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Humanization of the Refugee as the Modern Subject in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

May 2023

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Humanization of the Refugee as the Modern Subject in Mohsin Hamid's
Exit West

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ABSTRACT

Humanization of the Refugee as the Modern Subject in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

by Ani Gazazyan

This thesis discusses the central concern of the global refugee crisis through the fictional novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid. The novel tells the story of two protagonists who are portrayed as the modern subject that Hamid comes to humanize, which reflects on current society's representation of the refugee as dehumanized or "the Other." Hamid takes his readers on a journey that represents his characters as normal everyday humans that are forced into the process of refugeehood and displacement. Throughout this thesis, I discuss what makes the novel so unique in representing the modern-day refugee. In the first section titled "II. Humanization of Hamid's Characters," I discuss what distinguishes this novel from other forms of American Literature with its use of two central protagonists, the form and structure of the novel, the use of vignettes, magical realism, and its transition of privileged stable characters to displaced beings in the world. In the next section titled "III. The Role of Technology in Representing the Modern Subjects," I discuss the subjectivity of Hamid's main characters through their use of technology and the inevitable deterioration it brings to their homeland and each other. The thesis aims to highlight *Exit West* as a modern and effective representation of the global refugee crisis today, through the uses and growth of technology in the 21st century and its unique form of storytelling within U.S. fiction in representing the refugee as human. The goal of the novel and the paper is for readers to recognize refugee individuals as human beings.

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I. Introduction

A year prior to the release of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), a statistic calculated: "there were 22.5 million refugees and 65.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide" (Fisher 1119, UNHCR). In a 2019 calculation, the number of international migrants across the world is said to have reached 272 million people or 3.3% of the world's population (Veyret 106). What do we come to understand from such an unfathomable number? The collective realities involving a large number of individuals is something so incomprehensible that we just accept and move on. Given this reality, the relevance and importance of Hamid's recognition of the refugee crisis, and an attempt to humanize refugees through his novel which reminds us of the gravity of each refugee's life through fiction, is irrefutable. *Exit West* follows the story of Nadia and Saeed, a couple forced to leave their homeland due to escalating acts of war involving violent loss, coping, and love. Hamid takes readers on a journey which gives them an idea of what refugees endure and what their daily acts of survival might be. Introduced as modern subjects, Nadia and Saeed watch as their world gradually changes, and readers follow the drastic and turbulent events that occur to and around them. Representing the modern-day refugee, Nadia and Saeed are forced to "exit" their war-torn and unnamed homeland after the catastrophic deaths of their family members and are thrown into refugee spaces, first in Mykonos, then London, before they part ways in Marin County, California. *Exit West* humanizes Nadia and Saeed through events resembling ongoing experiences of hundreds of millions of refugees in the U.S. and beyond.

Since the release of *Exit West*, scholars inside and outside the U.S. have praised the novel for its remarkable depictions of refugeehood.¹ In fact, a majority of scholarly articles on this novel are international publications from countries including India, the United Kingdom,

Switzerland, and Germany, which indicates how Hamid's treatment of the global refugee crisis has resonated in particular parts of the world. Because the novel is of interest to scholars in the U.K. and India, it indicates the unsevered histories of the former British Empire, tied to Hamid's home country, Pakistan, which was long under its rule until the 1947 Partition of India. Scholarly attention in countries like Germany and Switzerland suggest similar concerns in other parts of Europe with increased and increasing populations of displaced peoples. As of 2016, the potential costs of hosting refugees, in one study, was estimated at "twenty billion euros, [which is] much more than originally estimated" (Parekh xviii).² Such global reach in scholarly attention of the novel in these European countries affected by this refugee crisis, I would argue, attests to the novel's successful portrayal of refugee protagonists who are humanized as modern subjects through Hamid's novel, no longer reduced to a number which is limited in representing refugeehood as a graspable reality.

