Postmigration in a Global World: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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Abstract

Extensive migration to Europe from North Africa, the Middle East and the Far East is a daily reality. Various reasons may drive migrants to escape: wars, religious or ethnic persecution, famine, poverty and environmental disasters. Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have become transnational actors of change and transformation in the "First World", continuously re-defining their own existence and the equilibrium of their host countries. Mohsin Hamid's novel Exit West *imagines a world where global mobility and different forms of place-making seem to be the norm. By narrating the life of his characters – a couple fleeing from an unnamed city, which is undergoing a political apocalypse, first to Mikonos, then to Britain and later to California – the author is able to depict the global map of planetary changes and transformations. My contribution will analyse Hamid's novel in the light of concepts elaborated in postcolonial theory and migration studies.*

Keywords: *Mohsin Hamid,* Exit West*, postmigration, precarity, multiplicity of belonging, transnation.*

Exit West, published in 2017, is a novel that sounds prophetic today in the wake of the 2021 Afghan crisis, which saw the Taliban regime take control of the country after the withdrawal of the US troops, causing the pro-American government to collapse and thousands of Afghans to flee abroad. The Americans had invaded Afghanistan in 2001 in response to the 9/11 attacks, in order to wage war on terror, that is, on Osama bin Laden and the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda, who were considered responsible for the attacks and had taken sanctuary there (Haski 2021; Marchand 2021).

In *Exit West* the two protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, are a young couple fleeing from a Muslim country that is never openly mentioned and is devastated by a civil war. Feeble government forces are unsuccessfully trying to neutralise the terroristic and military activity of bands of religious fundamentalists, called "the militants", who are occupying increasingly larger areas of the country and will end up controlling all the most important cities. The militants, who are also supported by foreign powers, spread a reign of terror, brutally killing anyone contrasting their views, in terms of religious doctrines, prescribed social behaviour, and gender relations. More generally, they are violently enforcing a theocratic cultural and political regime.

Right from the incipit, the novel describes the condition of refugees as a common feature of a global world: "In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom" (Hamid 2017: 3). Saeed and Nadia are surrounded by people escaping from wars or calamities, but soon the couple will enter this category themselves when they decide to emigrate to Western countries. The first part of the novel focuses on the birth and evolution of Saeed and Nadia's love, in a context that becomes increasingly threatening:

> Back then people continued to enjoy the luxury of wearing more or less what they wanted to wear, clothing and hair wise, within certain bounds of course, and so these choices meant something.
>
> It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class –in this case an evening class on corporate identity and product branding –

> bur 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.
>
> (Hamid 2017: 3-4)

Saeed and Nadia are depicted as an educated middle-class couple, with no propensity for religious radicalism: Saeed doesn't have a full beard but just "a studiously maintained stubble" (Hamid 2017: 3) and thinks that praying is "personal" (Hamid 2017: 5). Nadia never prays, listens to Western music, rides a motorcycle and lives in a flat on her own pretending she is a widow. Nevertheless, she always wears a full black robe in public (over jeans and a sweater) as a sort of armour, a protection of her anti-conformism. They are both technologically savvy and in full contact with the global world through the social media and the web. The painful decision to leave their homeland is a forceful attempt not to succumb to insane and violent extremism and to have a chance to thrive.

Most of the novel deals with their wandering as refugees outside their country in a fluid world where they interplay with masses of other refugees desperately trying to enter the rich Western countries. It is a global space of "flows", in Appadurai's terms (1996), characterized by movement and mobility, affecting people in different and contradictory ways and creating unequal relations of power, as Hinkson effectively describes:

> In recent years displacement, mobility, and placemaking have asserted themselves in human experience, consciousness, and imagination with newly compelling force. From the 65 million people estimated in 2015 to have been forcibly displaced (UNHCR 2016) to rust-belt neighbourhoods struggling with the withdrawal of industrial production, from agriculturalists dealing with unpredictable weather patterns and global markets to small islands communities confronting rising sea levels, from intergenerational contests between indigenous people, states, and corporations over resource extraction to the hypermobility of labor migrants and cosmopolitan elites, from Brexit vote to the ascendency more generally of governments promising to close borders and push back against globalization– across these diverse situations the outcomes of unequal, contradictory pressures on erstwhile ways of living in places are everywhere apparent.
>
> (Hinkson 2017: 50)

