

'Exit West' Of Mohsin Hamid: An Analysis In The Light Of Global Migration Crisis



Muhammed Salahudheen V P
Ph.D Scholar
Osmania University, Hyderabad

Abstract

Migration literature is a literature genre which is written by migrants, or tells the stories of migrants or their migration. According to Rosemary Marangoly George, migrant literature is a contemporary literary writing in which the politics of location/ or delocation is central to the narrative. 'Exit West', this year's Man Booker shortlist novel of Mohsin Hamid- a Pakistani british novelist and a prominent name in contemporary migrant literature-, is a novel in which the current global migrant crisis along with expatriation- immigration dichotomy is best dealt with an optimistic approach. It is an excellent tale with powerful dramatic visuals and stories we see in our daily newspapers and on the internet. As contemporary migrant literature is best read as a sub-genre within post-modern writing which depicts the theme of dislocation and homelessness, this article attempts to bring out the elements of forced migration and current refugee crisis in Mohsin Hamid's latest novel.

Key words: Migrant literature, refugees, global migration, intolerance, cultural exchange.

Human migration has a long history of almost two million years. During the course of history, human population migrated for various reasons. Coming to the modern times, 20th century world wars had an enormous impact on migration. During the collapse of Ottoman empire following the first world war, muslims moved from the Balkans to Turkey, while christians moved the other way. Hundreds of thousands became homeless and stateless refugees. Because of the antisemitic attitudes of the Europe, four hundred thousand jews had already moved to Palestine and numerous jews to America. The Russian civil war forced millions of Russians to migrate out of the new Soviet union. Decolonization efforts following the second world war also caused migration like what happened between India and Pakistan during Partition.

The later decades of 20th century and the beginning of 21st watched a new phase of migration, mostly for economic and career reasons. People of the undeveloped or developing countries started to migrate to European, American or Gulf regions to enhance their economic opportunities. As a result, some countries had immigrants consist of over half of their population including many Middle Eastern countries. Migrants had a crucial role in the economic growth of many states and in the cultural exchange as well.

2010s witnessed a hot-debated global Migration crisis following the civil wars in the Middle East. An estimated 11 million men, women and children fled their countries and sought asylum mostly in the European continent. A record of more than 5000 migrants drowned, suffocated or froze to death in the mediterranean sea in 2016. This was the biggest humanitarian crisis in the modern history after the second world war. Due to the excessive number of migrants coming to their lands, many European countries were forced to implement some restrictions including the border closure and a number of anti-immigrant right wing groups were also emerged exploiting the huge crisis.

'Exit West' is a Man Booker shortlist (2016) novel which tells a story on the global migration crisis. The author Mohsin Hamid- himself a Pakistani migrant to Briton and the writer of three other novels; *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Moth Smoke*- depicts the story in an equally present and ambiguous way. Though the central characters' city/country from which they flee remains unnamed in the novel, we can understand it being a South Asian one- it could be Pakistan, Hamid's home country, Syria, Iraq or Libya or any number of others. Nadia and Saeed are the main characters of the novel who leave their country, which is lurching toward a civil war, in search of a new life. The novel, which is told through the third person omniscient perspective, opens on the first meeting between Saeed and Nadia in a night class. "In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her." We know what will eventually happen; a boy-girl love story, go out for walking, invite each other to house, where they enjoy.

As their loving relationship develops, their city experiences a series of unfortunate events. One night, while standing on their balcony, Saeed's family hears gunshots and screaming in the distance. Then helicopters and drones begin to swarm lighting up the night sky. Militants seize the stock exchange, but are gunned down by the government forces with significant loss of lives. Then the militants begin arriving in the city in large numbers, taking over the city. The rest is a prototypical Aleppo; with curfew, gunshots airstrikes and bombs.

After Saeed's mother is accidentally shot dead, Nadia and Saeed decide to flee for their lives. Saeed's father refuses to leave with them and Nadia promises him that she will protect his son. The couples start investigating rumours they heard about mysterious doors; "door that could take you elsewhere often to places far away, well removed from the deathtrap of this country". They talk to a man who promises to get them out to one and seconds after they step through it, they find themselves on a Greek island with fellow refugees from all over the world.

At this point, the story line becomes a little dreamier, but still coordinately prompt and powerful, as it not only scans the chattels of conflict, strife, and paranoid suspicion and fear have on an affair, but it is also a keen remark on the current refugee experience, and how people in the same situation can hold each other.

In the Island, they sooner or later gain the sympathy of a local Greek girl who has a strong rapport with Nadia and helps the couples go through a recently discovered door which leads to a luxury home in London. Nadia and Saeed and other refugees settle in the home, claiming it from its owners.

