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Empathy and Unity in *Exit West*

Kelsey Madison Dietrich

Abstract: Mohsin Hamid's contemporary novel, *Exit West* (2017), proposes a world that allows all people to migrate with relative ease across the globe through instantaneous transportation via magical doors. This stylistic choice to use organically emerging, non-state-sanctioned doors as border walls aims to make migration an accessible option for people of all identities. This notion of accessibility is represented as the primary plotline follows the trajectory of two characters using the doors after their unnamed home country is overtaken by militants. Additionally, several vignettes interspersed throughout the novel depict people with various identities who have been transported through doors and the challenges they face immediately upon entering new spaces. The symbol of the magic doors, as well as who is depicted using them, will be analyzed in this paper from the humanitarian perspective that these stylistic choices strive to foster inclusion and empathy for people regardless of identity and reason for migration. By removing the barriers associated with the actual process of migration, Hamid creates a world where migration, or stepping through magical doors, is a chosen and attainable endeavor that supports the agency of people who desire to relocate. This contrasts with the reality of displaced people who endure dangerous situations in attempt to seek safety from the traumatic circumstances in their current location, only to be denied and further traumatized.

Keywords: Refugees, Global Migration, Border Control, Empathy, Magical Realism

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Published during migration policy reformation and an increasing number of displaced people across the globe, Mohsin Hamid's novel, *Exit West*, offers an inclusive approach founded on the values of empathy and unity for reimagining the current refugee crisis. The novel shares the trajectory of Nadia and Saeed who experience immense shifts in their daily lives when their home city, in an unnamed, post-colonial country, is violently overtaken by militants. After Saeed's mother is killed by stray gunfire, Nadia and Saeed make the choice to leave their home country to seek safety and security elsewhere because the risk of remaining at the mercy of the war-torn city is much too great. Rumors of leaving through doors begin to circulate throughout the city. Together, the two decide to find a door and pursue the unknown rather than remain in escalating violence. *Exit West* is a contemporary global novel that incorporates elements of magical realism throughout the text most notably using doors as passageways to new places. The novel's title denotes the physical movement of people towards a sense of safety that is hopefully available in affluent countries. Hamid uses the magic door to represent borders that are entered quite quickly and not sanctioned by the state. Nadia and Saeed are transported through these magic doors that emerge in unpredictable spaces and then instantaneously bring people into different geographic locations. Mid-way through the novel, they are transported to dark London where scenes of intense violence are portrayed; this matches the current historical moment of rising xenophobic movements in England and Europe. Additional vignettes depict the identities, stories, and treatment of several other people using the magical doors throughout the novel.

The purpose of this study is to reveal how *Exit West* encourages readers to reconceptualize the process of migration through a more accessible lens supported by the values of empathy and unity. This argument is developed in three primary sections. First, the work of American political theorist, Wendy Brown (2010), will set the foundation to understand the political context of global migration at the time *Exit West* was published. Further, the scale of global migration and legal definitions of "migrant" and "refugee" will be provided before reviewing Hamid's approach to labels within the novel. Secondly, literary scholar, Michael Perfect, argues that the use of magical doors to depict migration negates the hardship associated with migration. This perspective will be challenged through the analysis of examples from the novel in support of the notion that this stylistic choice does not bypass migration trauma; instead, it normalizes the process of migration to promote empathy towards all humans who want to move for various reasons. Lastly, the identities represented throughout the novel will be reviewed and deemed supportive of Hamid's generalization: "we are all migrants through time" (209). Rather than calling this an "optimistic" statement, as critiqued by world literature scholar Amanda Lagji, it will be contended that this statement seeks to unify people by emphasizing that all humans are moving through

time together. While this novel portrays a sense of optimism about acceptance of human migration, it does still depict several xenophobic scenes to remind readers of the traumatic maltreatment of refugees. Together, these initiatives aim to contribute to the ongoing conversation of how and why the representation of human identities within literature matters. Hamid experiments with removing an “us” versus “them” dichotomy between migrants and non-migrants through the synonymous use of the terms “migrant” and “refugee,” magic doors as borders, and representation of diverse people using doors.