Hamid's interest is not the cosmopolitan elite of the globalized world, whose lifestyles and identities are not constructed within or devoted to a particular culture (Waldron 2010: 163), but the poor, the subaltern, the refugee. Interestingly, the writer does not focus on the so-called "journeys of hope", like the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea by North-Africans on board precarious dinghies or the Balkan routes followed by refugees from the Middle East or Far East. He imagines mysterious "doors" leading into tunnels and passages, through which refugees get to their chosen destination after paying the right people who know where these doors are located. His emphasis is not on the travellers' suffering but, symbolically, on the transformative effects of these passages, which are compared to crossing a dark and opaque black hole that "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 […] the passage was both like dying and like being born" (Hamid 2017: 103-4).

Nadia and Saeed move first to a refugee camp in Mykonos, then to a squatted building in London and finally to Marin, a village near San Francisco. The world explored in the book is one of diasporas, transnational culture flows, and mass movements of population which

continuously problematize the relationship between space and culture, and destabilize the idea that culture and nation are isomorphic, namely, necessarily corresponding.

If Anderson defined the modern nation as an "imagined community" (1983), recent debates on the formation of nation-states and the relationship between nation and culture further underline the illusoriness of such a concept. Whereas once the nation was a category that enabled the socialization of subjects and the structuring of cultures, today it is "a near-absent structure" (Ashcroft 2010: 72). Meyer agrees with Anderson's idea of nation and adds that "the cultural imagination involved is substantially constructed in the wider world environment", therefore the nation-state "is embedded in and constructed by an exogenous […] culture" (Meyer 1999: 123). Indeed, the nation-state has become a controversial concept in an era that has challenged its primacy due to economic globalization (Steinmetz 1999: 4). A new concept has also emerged, that of transnation, which further complicates the present situation and challenges the possibility of a monolithic idea of nation, based on homogenous culture and customs. According to Ashcroft a transnation is:

> the movement of peoples within (and only sometimes across) the geographical boundaries of the nation-state yet who circulate around the boundaries of the state in ways that render the nation less and less instrumental in the framing of identity. […] Transnation is the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation. It is the mark of interpellated subjects flowing through and around ideology itself.
>
> (Ashcroft 2017: 46-7)

This situation can be especially identified in countries such as India and China, where "the nation is already a migratory and even diasporic aggregation, both within and without state boundaries" (Ashcroft 2010: 73), and could be applied to many other areas of the world, for example the Pacific region, which will be mentioned later in relation to the concepts of multiple belonging and identities.

Exit West reflects the crisis of the concept of nation, which appears as a dissolving and collapsing entity:

> The news in those days was full of war and migrants and nativists, and it was full of fracturing too, of regions pulling away from nations, and cities pulling away from hinterlands, and it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone else was also moving apart. Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they had to play. Many were arguing that smaller units made more sense, but others argued that smaller units could not defend themselves.
>
> (Hamid 2017: 158)

Together with mobility, also precarity seems to be a major feature of a global world of transnational migrations. Hinkson distinguishes between two words that are often used interchangeably but are not synonyms: precariousness and precarity. Precariousness is "a generalized common condition of human sociality" (Hinkson 2017: 51) and "a vital element of every exchange – the condition of being dependent on the grace or will of another" (Hinkson 2017: 51, quoted from Butler 2004). It "presupposes a meeting place of relationships with transformative potentialities" (Hinkson 2017: 51, quoted from Carter 2014). Hamid's focus on the protagonists' transformation could be interpreted as the

description of a state of precariousness. During their wanderings Saeed and Nadia indeed develop that mutual dependence that enables them to communicate, grow, and acquire a better understanding of themselves and each other. They undergo a considerable personal evolution. However, they also experience precarity, which is conversely a specific circumstance of contemporary mobility, "characterized by a set of 'dissolving assurances'" (Hinkson 2017: 51, quoted from Berlant 2011: 3). In the course of the novel, in fact, Saeed and Nadia must bear the anxieties and insecurities deriving from the sense of dispossession, placelessness and alienation, which has become a common dimension for the subaltern in this historical moment, in particular for refugees.