Acknowledging the innovative structure of the novel – with Nadia and Saeed's central story interspersed with a shorter, loosely-connected vignette in each chapter except for the final chapter – this thesis addresses the way Hamid creates a "bildungsroman"³ modern genre of the novel to provide a representation of the interiority and humanization of refugees in the digital age. *Exit West* frames an inevitable future of precarity for an ever-increasing population shaped by the continued growth of migration and displacement of refugees. Even though the book centralizes the modern subject of Nadia and Saeed, Hamid's use of vignettes and its multiple locations worldwide (as he chooses to explore U.S. settings like San Diego and Palo Alto, but also such global settings as Sydney, Amsterdam, Tokyo, Dubai, Vienna, Tijuana, Rio de Janeiro, and Marrakesh), invites readers to think about the current refugee crisis in the longer historical context of pre-existing orientalist and imperialist trajectories. To prepare for a future in which

the refugee population keeps mounting, it is vital to empathize with Hamid's characters to prompt readers to look into the state of legislation around immigration and refugees. As Yogita Goyal urges us to consider, literary representations may be deeply tied to social transformations necessary in the contemporary world: "As we live through a moment of massive and widening economic inequality, amid closing borders, ecological devastation, and a retrenching of unexamined extreme nationalisms and racisms, how might our literary canons transform ... these events" (242)? Indeed, given the range of concerns around the global refugee crisis that drives Goyal's question, literary representations like *Exit West*, and its incorporation into "the literary canon," is salient. Cultivating readers' empathy with refugee protagonists, the driving force of Hamid's novel, helps his readers feel the urgency of the global refugee crisis.

In particular, this thesis argues that Hamid's depiction of the way that modern technology shapes the world, as seen in his frequent usage of cellphones, television, drones, and news articles, is key to humanizing refugee protagonists. The protagonists' access to technology is more than a mere marker of their lives being similar to the readers of the novel, most effectively by recognizing the limitations, as well as new possibilities, of technological advances. The novel places an emphasis on the fleeting nature in the sense of connectedness created by technology despite physical separation of bodies in the 21st century. The novel provides an alternative to the readily available depictions of refugee experiences without agency, which results in the minimizing of refugee subjects into refugee bodies. The refugee protagonists' access to technology is as important as Hamid's portrayal of them as users of technology; the sense of alienation and disconnect felt by the protagonists, a recurring motif in the novel, explains the protagonist's craving for virtual connections to the outside world.

Exit West augments this fleeting sense of connection in a border-closed world through the

use of magical realism, introducing a “door” which leads the protagonists to move through multiple refugee spaces. The use of the magical door serves to showcase, not the details of a refugee character’s temporary travel from one place to another, but the ever-growing and permanent displaced people around the world itself. Each migrant’s movement is portrayed through the magical door, with each refugee character stepping through the door like Nadia and Saeed’s, sharing traumatic events of being smuggled through the doors and ending up in an unknown state of living which awaits on the other side each time. Hamid is able to render the protagonists’ experience as being equivalent to the constant refugee relocation through spaces of displacement everywhere, each defined by unbearable living conditions as well as the lack of basic human necessities and rights, without compromising their humanity. Hamid uses technology as a mechanism of the modern condition when allowing his characters to communicate with loved ones and connect with the outside world but strips them of their humanity when depicting them in the fictional form of media, naturally reflecting on modernity. Hamid both contradicts and affirms his beliefs that technology can benefit and alienate society in the modern world, especially with its rapid advancements.

This thesis aims to discuss *Exit West* as a bildungsroman novel by providing commentary on Hamid’s protagonists as the cathartic representation of refugees living in the dehumanized digital age. The thesis will first reflect on *Exit West*’s settings and characters as ordinary human beings who are forced into refugeehood, prompting empathy to all who read it. Throughout the first section titled “Humanization of Hamid’s Characters,” I will also reflect on the structure of Hamid’s novel, with the vignettes that play one of the largest parts within the novel. In the second section titled “The Role of Technology in Representing the Modern Subject,” I will discuss how the novel invites the reader to reflect on the effects of technology on displaced

people and society by focusing on Hamid's characters and digital spaces. Ultimately, the thesis aims to shed light on Hamid's work as a way of displaying the refugee protagonists as modern subjects, by exploring how the novel resists dehumanized depictions of refugee subjects and their journey through multimodal spaces of modernity.