Political Context, Legal Definitions, and Word Choice

Foremost, it is necessary to provide the foundation for the political context of the real-world during which *Exit West* was published and thus responding to. American political theorist, Wendy Brown, posits that border walls are built by nation-states as an act to protect capitalism, yet globalization and wall-building are co-occurring in contradiction to one another. Ironically, this preoccupation with establishing and maintaining borders takes place in a world that operates from a postmodern perspective where the global economy is prioritized. This is despite the fact that the maintenance of the economy is a global issue that requires communication across borders. Brown suggests that the border walls instead represent the waning relevance and cohesiveness of state power because of the inability of law and politics to control the world (24). The walls are a contemptible effort to proclaim power preservation based on the value assumption that capitalism exceeds democracy. The visible structure of the border wall acts as a blockade against humans. Rather than acting as an attempt to defend against potential attacks, the walls are targeting individuals, groups, movements, organizations, and industries that are not affiliated with the state (Brown 21). Border walls are having the greatest impact on informal powers as opposed to the military and “signal the existence of a corrupted divide between internal and external policing and between the police and the military” (Brown 24-25). The borders considered by a nation are complex and not fully understood. One important consequence of geopolitical systemic barriers, such as the implementation of border walls, is the detrimental impact on refugees. The definition of who is considered a refugee has evolved. The United Nations met in Geneva in 1951 where the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was developed and adopted on 28 July 1951 and eventually entered into force on 22 April 1954 (Marshall 62). According to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Chapter 1, Article 1, Section (A), a person is considered a refugee when:

“As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to the well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons 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 the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. In the case of a person who has more than one nationality, the term 'country of his nationality' shall mean each of the countries of which he is a national, and a person shall not be deemed to be lacking protection of the country of his nationality if, without any valid reason based on well-founded fear, he has not availed himself of the protection of one of the countries of which he is a national" (Marshall 62).

Furthermore, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees expanded upon this definition by applying these considerations to all refugees, regardless of the start date of 1 January 1951 (Marshall 62). There have also been other definitions of "refugee" with some variation. For example, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund defines a refugee as "someone who has been forced to leave their country because they are unable to live in their home or they fear they will be harmed. This can be due to a number of reasons, including fighting or natural disasters, like earthquakes or floods" (Marshall 63). Additionally, the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees defines refugees as people "who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order" and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as "any person who is in a country other than their own and are unable or unwilling to return due to the fear of persecution, serious and indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity or freedom resulting from generalized violence or events seriously disturbing public order" (Marshall 63).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees publishes annual trends in displacement, protection, and solutions regarding seven population categories: refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons protected/assisted by UNHCR, stateless persons, returned refugees, returned internally displaced persons, and others of concern. Collectively, these groups are referred to as "total population of concern." By the end of 2015, the total population of concern was estimated at 63.9 million people, with people categorized as refugees comprising 15.4 million (UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2015). Most recently, data from mid-2020 indicated that there were 26.3 million refugees in the world, with 86 percent hosted in developing countries, and 28 percent were provided asylum by the least developed countries (The UN Refugee Agency). It is imperative to note that the data presented are provided by governments based on their own definitions and methods of data collection (UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2007 12). Therefore, this data may not even be fully inclusive of all people in the total population of concern or who are considered refugees.

Regardless, this is a clear ongoing crisis where human beings are attempting to live in serious situations and the basic necessity of safety is absent. As demonstrated, the definition of refugee has changed over time with different international organizations adhering to various definitions. The distinctions of the term continue to be an important topic of debate with enormous ethical repercussions for people whose lives are at stake as well as having major impacts on the sociopolitical, safety, and economic decisions of a country. Thus, depending on where in the world anyone resides, there are numerous contextual factors that shape the connotation associated with the categorization of refugees.