The novel therefore questions the spatial assumptions implicit in the most fundamental concepts of social sciences, such as: culture, society, community, and nation. Identities are increasingly coming to be de-territorialized and re-territorialized, or differently territorialized. As Gupta and Ferguson underline, "In this culture-play of diaspora, familiar lines between 'here' and 'there', centre and periphery, colony and metropole become blurred" (1992: 10). And, they continue: "deterritorialization has destabilized the fixity of 'ourselves' and 'others'" (20). Therefore, old-fashioned attempts to map the globe as a set of cultural regions or homelands are vain, as the Mykonos refugee camp shows:

> What looked like a refugee camp, with hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colours and hues – many colours and hues but mostly falling within a band of brown that ranged from dark chocolate to milky tea – and these people were gathered around fires that burned inside upright oil drums and speaking in a cacophony that was the languages of the world, what one might hear if one were a communications satellite.
>
> (Hamid 2017: 106)

Later, another door leads them to London, and they find about a million refugees, the so-called "people of dark London" (Hamid 2017: 154), squatting in the empty spaces of the city: parks, disused lots, unoccupied mansions. The building in which they find accommodation is inhabited by Nigerians (the largest group), Somalis, people from Thailand and Myanmar (Hamid 2017: 123). In some areas of London, refugees are more numerous than the legal residents or native-born people. At night one could hear somebody singing melodies in Igbo and in the morning a call to prayer in the distance. Nadia becomes part of the Council of their house, mainly formed by Nigerian elders, and discovers that they are from different regions, speak different languages, have different religions, and "further that there was perhaps not such thing as a Nigerian" (Hamid 2017: 148). They communicate in various Englishes, namely, different variations of English. And Nadia's English is just another variation among them (Hamid 2017: 148-9).

Saeed and Nadia react to displacement in a different way. Saeed is critical of the occupation of a place that is not theirs and is more homesick. He joins a community from their country for weekly prayers. He would like to re-create his territory, but he is shocked when he realises that the preacher is fostering martyrdom and an extremist attitude similar to that of the militants at home (Hamid 2017: 156), so he distances himself from the community. Nadia is open to a more radical reconfiguration of herself in the new space, as her participation in the Council demonstrates. She is willing to experience different options of mobility. In Mykonos, she had suggested they should explore the island as tourists (Hamid 2017: 113) and in London she parallels the life in the occupied mansion to that in a college

dormitory "with complete strangers living in close proximity" (Hamid 2017: 131). Both, however, are going through a re-territorialization and new forms of place-making.

Saeed and Nadia develop a "multiplicity of belonging", which is the natural process when a high level of movement occurs. As Hermann, Kempf and van Meijl underline, "movement invests place-making and cultural identifications with a new dimension of multiplicity" (2014: 1). Multiplicity is not intended by them as negative or synonymous of fractured identities, but seen in its potentialities of flexibility and changeability (2014: 12). It basically means belonging in a transnational landscape of relationships and contacts. Hermann, Kempf and van Meijl endorse a theoretical trend in anthropology that considers static models of representations (stability, coherence of social systems, rootedness, immobility) unsuitable to today's reality and highlights the potentialities of flow, flux, mobility and migration. Their particular field of studies is the Pacific region, that has always been characterized by "a history of exploration, trade, interlinking and networking – including the transnational migrant flows of recent years" (2014: 3), due to sea-level rising and the flooding of atoll islands (Storlazzi, Gingerich et al. 2018; Kempf and Hermann 2014). Their view somehow reflects sociologist Hepeli Ha'uofa's definition of Oceania, intended not as "islands in a far sea", but as "a sea of islands" (Ha'uofa 1994: 153), that is, a constellation of relationships between islands. His focus is therefore on connectivity, movement and relation rather than smallness and fragmentation. In this context, multiple identities and multiplicity of belonging are the norm and even an added value. Interestingly, Nadia still keeps wearing her black robe as a protective shield of her freedom or a powerful symbol of one of her multiple identities, "because it sent a signal, and she still wished to send this signal" (Hamid 2017: 114).

