

OPEN SESAME: A FARISIAN ANALYSIS OF *EXIT WEST* AS A MAGICAL REALIST NOVEL

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Original Article

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Abstract

Mohsin Hamid has couched his novel Exit West in magical realist chromes to highlight the issue of migration which was most problematic at the time of its publication. The present study analyses this extraordinary narrative in the light of the theoretical insights of Wendy B. Faris in order to determine how successfully Hamid has employed this post-modern mode and through it, contributed a worthwhile share to the bulk of this prevalent and most popular technique of writing. The study is qualitative, explorative and argumentative in nature which establishes that Hamid has aroused awareness about the plight of refugees who were banned from many metropolitan centres of the world and expounded his views on the solution of the refugee crisis and magical realism has served his purpose most appropriately and effectively.

Keywords: Awareness, Magic realism, Migration, Post-modern, Refugees

1. Introduction

After the initial trauma of the partition which constrained old Pakistani writers to regional issues, the young Pakistani writers earned fame internationally at the end of 20th century through their politically committed writings. In this regard, they contested with South Asian writers, specially from neighbouring India. These talented Pakistani fiction writers tried their hand at different themes. Most of these writers were Pakistani diaspora or had wide experience of Western culture and history. Besides, they were also deeply aware of the issues faced by Pakistan and the global world. So they embedded their writings with the newly emerging problems which had blighted this planet. They secured some literary prizes and thereby commanded the attention of new Anglophone readers who were fascinated by the new literary trends practiced by these writers. Magical realism is one of the literary trends of postmodern literature in which Pakistani writers have contributed a worthwhile share. Mohsin Hamid is one such young and talented writer who has opened up new vistas of awareness through his magical realist novel, *Exit West*. He is a Pakistan-based author born in Lahore and graduated from The Princeton University of America. Hamid has a broadened view of the national and international concerns of the 21st century (Clements, 2013, 104). Munro (n.d) also traces his hybridity and multinational brought up as the root cause of his deep awareness of globalized world which is full of so many issues (n.pag). His Booker short-listed novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) caused sensation in the literary circles by disrupting the stereotypes about terrorists (Chambers, 2011, p.19). As a well-travelled man who has been frequenting between Pakistan and other foreign countries, he has close awareness with the plight of migrants in the wake of 9/11 and the later developments in world politics. Hamid himself observes that anti-migrant elements are active in European Union, England and the USA (Hamid, *Discontent*, 2015, n.pag.). Western sanctions

and restrictions against the migrants in the metropolitan cities is the subject of his 2017 novel titled *Exit West* in which he has treated the world-wide issue of migration in a magical realist undertones. This novel which has been long-listed for the Man Booker nominations and later short-listed for the award also (Alam et al n.pag), discusses the theme of migration globally. Menger observes that Hamid has employed estrangement effect in his fiction to create a novel world which questions the status quo. In this way he has stepped into the terrain of magical realism (2018, p.80). Kazmi also observes that it is through his novel *Exit West* (2017) that Hamid has "ventured into the capricious territory of magical realism ... " (2017, n.pag).

2. Literature Review/Theoretical Insight

Magical realism is a narrative mode which incorporates the fantastical and realistic elements in a single chain of events combined in one narrative. It was initiated by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier and popularized by many other Latin American and other writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Amado, Gorge Luis Borges, Miguel Angel Asturias, Julio Cortazar and Isabel Allende proving the fact that this technique in literature and art has been employed outside of Latin America also (Wolff, Magic Realism in Britannica, 2006, p.1167). According to Faris (2004), magical realism is a combination of realism and the fantastic elements in which the marvelous seems to be the organic part of the ordinary and the distinction between the two are blurred out (p. 1). Chanaday (1995) explains magical realism as a combination of two conflicting perspectives in which one is the rational view of life and the other is acceptance of the supernatural as a part of everyday reality (21-22). Faris has suggested five elements of magical realism. First one is the irreducible element (2004, p.7) which cannot be explained through empirical knowledge or logic. The second one is phenomenal world (2004, p.14) which is the realism within the magical realism in the form of real sounds, things and real places. The third one is the unsettling doubts (2004, p.17) which arise to settle the question of whether a particular event is a dream, hallucination or a miracle. The fourth one is the merging realms (2004, p.21) which denotes that the two contradictory worlds are related one with the other creating an in between space. The fifth characteristic is disruption of time space and identity which substantiates in subverting the popular ideas about time, space and identity (2004, p. 23).