The United Nations defines a migrant as “any person who changes his or her country of usual residence” with the “country of usual residence” representing the place where the person has the center of their life (United Nations 1998 17). Recent literature indicates the existence of migrant subgroups such as “qualified migrants” and “transnational knowledge workers,” yet, these subgroups do not include individuals who are forced to move out of their country of usual residence or individuals who are permanently staying in their host country (Andresen et al. 2297). As Teju Cole (2015) points out, some refugees become migrants; likewise, some migrants become refugees. Similarly, some migrants become immigrants. In a world that is much too focused on categorizing humans to create an “us” versus “them” dichotomy to establish power dynamics, as previously denoted by Brown’s theories of nation-state border walls, a similar reflection regarding the legal definitions of “refugee” and “migrant” is advised. Should people be defined based on these parameters especially when there is overlap between the categories and the presence of subcategories and special circumstances within each? Cole encourages an approach rooted in empathy: “I say refugee, I say migrant, I say neighbor, I say friend, because everyone is deserving of dignity. Because moving for economic benefit is itself a matter of life and death. Because money is the universal language, and to be deprived of it is to be deprived of a voice while everyone else is shouting.” Cole advocates for a balanced acknowledgement of the traumatic circumstances that prompt people to move to new countries and the elements of common humanity that connect people together. Suffering is part of the human experience. Moving is part of the human experience. Seeking new opportunities is part of the human experience.

These humanistic notions are exemplified in *Exit West* where the terms “migrant” and “refugee” are used synonymously throughout the 231-page novel as readers are challenged to reimagine the refugee crisis and global migration. As noted, the legal definitions of “migrant” and “refugee” have changed over time. Furthermore, there are not always clear distinctions between these two definitions because context is highly individualized and sometimes these circumstances overlap to qualify people as both “migrants” and “refugees.” Rather than getting preoccupied with definitions, which is a common pitfall in

society, Hamid is blurring the lines between “migrant” and “refugee” because, in reality, these categories are not distinct. The underlying reasons for people to move are similar. However, connotations are associated with each word. These connotations then propel stigma and the creation of systemic barriers against people based on whether they are categorized as “migrant” or “refugee” even though the consequences for human lives are the same. Roger Zetter (1991) acknowledges the fluctuating value of the word “refugee” within society and reiterates that the “refugee” label conveys “an extremely complex set of values, and judgements which are more than just definitional” (40). In *Exit West*, there are no barriers for people strictly based on their labelled identity of “migrant” or “refugee.” The readers are not shown a time where a character is prohibited from using the doors merely because of the affiliated assumptions around the reasons for changing location, hence Hamid’s choice to use the words synonymously. This stylistic choice removes stigmatized barriers by deconstructing preconceived notions that may have been present if only “migrant” or “refugee” had been used consistently throughout the novel. By still including the words without a clear distinction between who constitutes the “refugee” or the “migrant,” readers are prompted to examine what truly matters: the stories of the humans who are moving. “Labelling matters so fundamentally because it is an inescapable part of public policy making and its language: a non-labelled way out cannot exist” (Zetter 59). Thus, it was crucial for Hamid to include the words “migrant” and “refugee” to tell readers that he is commenting on the current humanistic crisis of border control; yet, his method does not draw attention to distinct labels and therefore provides an innovative approach to the readers’ ability to connect with the characters.

The primary plotline follows the journey of Nadia and Saeed as their birth city is overtaken by militants. The detail of where in the world this city is located is absent. This omission assists in Hamid’s success in connecting the characters in the book to the readers in real-life. Nadia and Saeed’s city under siege could be anywhere in the world; this means it could represent any place in which the reader is currently residing. If the city had been named, assumptions about the real-life people residing in that specific city could be made; consequently, this would have possibly removed readers who do not live in that specific city themselves. One of the themes of Hamid’s novel is finding the common humanity that connects people throughout the world and then using that element as motivation to enact systemic change rather than bypassing the trauma experienced by migrating people. The unnamed city provides the possibility for readers to place themselves in the position of the characters since there is no restriction of a designated location to use as justification for viewing Nadia and Saeed as unidentifiable. “This generalizing gesture encourages readers to see similarities between places that could serve as the novel’s setting” (Lagji 223).