If migrants and refugees have to re-design their existence continuously, they also re-define the equilibrium of their host-countries, becoming transnational actors of change and transformation in the "First World". The emergence of forms of populism and nationalism based on essentialist or nativist ideas is evident in the countries visited by Nadia and Saeed. Populism and nationalism rise from the frustration of a never fulfilled nation, so it is necessary to project this frustration onto alterity (Bromley 2017: 38). In Mykoonos, "Decent people vastly outnumbered dangerous ones, but it was probably best to be in the camp, near other people, after nightfall" (Hamid 2017: 107). In London, riots and violent outbreaks occur, fomented by a "nativist mob" (Hamid 2017: 134) who attack and beat migrants and refugees. During the so-called "battle of London", military and para-military forces are mobilized to clear migrant ghettoes like the one where Nadia and Saeed live. But there are also volunteers, distributing vaccines and food to refugees in need. The violent reaction of the British natives reminds Nadia and Saeed that their own country had received millions of war refugees in the past, but the conclusion is: "That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose" (Hamid 2017: 164).

In general, the news on the web shows a transformative process occurring in the "First-World", whose nations are anthropomorphically defined as people with multiple personalities, split apart, and Britain as a geographical but not political entity:

> Reading the news at that time one was tempted to conclude that *the nation was like a person with multiple personalities, some insisting on union and some on disintegration*, and that this person with multiple personalities was furthermore a person whose skin appeared to be dissolving as they swam in a soup full of other people whose skins were likewise dissolving. Even Britain was not immune from this phenomenon, in fact some said that Britain had already split, like a man whose head

> had been chopped off and yet still stood, and others said Britain was an island, and islands endure, even if the people who come to them change, and so it had been for millennia, and so it would be for millennia more.
>
> (Hamid 2017: 158; my emphases)

Interestingly, the concept of "native" itself becomes multiple. The natives of Britain had so many different accents that it was impossible for Nadia to say which was the ancestral one (Hamid 2017: 182). And the British native foreman in the construction place where she works has a non-native wife who apparently arrived from a nearby country two decades ago but looks native to Nadia (Hamid 2017: 182). The Italian reader could suppose she is from Italy and cannot but remember the migration of millions of Italians to Northern Europe in the past.

When the couple arrive in the US, they discover that the natives are very few as they were largely exterminated long ago. However, they also realise that nativeness is a relative matter because many others consider themselves native to the country: basically all those whose families migrated to the US in previous generations and all African Americans (Hamid 2017: 198). Being a land of migration, the natives of US were mostly migrants.

The most powerful weapon in global mobility is actually technology. If, on one hand, technological advance helps nation-state governments to exercise control, defend borders and clear occupied territories, through drones, helicopters, surveillance balloons, and flying robots, on the other hand cellular phones and the world-wide web allow people in movement to build a network of contacts, information and help. And wherever migrants are, a thriving trade in electricity goes on.

Hamid's book seems to advocate the spreading of a postmigrant attitude in the present global world. Postmigration refers to a new set of emergent spaces of plurality and is a concept in which the prefix "post" is not just temporal but also epistemological (Bromley 2017: 36). As Bromley pinpoints, postmigration cannot be romanticised as "a new belonging" (2017: 37). It is about "de-essentializing so-called migrant coherences and homogeneities and breaking up ascribed identities" (2017: 36). It is "an exploration of the conflicts and contradictions, the belonging and unbelonging, the split subjectivities which, in many cases are a feature of a postmigrant belonging" (2017: 36). A postmigrant attitude aims at promoting new representational and cultural practices for migrants, going beyond fixed representations. It is performative, that is, it manifests itself in new forms and challenges traditions and customs because it is a process of discontinuity, something always under construction. Postmigrant aesthetics is a challenge to ways in which we are accustomed to talking about questions of assimilation, integration, roots, origins, cultural belongings, and equality. It encourages the right to ambivalence, to be here and there, without having to choose (2017: 37). Bromley wonders how a migrant ceases to be a racialized "other". His answer is:

> We need to move away from representational strategies that focus exclusively upon ethnicity or migrancy or minority to explore narratives that are post/national/ist, post ethnic and postmigrant in order to produce stories of complex subjectivities, which unsettle, render unstable, ideas of otherness.
>
> (Bromley 2017: 38)

Like the concept of multiplicity of belonging, postmigration encourages a "bricolage of identifications" (Bromley 2017: 37) for migrants, one that sets in motion interculturalism

rather than multiculturalism. In fact, the latter tends to lead to essentialism and separation, while the former is conversely "more fluid and dynamic, more of a dialogue, as it suggests narratives in motion, mobile and changeable belongings, with identities which are always under construction, incomplete, being here and elsewhere." (Bromley 2017: 37). It is a process that involves multi-directional and reciprocal interaction and exchange between "mainstream" cultural activities and those practiced by minority cultures. In this sense, it is not a process of assimilation into the hosting culture but brings a change to it as well.

As mentioned before, the protagonists experience a state of precariousness that triggers their evolution. During their tragic predicament they also learn something about themselves and are able to negotiate questions of sexual orientation, family practices and religious belief. The story of Saeed and Nadia is marked by love and respect for each other. Their bond, however, becomes more and more spiritual throughout the story and they are like brother and sister. This leads them to different directions and to the emergence of their primary needs. Saeed wants to recover his origin, roots and religion and starts a relationship with the preacher's daughter, whose mother comes from the same country as Saeed. She becomes a medium for him to retrace stories and images of his own mother country. On the other hand, Nadia becomes aware of her sexual orientation when she falls in love with the woman that works with her as a head cook.

The story of Nadia and Saeed is interspersed with short sections, generally no longer than three pages, which illustrate various episodes of migration, placelessness and violence, happening simultaneously in various parts of the world (for example, Sydney, San Diego, Vienna, Amsterdam, and Marrakesh) next to the main narrative, as if to underscore the interconnectedness of these events in a global reality.

In Sydney, a dark-skinned migrant emerges from one of the mysterious doors right in the bedroom's closet of an Australian woman. He is like a baby struggling his way out through his mother's cervix. The contrast between the sleeping pale-skinned woman and the frightened dark man with curly hair embodies the encounter between the First World and the subaltern refugee. The man finally sneaks out of the open window, to face his destiny in the new country (Hamid 2017: 7-9). In La Jolla, near San Diego, police officers are patrolling the coast where migrants, Mexicans or Muslims, are expected to land (Hamid 2017: 48-50). In Tijuana, on the border between Mexico and the US, an orphanage gives hospitality to the children of Mexican people working in the US. They are waiting to be old enough to cross the border themselves and join their parents (Hamid 2017: 159-61). In Vienna militants from Saeed and Nadia's country are shooting unarmed people in the streets to provoke an exacerbated reaction in Austrian citizens against the migrants. The mob, in fact, attacks the migrants starting anti-migrant riots (Hamid 2017: 109-10). All these sections frame the story, reflecting the global effects of migration.

One of the sections, at the very end of the book, seems to convey the most important message of the story. It depicts a rich old woman in Palo Alto, California, who has lived in the same house her entire life. She knew the names of almost everyone in her streets, families who belonged to old California. But over the years they had changed more and more rapidly, because people sold and bought their houses the way they sold and bought stocks. Therefore, now:

> all sorts of strange people were around, people that looked more at home than she was, even the homeless ones who spoke no English, more at home maybe because they were younger, and when she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that

> everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it.
> We are all migrants through time.
>
> (Hamid 2017: 209)

In this passage Hamid problematizes the concept of migrant, inserting it in the category of time as well as space, therefore indirectly applying a postmigrant approach which "introduce[s] new levels of diversity and antagonism, expose[s] the contingency and emptiness of nationalist signifiers, to go beyond the nation to formulate other, perhaps global, but not necessarily territorial, allegiances" (Bromley 2017: 38).

Exit West is a novel on contemporary migration in a global reality. With his continuous move between fable and realism, between psychological and political time, Hamid helps us change our perspective: it makes the readers migrants in space and time, like Nadia and Saeed.

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