II. Humanization of Hamid's Characters

The use of two protagonists in *Exit West* is the most obvious aspect of the novel that comes to humanize the modern-day refugee. The structure of *Exit West* plunges readers into both Nadia and Saeed's minds with ease and creates an unstoppable tension, allowing readers to understand the thoughts and feelings Hamid's characters experience. Hamid's novel also mimetically reproduces the fragmented nature of modern life in the formatting of the narration, with its noticeably drastic spacing often indicating the compressed passage of time, creating a fragmented sense of the characters' experiences rather than a continuum throughout all chapters. Each chapter (except the final chapter) features between five and twelve line breaks, using the spaces between sections to signify the passing of time, simultaneously creating the divide between the vignettes and the main story with Nadia and Saeed, and solidifying the unconventional structure and unique form of storytelling within literature. Adding these spaces contribute to the novel's general sense of fragmentation, with its sporadic insertions of unconventional forms of ellipses in printed copies. In the digital version of the novel, these spacings are even augmented and further emphasized with the use of three dots between every paragraph break of each chapter. This further heightens the disjointedness between both storylines, pulling the reader out of multiple realities around the world by representing fragmentation as a form of displacement. Elizabeth Rodriguez-Fielder reads this resistance to linearity as "stowaway aesthetics," which she defines as "both a method of storytelling ... and an aesthetic in contemporary fiction about migration that draws attention to what is hidden or unsaid in narratives about refugees" (333). The term stowaway itself is defined as something secretive or hidden that can be looked at through the representation of the refugee being displaced,

victimized, and unknown to many. It is Hamid who steps away from the figure of the victimized refugee and, instead, helps readers question their knowledge about the migrant. Hamid contributes to Fielder's concept of stowaway aesthetics as he elucidates the state of refugeehood from the past and present, and changes for the future.

Prominent factors of *Exit West* that make the novel effective as a refugee novel are its form and structure. Throughout the course of each chapter, Hamid employs a third-person omniscient narrator, providing readers with constant feedback on the character's thoughts, actions, and emotions. The novel is not strange in incorporating an omniscient narrator. It is through this narrator that we come to learn that Nadia and Saeed's home country will inevitably be no longer at peace and destined to be "openly at war" from the very opening lines of the novel (Hamid 3). The omniscience of Hamid's narrator, compared to the convention of first-person narrators, serves to shape the mind of the reader by staying a step ahead of his characters. By far, the defining aspect of this novel is its reliance on two protagonists. Having two central characters is not, in fact, entirely new in U.S. literary history, but this narrative choice carries a particular resonance. While there have been novels with two central characters in U.S. literature such as *The Scarlet Letter*, at times, American novels with two protagonists have also been problematic. As Toni Morrison argued in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), U.S. writers have used more than one protagonist in narrative fiction with a specific role of racialization.⁴ In a concept she coined as Africanism, she explains that U.S. literary works have generally relied on a racialized presence of characters which create the whiteness of the central character in a given work, so that "denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings, that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (Morrison 7). As a novel with two central characters, for example,

Morrison points to Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). The title itself embodies this dynamic, with the unnamed slave in the title featured prominently alongside the slave owner/mistress, Sapphira. The "slave girl," Nancy, is "othered" and shadowed by the erasure of her individuality along with her name, which brings centrality (and whiteness) to Sapphira's character. Morrison argues that such Africanist presence of the forgotten or marginalized figures has traditionally been used as a way to drive a plot or narrative forward in U.S. fiction; this concept points to the way in which having two characters has simply been another form to construct the individuality of a white character, relying on the dehumanization of Black characters.⁵ In Hamid's case, he builds a story centering two protagonists in a romantic relationship rather than a master-slave relationship, shaping both of these two central characters as humanized modern subjects. While this may not relate to Morrison's racialization of characters, it is still important to identify the equal subjectivities of these characters that Hamid humanizes through their connection. Nadia and Saeed retain their respective individualism throughout the novel, each carrying distinct experiences of loss and mourning, portrayed as individual beings bound through also differentiated feelings of attraction to one another.

Nadia and Saeed are introduced as characters with modern subjectivity before they assume refugeehood. As their first meeting indicates in the opening of the novel, in a business class, Nadia and Saeed's characters are born into lives of relative privilege and stability before being forced into refugee spaces. Saeed's parents "had chosen respectable professions," as his mother is a schoolteacher and his father a university professor (Hamid 10). They lived in a home with "the sort of view that might command a slight premium," where the family would stargaze on their home balcony with a telescope that is described as "dark and sleek" (14). Saeed's father questions his profession after many years, but still has the privilege to live a comfortable life and

ponder whether he made the mistake of not “sending Saeed abroad” for school (52). Moreover, Nadia first appears to readers as a feminist character, with a full-time job affording the money, motivations, and confidence to live alone in a prominently religious Muslim country. She is a unique character whose existence calls attention to girls who are otherwise forced to follow gendered cultural traditions for the sake of their families. Nadia’s character is stubborn from the start, as we learn she doesn’t care for others’ opinions even after being called “a whore,” only wears a black robe “so that men don’t fuck with [her],” and orders hallucinogens (“shrooms”) to her apartment (42, 17, 43). Here, Nadia has a feminist presence as a character who will not change even for her culture, let alone a man. Her actions are a representation of how she navigates the world as a free spirit who embraces change. She uses her cultural background to live an autonomous life, representing cultural identity as malleable. Hamid presents two protagonists who come from a stable, privileged platform in a country drowning in poverty to represent its transcendence.