The purpose of identifying with the characters create a unified perspective that may inspire readers to take real-life sociopolitical action rather than reinforcing an “us” versus “them” dichotomy regarding the refugee crisis.

Moreover, readers may identify with Nadia and Saeed because the novel opens with them attending classes as students: “that is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying, and our eternally impending ending does not put a stop to our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does” (Hamid 3-4). Immediately, Hamid is connecting readers to the characters by using the word “we” instead of identifying this existential pondering as only something that Nadia and Saeed experience in a post-colonial city. The novel is not told from the first-person point-of-view of Nadia and Saeed; therefore, the “we” at the start of the novel refers to tying the reader, characters, and third-party narrator together to deter from creating an “us” versus “them” dichotomy within the minds of readers. Similarly, this line implies that “we,” as in all people, are possible subjects to unexpected events that could reshape the trajectory of life which may inspire feelings of empathy when people witness others going through, or hold space in the aftermath of, trauma. Aside from word-choice, this element of unity is also conveyed through the actions taken by the characters throughout the novel.

Magical Doors as Borders

The magic door is a literary device commonly used to represent instantaneous transportation to new places and has been used within iconic texts such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), and the series of *Harry Potter* (1997-2007). Rather than showing people as they move across borders by traversing physical walls, *Exit West* incorporates the element of magical doors as passageways to transport people to new places. As Nadia and Saeed learn, these doors randomly appear in areas that are only sometimes highly patrolled by people in power and can take them to new places without warning. In this novel, the magic door is a symbol of the world's current global migration crisis. If stepping through a door is analogous to crossing the border from one country to another, then Hamid's depiction of migration is a quick process that does not draw much attention to the life-threatening circumstances that most people endure while attempting to cross borders. Readers are only given surface-level details of the migration process. The characters might need an agent to help secure a door; then, they step through the doorway uncertain of what will be on the other side. Sometimes, the doors appear, and they can step through if they happen to be in the right place at the right time. At other instances, there are descriptions of crowds of people running to a door they learned of only to find out that the door is under high surveillance by the government. This uncertainty

surrounding the locations of the doors coupled with the ease of stepping through them depicts migration simpler than in the real-world. “Reality is this: the vast majority of refugees today live in perpetual limbo—without permanent residence or economic rights and with nowhere else to go” (Fisher 1121). Nadia and Saeed can use these doors at their discretion to get to safer or more desirable locations instantaneously.

Hamid’s further merging of the terms “migrant” and “refugee” is reinforced by the fact that Nadia and Saeed were both “migrants” and “refugees,” based on the technical definitions cited at the start of this paper, at some point within the novel. The two “dedicated themselves single-mindedly to finding a way out of the city” (Hamid 87) after the militants secured the city in chapter five, paid an agent who secured them a door, and then stepped through that door to the Greek island of Mykonos in chapter six. While the concept of using a door is simple, the action of passing through one is not described as so: “It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a grasping struggle as she fought to exit it” (Hamid 104). Here, Nadia and Saeed would be considered “refugees” as it became treacherous for them to continue living in their city when the militants were murdering people and displaying the corpses on the streets, resources became scant, and drones were surveying the land. It was dangerous for them to remain in their home; therefore, this use of the door, by technical definition, would have considered Nadia and Saeed “refugees.” A key paradox presented in this novel is that Nadia and Saeed began as general citizens of their unnamed city who were distinctly different from the refugees that were arriving there. This important detail ties the reader to the main characters via the notion that anyone could be subject to forced displacement. “Exit West seeks to achieve readerly empathy with two characters who become refugees and, as part of that project, begins with those two characters being themselves unable to empathize with refugees” (Perfect 191). Contemporary readers may feel compelled to separate themselves from the refugees depicted in the novel or also in real-world situations; however, as Hamid makes clear, there really is no absolute separation. “We identify with Saeed and Nadia being too busy living their lives ‘as usual’ to identify with refugees, after which the novel turns Saeed and Nadia into refugees and thus, paradoxically, secures our identification with refugees” (Perfect 192).

