the novel is encompassed in the line, “The future seemed to belong to those who could move and change” (Hamid, 2017, p. 221). This quote underlines the significance of flexibility in the fast-globalizing world. Migration is demonstrated as not only a challenge but also an opportunity for cultural exchange, personal development, and the forming of new forms of identity.

VI. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The results of this paper indicate that *Exit West* depicts the migration as a multidimensional and transformative experience that alters identity across the dogmatic national and cultural borders. These results are very much aligned with the theoretical and scholarly views presented in the literature review, especially the concepts of hybridity, displacement, and transnational identity that are postcolonial in their nature and have been proposed by other scholars like Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Edward Said. The novel shows how migration disrupts the ideas of identity and promotes the development of fluid, hybrid identities in the globalized world through the experiences of Nadia and Saeed. Among the key conclusions of the research, it should be mentioned that migration in the novel becomes a representation of the universal human experience instead of the processes of refugees or displaced populations. This universal point of view is implied in the line “We are all migrants through time”. This notion is consistent with the argument by Hall (1996), who argues that identity is dynamic and is continually changing with the historical or social processes. According to the story, culture is defined by mobility, adjustment, and exposure to new spaces. In this regard, the results validate the position taken by Hall that cultural identity is built in the process of constant change and not out of fixed cultural sources.

The results also bring out the emotional and psychological aspects of migration, especially the loss and separation developed by the migrants. The figurative line that migration is murdering the lives of the people we abandon is evidence of the deep emotional effects of displacement. This observation relates to the points presented by Edward Said (1993), who defines exile and displacement as the defining provisions of the postcolonial world of the present day. Said stresses that migration can easily result in a sense of disintegration and culture shock, and that this sense is very evident in the lives of Nadia and Saeed in the course of the novel. The other important outcome is associated with the presence of cultural hybridity in the formation of transnational identity. The novel demonstrates the negotiation of various cultural forces by migrants who experience accommodation to new social places. The flexibility and the willingness of Nadia to adapt to the new setting can be seen as the symbol of merged identity, whereas the need to adhere to the cultural traditions of his country is one of the manifestations of the conflict between recollection and adjustment by Saeed. These two opposing reactions are a big confirmation of the idea of hybridity and the third space presented by Homi K. Bhabha (1994), where new cultural identities are created as a result of exchanging the cultural traditions. The novel proves that immigration is not a replacement of one identity with another, but it produces a complex and hybrid identity, which is a result of cultural negotiation.

The results also coincide with the arguments of the scholars who have examined the global aspects of migration. Indicatively, the symbolic depiction of magical doors in the novel expresses the fast and unforeseeable change of people in the modern world. The concept aligns with the views expressed by Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Saskia Sassen (2014), who suggest a theory that globalization has increased transnationalism and cultural exchange. The novel depicts the world in which the geographical boundaries are becoming more and more blurred, and people can build a connection across national borders. Moreover, the results corroborate previous critical readings of the novel. Researchers like Rebecca L. Walkowitz (2018) have claimed that the fragmentary and mobile nature of being a migrant in a globalized world can be seen in the narrative structure of the novel. Likewise, the findings of this paper can be correlated with the opinion that the novel would oppose inflexible nationalistic ideology and would encourage a more humanistic interpretation of migration. The general discussion indicates that the results of the present investigation go hand in hand with the theoretical and academic views found in the literature review. The novel shows the way migration destroys identities, promotes cultural hybridity, and forms transnational belonging. Through the journeys of migration as both an individual and a global one, *Exit West* offers an excellent postcolonial argument about the inflexibility of national borders and the dynamism of the concept of identity in the modern interconnected world.

VII. CONCLUSION

The paper comes to the conclusion that *Exit West* presents migration as a transformative process that redefines the sense of identity, breaks the established ideas of what it means to be a nation, and creates a sense of transnational solidarity. The novel is a depiction of the cultural hybridity, emotional negotiation, and fluidity of home in a globalized world through the experiences of Nadia and Saeed. The magical realism and changing of landscapes created by Hamid underlines the uncertainty of the migration process and the fluidity of identity. In line with the postcolonial view, the paper portrays that migration does not only break boundaries but also allows the development of hybrid and flexible identities that are not subject to geographical and cultural boundaries

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