As more groups of migrants enter London, sympathy of the native-born turns into disinterest and eventually into hostility between the migrants and the natives, which drags attacks and mob-rule. The migrants are finally cordoned off into a ghetto with minimal food and electricity called "Dark London". After a raid to clear out a migrant camp goes wrong, the natives decide to try to work

together with the new migrants and put them to work clearing the land for Halo London, a city surrounding London-proper, with the promise that they will be given a small plot of land and access to the essential amenities. Nadia and Saeed throw themselves into the work as they feel themselves distant from each other.

Although the couple are on a list that puts them among the first to get a secure home, Nadia suggests that they move to Marin, outside San Francisco. They find they are generally welcome there and Nadia gets a job at a food co-op while Saeed gets involved with a local religious organization led by an Afro-american preacher. Eventually, realizing that they no longer have any feelings for one another, Nadia leaves Saeed and moves into a room at the co-op, forming a relationship with a cook who works there. Saeed, meanwhile, gets more involved with the preacher's daughter and finally gets to marry her.

The ending of the novel is a good match for the rest of the plot. Half a century later, Nadia returned to their city for the first time, and meets with Saeed in a nearby coffee-house. Gradually, their conversation develops into a playful recapitulating rhyme. During the meet, Saeed offers that he will one day take her to see the deserts in Chile. They leave it open for the possibility of a rekindling, though the reader knows this is fragile.

The novel has a powerful and relevant narrative, as Mohsin Hamid creates a plot applicable to today's global issues. It provides insight to humanity and how all the mankind have similarities though they may origin from different places. Although the discourse of religion, immigration, refugees, and the constant fighting between "natives and strangers" imply controversial subjects, the narrative of "Exit West" keeps the novel away from being about a specific crisis. The ambiguity about the country, religion and language of the characters makes the novel more applicable. This obscurity allows this text to be read in many different ways comparing to the current global issues and the insight on the psychological repercussions the refugees face as they travel from their homelands, actually helps readers suppress the prejudices and misconceptions about refugees of the present world.

At a time when some wish to label all migrants in a negative way, this novel will teach you to empathize others more complexly. This is a clear-cut reminder of why thousands flee their homelands, and how their humanity is often lost in the cross paths. It is highly commendable that neither Nadia nor Saeed don't blame the natives of the countries they ended up in even though they face hostility and hatred. But beyond all the social and political commentary, this book is, at its heart, a story of love, relationships, loss and sacrifices we do for our beloved ones and simultaneously provides a sense of hope that many will find consolatory given the current chaotic time of the world.

In a recent interview, Mohsin Hamid told that the backlash against the migrants in Europe, serious episodes like Donald Trump's Republican victory and Brexit made his novel more prescient. We could see an anti-immigrant and intolerant concerns though the lines of all these events. If the tension grows between two positions; between the desire to move, and the desire to not let the people move to where you are, eventually the world becomes fundamentally intolerant of diversity, and intolerant of those who intermingle in fascinating levels. The novel warns the readers about this right-wing xenophobia and promotes the possibilities of global thinking and global citizenship, which doesn't feed off the hatred of the other.

But while "Exit West" seems like a dark reflection of our clamorous times, Mr. Hamid said the novel grew out of an optimistic impulse. When people are seized by pessimism, it makes possible for all

sorts of nostalgic and reactionary politics. So, it is important to enunciate optimistic views in the writing. "What if we look at a very difficult future, can we still find hope and beauty and love and things that we want?" he said. "For me, this is not a novel about dystopia; actually it's about looking for signs of hope and optimism in the future."

In my view, the future for refugees apparently isn't something of a silver lining. Global migration and refugee crisis are the by-products of political power systems that are unlikely to come undone or cured in near future. The current refugee crisis can only be resolved when all concerned shoulder their responsibilities and commit to deal with it as German politician Martin Schulz pointed out at an informal meeting of EU leaders last year. Governments need to stop blaming refugees for all their social and economic problems and should combat all kinds hate crimes, xenophobia and racism. They have to put solidarity and compassion above petty quarrels. Then only, we can hope the 'Exit West optimism' comes true.

The writing style of Hamid is brilliant, evocative and so, beautiful. He deals with many controversial and complicated themes, but uses simple and open language. Despite being a bittersweet love story, it is not written emotionally. The magical realism is done so aesthetically and imaginatively and works so well for a story which is incredibly important for today. Throughout the novel, there is a striking collocation between love and hatred, empathy and brutality or beautiful and hideous. The novelist extraordinarily summarizes the nature of migration as well the entire sentiment of the novel when he describes Nadia and Saeed struggle to say their final goodbyes to their beloved ones, "For when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind."

In many such ways, 'Exit West' is quite touching and beautiful. A most anticipated timely novel which will bring the reader face to face with the realities of the war-torn countries and the bitter experiences of the global refugees.

Works consulted

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