With scarce safety and resources in their Mykonos camp, Nadia and Saeed pass through a second door that places them in London. Rumors on social media alluded to future army deployment while drones, helicopters, and armored soldiers in vehicles were patrolling the grounds. After working in a migrant camp, Nadia suggested to Saeed that they move through another door to California “out of the blue” (Hamid 188). In this final instance of their door passage, the pair

could be considered “migrants” as safety concerns were not the primary reason for leaving yet hope for a better life was. The stylistic choice of Hamid to not designate a “refugee” versus “migrant” categorization promotes the notion that it is possible for people to be both, as was the case for Nadia and Saeed, and most likely may be the case for many people in the real-world. Consequently, Hamid is challenging readers to simultaneously hold both labels which may historically have different connotations resulting in different societal judgments, treatment, and governmental action. Perhaps following Nadia and Saeed’s trajectory from their first use of a door to the last prompts an understanding that real-world people change their geographic location in varying contexts; the culmination of these various contexts and experiences will shape one’s reasoning for migration.

The perilous journey that is true of people fleeing their homes or attempting to seek safety in a new place is notably absent from Hamid’s novel. “For all the novel’s emphasis on their darkness, Hamid’s ‘ingenious conceit’ of the doors arguably risks negating the extraordinarily hazardous, frequently traumatic, and often deadly nature of the journeys undertaken by displaced people” (Perfect 196). While it is understandable that this absence of detail could potentially negate the threats of the migration journey, there are three reasons, rooted in unity and empathy, that support why Hamid’s stylistic choice of the magical door is effective. First, the magic doors seek to normalize the concept of people moving to new places; everyone in the modern world steps through a doorway daily. Again, this removes the “us” versus them “dichotomy” by attempting to relate the readers to the characters and possibly non-migrants to migrants. People may walk through a doorway several times within a single day in the context of the modern world. Therefore, readers consuming Hamid’s novel can relate to the typical action of passing through a door within their daily lives just as the characters are passing through magic doors all throughout the novel.

Secondly, doors symbolize the entry and exit points between places. In the real world, one walks through a doorway to enter a different space perhaps from one room to another within a house or maybe from inside to outside a building. In the novel, the doors magically transport people across the globe. The action of walking through a magic door literally transports people to different spaces with new time zones, natural landscapes, and cultural norms. Hamid’s use of the door rather than border walls to depict people moving from one place to another removes the uncertainty of seeking asylum and dealing with governments and law enforcement to get to a new place. Initially, this may be considered bypassing of the extremely difficult hardships that refugees experience while trying to gain citizenship in countries outside of their birth. However, Hamid is challenging readers to reimagine a world where these extreme barriers are no longer presented as they are in modern society. There are instances where doors for the affluent North are attempted to be guarded in contrast to doors in the

global South which alludes to the real-world difficulty for migrants attempting to enter affluent Northern territories. Generally, the doors in the novel are not policed and allow for instantaneous transportation to locations across the globe. While there are still struggles depicted in the novel, such as the mention that visas are almost impossible to attain for people without financial resources and the doors are sometimes patrolled by police, the action of passing through a door is moderately simple. It is common for characters in the book to be transported through a door by their choice without major barriers that stop them. Thus, Hamid is depicting a world in the novel where people can choose if they want to use a door and then can pursue that choice without the additional stressors that accompany real-world migration scenarios.