3. Methodology of the Study

This study is qualitative and explorative designed to be analysed on Wendy B. Faris' theoretical insights about magical realism. Warnes (2009) remarks that myriads of cultural concerns can be penned down through magical realism in diverse perspectives (p.28). Employment of magical realistic technique varies from writer to writer and one geographical setting to other one. Writers have variously used it to expound their views on culture and politics. Srikanth and Chandra (2014) find it helpful to show the distance between the center and the margin i.e. the East and the West (pp.331-332). The present study plans to analyse *Exit West* as a magical realist novel in the light of the insights shared by Wendy B. Faris in her famous writing *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of the Narrative* (2004). Wendy B. Faris' model is based on the criteria of these five constituents:

- Irreducible Element
- Phenomenal World
- Unsettling Doubts
- Merging Realms
- Disruption of Time, Space and Identity

4. The objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- To determine how far Mohsin Hamid comes up to the international standards of this modern genre of magical realism as he has couched his fiction in this mode
- To explore how successfully he employs it as a means of enlightening the reader about the burning problem of the globe i.e. the rehabilitation of refugees and migrants.

5. Analysis

5.1. Irreducible Element in *Exit West*

Sandhu (2017) calls *Exit West* a story of change and migration which is a hybrid narrative adorned with the elements of magical realism (n. page). *Exit West* constitutes a part of a new trend in Pakistan which has been lately adopted by some fiction writers. The fantastic element mentioned by Faris is represented through the magical doors which teleport people to unfamiliar places. In the dystopian city of Nadia and Saeed, the doors are the only hope for war-ravaged people. The mysterious doors are reported through an unknown narrator. The reality of the doors is never discussed in detail. They remain a riddle as to how and when they appeared all of a sudden. In appearance they are like ordinary doors except that they are invariably black in colour and Hamid calls them as "a portal of complete blackness" (Hamid, 2017, p. 27) a blackness which is visible even under the dim light of the mobile torch (Hamid, 2017,p. 63). The ontology of the doors needs no special structure or mechanism. They could open up anywhere and anytime even without any premonitory sign or warning. Even the journey of Nadia and Saeed through one of these doors is related allegorically giving it a generic tinge and enveloping it under the cover of vagueness and ambiguous suggestiveness. Nadia found it both like the experience of dying and being born. Hamid's doors are a mockery of the modern day borders as they link and join people whereas borders divide and alienate them (El Akkad n. page). Sulter likens them to the closet in Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* which carries away to an unfamiliar world (n. page). Aziz uses the terms of portals and dark rectangles which emerge magically by themselves and are occupied by dubious people who let distressed people pass through them for a price (n.pag.). Generally, we find such fantastic devices in science fiction or fantasy stories but by incorporating such fantastical doors in an otherwise realistic narrative, Hamid has fulfilled one requirement of magical realism. In an interview with Leyshon (2016), Hamid admitted that he has introduced a strand of unreality through his magical doors (n.pag). In another interview with Inskip (2017), he admitted that the inclusion of the doors was spurred by his interest to know the motives behind people's migration and the circumstances they faced in foreign countries (n.pag). Hamid has given these magical doors a universal presence as they are everywhere. Through them, the readers are afforded a transnational peep into the lives of the people i.e. An Australian woman sleeping in her bed room while a black man emerged from her closet door (Hamid, 2017, p.6), a naval officer in California who is more concerned about who these migrant might be, whether they might be Mexicans or Muslims (Hamid, 2017, pp. 45-48), and an old woman living in Palo Alto who once was familiar with everyone in her neighbourhood but not now as there were strangers all around and every year new people were moving in and moving out from those mysterious doors (Hamid, 2017,p. 209). These doors are being used from east to west that is why Sulter calls them a means of connectedness between the local with the global and known to the unknown (n.pag). They were turning the world into a borderless place where people could move in and move out of any territory without the passport and visa constraints. So they fictionally materialize the utopian dream of a unified and borderless world. Irreducible element in magical realism defies logic and urges the readers to willingly suspend their disbelief. The