Thirdly, the stylistic choice of the door may symbolically serve as a reminder for readers outside of the lines of the novel: each time that they walk through a doorway to enter a new space in their lives, a common daily occurrence, may be a reminder of the global migration crisis. Oftentimes, it can be easy to read news stories, review social media, or be alerted somehow of heavy issues happening in the world and then forget about them sometime after. Particularly, the source of information here is a magical realism novel. People who are likely to already remove themselves from the topic of global migration, if it feels too far away from their current and personal life, may even create more of a distance between themselves and the novel since it uses magical realism. Doors that randomly appear to transport people to different places in an instant do not exist; therefore, the reader is not connected to this action. However, it is contested here that Hamid's use of doors acts as a symbolic reminder to readers of this novel. The simple, daily action of passing through doorways serves to remind readers that this experience is an everyday occurrence for them to get to where they need or want to be. Similarly, there are people attempting to migrate to different places to get where they need or want to be every day. It is important to acknowledge that modern readers who have been exposed to *Exit West* and then use doors as they continue to carry on with their lives are not faced with the life-threatening and dehumanizing trauma that the novel's characters or real-world migrants experience. The door does not symbolize the emotional impact of migration on the lives of those who are seeking refuge. Instead, the door is a symbol for the action of migration as Hamid is bringing awareness to the fact that this is the common reality of many people and advocates for a reimagined world where the process of migration can occur with ease.

Represented Identities

While the primary plotline details the events of Nadia and Saeed, interspersed throughout the novel are brief vignettes that show various people

either currently moving through or recently having moved through a magical door. The first vignette describes a man “with dark skin and dark, woolly hair” entering a bedroom where a “pale-skinned woman was sleeping alone” in Australia (Hamid 7-8). There is a shared vulnerability between the two people: a pale-skinned woman sleeping alone in her bedroom and a dark-skinned male who was randomly transported to this space, as described here: “With a final push he was through, trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal. He lay still, spent. Tried not to pant. He rose” (Hamid 9). The readers see that this man is aware of his vulnerability as he swiftly surveys the space he has been transported to, spots the sleeping woman, “wishes only not to be heard,” and, “through an instant,” leaves the space via the open bedroom window (Hamid 9).

While the novel does not detail the act of migration itself, it does carefully articulate the challenges, ethical issues, emotional strife, and trauma that people experience on the other side of the magical door when they have entered a new location. In this first vignette, the man is highly aware that the color of his skin makes him a vulnerable target: “he knew how little it took to make a man into meat” (Hamid 9). If the woman were to awaken and find this man in her bedroom, it likely would end with the police being called and possible police brutality against the man based on his skin color, as is an unfortunate reality for people, most commonly men, with dark skin especially in the West. While the man in the novel did not choose to have the door transport him to this location, he was put into a situation where it was necessary to think and act incredibly fast to ensure his survival; the readers are aware of his fear-based haste in attempting to leave without waking the woman. The purpose of this vignette is that, even when somebody does access a door and can “move” to a new location, this does not guarantee safety. Oftentimes, migration occurs because people are hoping for a safer place to live, yet they are still forced to remain vigilant in a new location because of their identity.

Similarly, another vignette depicts two Filipino teenage girls who “seemed emotional: perhaps excited, perhaps frightened, perhaps both” and are transported to a bar in Tokyo where the bartender is violent toward the girls because of their race and gender and dislikes that they were in his “territory” (Hamid 31). The girls are not welcomed in the location in which they arrive; instead, they are policed by the bartender who is having racist and violent thoughts about them. Yet again, Hamid is showing the vulnerability of people who are easily transported to a brand-new location but are in danger simply because they are living with marginalized identities. This vignette ends with the bartender walking behind the girls “fingering the metal in his pocket as he went” which implies that he is considering physical harm against the girls who have done nothing other than physically arrive to this space (Hamid 31). Here, the

novel is reminding readers that, despite the ease of being transported through a magical door, there are still threats looming over the door-users when they arrive to a location.

A third example of a vignette includes a family composed of a mother, father, daughter, and son who are described as having “dark skin” and speaking Tamil (Hamid 91). Upon arrival in Dubai, the family is being watched through two security cameras and followed simultaneously by three surveillance feeds as they walk. A small quadcopter drone also tracked the family when they were outside. “The parents held their children’s hands and seemed to be at a loss as to which direction to go” (Hamid 91). The family was not disrupting anyone as they were trying to gain a sense of where they had just arrived. Simply minding their own business, the family is considered a threat by the surveillance systems because of their skin color and language: “...then the minute ended and they were intercepted and led away, apparently bewildered, or overawed, for they held hands and did not resist or scatter or run” (Hamid 92). While readers do not specifically see the struggle of the family getting through the door, Hamid is clearly depicting the innocence of migrants who are profiled as threats based on race. This family did not know that they were under surveillance. Already having to deal with the confusion of adjusting to a location unfamiliar to them, the family is then taken away by forces of power without even having a chance to communicate about their situation. This vignette occurs quickly which may be a comment on the timeline of border patrol; when people in the real-world migrate to a country, they are usually immediately under surveillance, tracked, and removed from the area by police even when they pose no immediate threat, as was seen in the case of this family.

In addition to personal xenophobic attacks against people using the magic doors, the novel also depicts the traumatic environments that people are thrust into upon entering certain locations. For example, when Nadia and Saeed arrive in London midway through the novel, they experience fear, danger, and chaos as the city is relentlessly policed and people are continuously entering and exiting through doors. All people using the doors are under surveillance and stripped of human rights. Together, the protagonists live in a house which contains a door that is frequently used: “There were rough people in the house, but there were rough people everywhere, and in life roughness had to be managed” (Hamid 132). This “roughness” is portrayed as Nadia and Saeed are physically and emotionally impacted by an outbreak of city riots, frightening air surveillance, and “murders, and rapes, and assaults as well” that were either blamed to be “nativist provocateurs” or “migrants” (Hamid 146). This quote demonstrates that there is trauma occurring without any safety interventions or assistance

from authorities in attempt to prevent biopsychosocial harm. Additionally, this moment places immediate blame on the migrants in the area for the horrendous acts of violence without considering other possible perpetrators. These details demonstrate that, regardless of the ease of transporting through a door into London, Nadia and Saeed are faced with intense danger that is reminiscent of the xenophobic movements in Europe outside of the novel. Hamid presents the operations of far-right organizations that seek to drive foreigners out of the country to further discriminate against refugees in an attempt to control their human rights as well as the destiny of the social and political atmosphere. In the real-world, these far-right movements increased the mistreatment of refugees by denying asylum and specifically motivated the Brexit vote that has impacted the European Union's freedom of movement laws.

While the novel does show that the treatment of the individual varies based on identity, there are no barriers prohibiting people from even having the option to migrate due to identity. Hamid represents several people who have migrated with identities that are described as a dark man (8), two teenaged Filipino women (30), a brave man (67), a family including a mother, father, daughter, and son with dark skin speaking Tamil (91), a male accountant on the verge of suicide (129), a young daughter and mother (160), a wrinkled gay man who spoke Brazilian Portuguese (176), an old Chinese woman (208), and a maid who could not speak (223). In addition, Saeed is seen consistently praying, although never stated to whom directly, throughout the duration of the novel while Nadia continues to wear her religious robes despite a lack of personal identification with religion. These details imply that there is some religious affiliation intertwined with their identity as a result of their upbringing in their home country. Based on fact that many of the people using doors in the novel are from the global South, it is possible that Nadia and Saeed, given their descriptors, are Muslim. Given this interpretation, Hamid is depicting the very real human experiences of trauma and love between two Muslim main characters; this representation thwarts some of the underlying assumptions of Islamophobia that plague the affluent North regions. Overall, Hamid provides a sample of various identities who migrate within the novel rather than limiting accessibility to only people with societal privilege and power or depicting only one "version" of a migrant.