doors are a miracle in time and place. They teleport people to far off places within seconds. There is no cause and effect logic behind the doors. They are simply there and one has to accept them without challenging their existence. Implausibility of such magical doors in real life and their unchallenged acceptance in the fictional world is an important proviso of the magical realism.

5.2. Phenomenal World in *Exit West*

Hamid has counter balanced the magical doors with the realistic representation of the current world. Veret (2020) testifies the fact that *Exit West* has pursued the norms of realistic portrayal of actual world (p. 108). There are realistic images of a war-torn country where blind shooting and bomb blasts have blighted the lives of the people. Though there are dystopian details of the violence and exaggerated narratives of atrocities committed by the militants, the use of highly advanced war technology is a current scenario in which drones, helicopters, bomb explosion and machine gunshots are part and parcel of prevalent war strategies. Nadia and Saeed enjoyed the modern technology like mobile phones which keeps them connected in the tumultuous time of war. Nadia particularly was more active on social media but she kept her identity unnoticed through avoiding frequent posts and using fake user names. All this technological scenario of *Exit West* is a faithful replica of the modern day world. The militants and the government soldiers' activities throw light on the strategies adopted by such conflicting groups. The struggle of both the sides to take over the city, the government feigning to be in control of things, the militants getting all the more ruthless and emboldened, the people feeling confined and insecure and trying to keep some weapon for personal safety as government control on things seems to be ineffective, are all the realistic details experienced by a country undergoing civil war. Particularly the activities of the militants bear resemblance to those of ISIS and Taliban groups. Music is banned by them so Nadia has to hide her favourite music collection in case their flat is rummaged. These militants are very cruel and rigid as they interpret Islam according to their own narrow definition. They behead their opponents and brutally murder the members of a certain denomination. Any man without beard and woman without veil is persecuted. Even though Saeed and Nadia were in the approved dress and appearance of these militants, they had to show the proof that they were a married couple. These details are the realistic accounts of any country like Iraq or Afghanistan. The sights and sounds of the actual world, the real life places like academy, café, cinema and flats have nothing unusual about them. Realistic representation of the simple relationship between Saeed's father and mother and comparatively intricate relationship between Nadia and Saeed point to a generation gap that is an undeniable fact of our existence. *Exit West* contains no direct historical reference but it does have an irrefutable background reference of a large scale exodus to Europe from Asia which caused a rift in the west as well as dividing the Europeans into pro-migrant and anti-migrant groups. The Syrian refugee crisis of 2011-12 and America's strategy to keep its borders sealed for refugees have been hinted through the migration premises of the novel. Gheoghiu (2018) remarks that *Exit West* is deficient in historical references but Hamid has included some seminal inter-texts of the globe for which it may be termed a historiographic metafiction.... Gheoghiu observes that Hamid has broadened the parameters of the real through his depiction of the immigrants (p. 86). The details of the migrants' difficulties at refugee camps of Mykonos and dark London conform to the television reports and newspapers coverage of the migrants' plight.