This representative sample of identities supports Hamid's possibly controversial statement: "We are all migrants through time" (209). A previous interpretation of this assertion casts a negative light over its presence in the novel and considers the statement as "not only erroneous but also irresponsible" (Perfect 199). However, it is contended here that this statement aids in alleviating the "us" versus "them" dichotomy that is often emphasized in the modern world

regarding migrants and non-migrants. Rather than being problematic, this statement advocates for the values of unity and empathy within readers who may be so compelled to ignite social change. “Movement, as rendered in the novel’s fictional landscape, is the rule rather than the exception” (Lagji 219). One of the central themes of the novel is to normalize the desire and ability to migrate rather than the trauma that is unfortunately associated with migration in the real-world. Consequently, the novel reminds readers to connect with the characters, and ultimately real people in the world, on the foundation that all are human beings who inherently deserve basic rights and compassionate concern.

Furthermore, Hamid’s statement may have another interpretation. Perhaps this assertion is not only about imagining a world where all people could migrate across the world regardless of identity and status. Instead, this generalization may be referring to that fact that all people are moving through shared time on this planet together. In truth, all humans are subjected to the movement of time by no choice. Even when people are not physically moving to new locations, they are still moving through experiences and time. The novel depicts Nadia and Saeed changing throughout their time spent together and eventually growing apart. These two characters do not remain the same throughout time; they evolve just like real people in the world. Therefore, it is plausible that Hamid’s statement is insinuating this notion that all people are movers (read: migrants) through their time of life. As Hamid states in an interview about *Exit West*, “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. Every single human being is a refugee from their childhood.” (Chandler). When this element of unity is brought into awareness, readers may realize that they should develop a sense of empathy for the novel’s characters and real-world people who are migrating to geographic locations because all people are moving through time regardless of their identity. The notion of shared humanity fosters an empathetic response.

In the final chapter, Nadia returns to her home city half of a century after her departure. Readers can assume that the militants are no longer in control of this city due to an omission of detail regarding how she gets there; there is no mention of her transportation through a magical door. This possibly insinuates that border control is no longer an issue perhaps because the militants do not control the city. While this conclusion may not depict the current state of the world, perhaps Hamid is asking if the world could get here someday. If it is possible that peace is restored to Nadia’s home city, maybe it is possible that peace can be restored in the real-world’s war-torn countries.

Conclusion

Hamid carefully conveys a balance between depicting the trauma of migration and holding a sense of common humanity through three main stylistic choices that include the interchangeable use of the words “migrant” and “refugee,” depiction of accessible magic doors as border walls, and inclusion of many people using the doors. Overall, this novel inspires readers to connect with the characters, and ultimately real people in the world, on the foundation that all are human beings who inherently deserve basic rights and compassionate concern. Rooted in empathy and unity, this novel radically reimagines a world that removes the barriers preventing migration for all people, regardless of identity or reason for changing location, to eliminate the need for social status to access migration. While Hamid bypasses documenting the physical migration of refugees within the novel, he does sufficiently bring attention to other traumatic circumstances that people are exposed to after using doors. As noted, some people are still subjected to extreme xenophobic violence when they are racialized as foreign, placed under surveillance, and aggressively policed which exaggerates the vulnerability of entering a new space. Therefore, Hamid is only partially reimagining a more optimistic world where border walls are removed in *Exit West*. The removal of geographic borders is only one piece of what would be deemed useful in creating a more equitable, safe, and healing world post-migration crisis. While readers can empathize with the characters using magic doors in the novel, the people who meet these door-users on the other side still lack empathy; the latter treatment mirrors the global North’s perspective of people migrating from the global South. Thus, the immense improvement regarding the actual treatment of people is still left to be reconstructed both in and outside of the pages of the novel. Perhaps compassionate collective care could be implemented only after society acknowledges, and then respects, the main emphasis of Hamid’s novel: all humans are moving through time spent on the same planet while going through this unique journey called life together.

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