5.3. Unsettling Doubts in *Exit West*

The logical readers of *Exit West* closely follow the reaction of the characters in order to find a clue whether the magical doors are a miracle, dream or hallucination. The doors in *Exit West* at first create some sensation. They are something extraordinary in their life. Earlier the information about these doors reaches through third or fourth source but gradually they become a more intimate reality. The initial incredulity is replaced by a changed perception about these doors. Even Nadia and Saeed look at their

closet door, washroom door, front door, and entrance door in a different perspective (Hamid, 2017, p. 70). The doors seem to have attained the power to jeer at the dreams of the foolish people who want to flee from their place of origin. After initial waverings and doubts, the people believe in these doors as the only option for escape. They are desperate to leave that is why when the inland routes are banned, they turn to the option of doors. They become a more physical reality when the militants declare to hang those who use or keep any of these doors. They are being discussed internationally as a big global crisis (Hamid, 2017, p. 83). Though readers' doubts about the doors are not settled, they suspend their rational and judgmental capacities for a while and enjoy the panoramic view of diverse cultures and countries afforded through these portals.

5.4. Merging of Realms in *Exit West*

Exit West juxtaposes two contrasting worlds of east and west. East is dystopian, illogical and war-afflicted. West is developed, logical and peaceful till the arrival of the migrants. East is represented by some Asian or Middle Eastern city devastated by war. The two worlds intersect when Nadia and Saeed along with myriads of refugees step into the cosmopolitan centres of west like Mykonos, London and Marin, in America. In this way, quite paradoxically the doors serve as a border between east and west. In Ocheltree's view (2017), Hamid sketches his native people and land negatively. His people are a contamination against which the western people are justifiably taking preventive and distancing measures (pp. 1-2). East has some positive values as well such as is shown through the families of Nadia and Saeed. This strong family system is contrasted with a casual mention of a retired naval officer who is living isolatedly in California and who is alienated from his kid brother since long. As his property is overtaken by migrants, he is worried as he has no one to find a place with (Hamid, 2017, p. 48). There is another woman who is surrounded by strangers only and is occasionally visited by a granddaughter (Hamid, 2017, p. 209). Both the mundane worlds of east and west are invaded by the paranormal world of magical doors. The magical and the real merge intricately so much so that the one cannot exist without the other. Their norms clash with each other but they are part and parcel of the same magical realist world.

5.5. Disruption of Time, Space and Identity in *Exit West*

Exit West has some vague hints about the time of action. No referents are given except the mention of world-war II (Hamid, 2017, p. 19) and they place the narrative somewhere in the modern age. There are sudden hikes as the end of the narrative shifts the readers fifty years ahead (Hamid, 2017, p. 227) affording them a futuristic peep into the old age of Nadia and Saeed. Intermittent vignettes in the novel are also timeless snippets of the life of people across the globe. So the novel has a novel temporal scheme. An otherwise linear narrative is disrupted by the intervention of vignettes. The doors themselves are a miracle in time and space. They can teleport people to far off places within no time. The doors have compressed the concept of past, present and future. In a way, they have made us travel back to antiquity where there were no divisions in the form of borders or nation states, and when there were no restrictions of passport, visas or immigration laws. Gheorghiu (2018) calls the narrative a shortened history of colonial era and its aftermaths (p. 88). The narrative does not advance chronologically but is fractured by the episodes of vignettes. These vignettes intercept the flow of narrative at many points. Hamid has compressed the history of migration spanning over many centuries into the occurrences of a single year which Braur (2019) calls a form of disruption of history (p. 304). According to Sandhu (2017), for the critics, there is a confusing amalgam of "recent past, an intensified present and a near future (n.pag). The city of Nadia and Saeed is an unnamed city. Lagji (2019, p. 6), Leyshon (2016, n.pag.) and Hussain et al (2020, p. 334) hint that Hamid's intention in keeping the identity of the city secret was a part of his plan to make the experience of migration as a generalized one. Mykonos, particularly is a third-space, a hybrid

place, located in the middle of east and west. Like time and space, identities are also disrupted in this narrative. Nadia, for example is a hybrid character who wears hijab but is quite a liberal character. She lives independently as a single working woman away from her family. She eats joint and psychedelic mushrooms and has unorthodox views about religion which alarmed her father (Hamid, 2017, p. 18). In her sexual orientation also, she moves from heterosexuality to homosexuality and settles with a lesbian cook. Walid (2021) calls this change in Nadia's character her sexual fluidity (p. 19). Thus her development from a heterosexual to a homosexual or at least a bisexual makes her a hybrid character mentioned by Faris. Pequena (2019) also terms her "hybrid migrant woman" who keeps her attachment with her birthplace intact and comfortably adjusts with new settings (p. 74). Kayani et al (2020) term her as an unconventional feminine archetype whose liberal views on religion, sex and many other matters shock Saeed (p. 95).

5.6. Social Critique in *Exit West*

Himself a migrant, Hamid calls himself a mongrelized person in an interview with Mellen (2017, n.pag), and in another interview with Innskeep (2017, n.pag.) a professed pro-migrant. He is aware of the importance of migration and the restrictions imposed on it by world powers. When *Exit West* was written, the world was facing wars in most of the parts of the world resulting in closure of borders for war refugees. Baglama (2008) has pointed out that the factor of terrorism and fundamentalism also gave rise to the number of asylum seekers (p. 149). Hamid has afforded a panoramic view of the migration trauma and the issues involved with it. He has employed the fantastic in the form of the magical doors and aroused the world conscience to empathize with the refugees' sense of dislocation, unbelonging, violence and loss. Hamid condemns xenophobic feelings that have been surging lately. He has purposefully chosen the metaphor of doors to represent borders. Guarding the doors means sealing the border for foreigners in order to deny them opportunities in that particular region. According to Bilal (2016), Hamid has documented a particular phase in history which is concerned with the most ethical problem of refugee crisis (n.pag.). Mir (2018) terms *Exit World* as a modern take on the issue of migration (p. 15). Hamid's magical doors have bridged the gap between the east and west and resulted in "denationalized cultural spaces" (Korpez, 2020, p. 162). Everyone who belongs to any color, class or creed can enter and exit any nation state at will in a borderless space.

In the opinion of Sharma and Singh (2019), immigration cannot be stopped as anyone can be a migrant at any point of his life (p. 39). Menger (2018) opines that faith in magical doors has nurtured hopefulness for a better future (p. 82). Migration has been discussed earlier in conventional literature, but Hamid's use of magical realism has enabled people to view this issue in a new way. The magical doors suggest that Hamid is in favour of a dissolution of borders. He visualizes a future perhaps centuries ahead which will materialize the dream of a unified global world. In the words of Mellen (2017), he hints without mentioning the name of America that the country which theoretically supports equality but practically denies people equal rights on the basis of their birth place will change its policy (2017, n.pag.). It is through the potential of magical realism that Hamid has been able to have a visionary peep into future. Hamid has fictionalized this most seminal issue of the modern world. Through his magical narrative, he has rendered the borders and nation states as artificial and unnecessary. In this perspective, *Exit West* is an innovative attempt on the part of its author to promote the notion of a peaceful, co-existent and borderless world.

6. Conclusion

Exit West by Mohsin Hamid is a precious addition to the bulk of magical realist fiction. Hamid comes up to the standard criteria of magical realist novels as his narrative fulfils the requirements of a good magical realist fiction postulated by Wendy B. Faris. Though the narrative is grounded in reality, there are deep undertones of dystopian hyperbolic accounts, juxtaposition of paranormal magical doors, fractured time, unfamiliar spaces and fluid identities which give it a magical flavour. Not only does Hamid exhibit fidelity to the form, but he focuses on the real purpose of this technique also. That is why he has most effectively employed the form to convey a serious message about migration as effectively as is possible through this veiled medium.

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