Through these two main characters, Hamid displays refugee living as something that can occur to anyone, anywhere, thus offering a form of empathy and relatability when representing refugeehood to the reader. When this platform of privilege is stripped, with the shuttering of their workplace along with the traumatic deaths of Nadia’s cousin and Saeed’s mother, they still fight for their chance to survive. Knowing one has lost everything, especially those who refugees may share trauma with, hope and identity ceases to exist, or is difficult to recollect, after such traumatic events. The narrative invites readers to empathize with protagonists who come to lose everything, eventually even each other as the novel progresses. It is through the striking traumatic events of family deaths, separation, war, and loss of stability which drives a cathartic voice that is echoed throughout the pages of the novel. The novel even relies on the presumed

straightness of the two characters in sexual orientation for the most part, as a source of relatability, and later through queerness as Nadia eventually gravitates toward female characters. Nadia's resistance to gendered confines of her culture shifts to show who she truly is as a queer character towards the end of the novel; readers learn she settles down with a woman after escaping from the United Kingdom to California, parting ways with Saeed. Through her forms of transportation of owning "a black motorcycle" (Hamid 5), and further attributes of resistance towards her families and cultures ignorance of her desires, shows readers moments of masculinity in her actions. She moves on to live on her own even if she is to lose those she loves. This further broadens the scope of readership who might do well to think about their own precarity and connections to Hamid's characters.

The status of Nadia and Saeed's characters as modern subjects are reinforced through Hamid's short vignettes between chapters that extend his concerns on the global refugee crisis. These vignettes actually serve multiple functions. Most obviously, the brevity of the vignettes in each chapter come to reinforce the central story between Nadia and Saeed, deftly avoiding the problem of racialization Morrison problematized in *Playing in the Dark*. The vignettes locate different individuals throughout the world and their decisions and views on the doors that magically surface everywhere. Here, Hamid uses the concept of magical realism through doors to represent refugee migration and the complexities of crossing through them, described by scholar Steve Almquist as "doors that compress time and space, thereby imbuing the characters' experiences with a simultaneity that both normalizes (nobody seems troubled by the doors) and destabilizes (readers must confront their fantastical nature) the migrant experience" (139), and by Arjun Appadurai as "interesting not only as a literary genre but also as a representation of how the world appears to some people who live in it" (58). The doors are a way for Hamid to jump to

the larger aspects of a migrant's life, focusing on their permanent situations and settlements rather than the temporary travels. Hamid looks at the doors as "emotionally true to our current technological reality ... technology works a bit like magic [because it] is obliterating geographic distance. And so, the doors in a way give life to that" (Sadaf 4). The vignettes further function as a point of contrast to the main storyline with Nadia and Saeed.

The ultimate emphasis of Hamid's last three vignettes is the interconnectedness through the theme of gender as a central dynamic. The fifth vignette is set in Amsterdam, a culturally accepting city known for its progressiveness, particularly in protecting equality of all genders and sexualities. Hamid explores a budding romantic relationship between two elderly men that is witnessed by a female photographer momentarily bound to them by circumstance: "a witness to their very first kiss, which she captured, without expecting to, through the lens of her camera, and then deleted, later that night, in a gesture of uncharacteristic sentimentality and respect" (Hamid 176). This vignette displays love and connectivity between all genders and the distance represented between people in love that can be seized due to immigration laws. The woman plays an essential part in displaying empathy in a positive light, in that she is the cathartic figure representing the audience's reaction to the loving couple. The woman creates a beautifully tragic moment when she decides to delete the image of this "first kiss" because, the moment the two men decided to explore the connection between them, they created their own magic of love and desire, despite the use or thought of the doors.

This connects to the final two vignettes, ultimately placing an emphasis on the notion of every person being a "migrant through time" (209); even when individuals do not move in physical space, the world around them does keep changing and displacements can happen. In these two final vignettes, readers are introduced to two different women: one who has never

moved a day in her life (doors are not a part of this vignette; only the commentary of migration) and the other, who recognized the existence of the doors but never cared to use them. Both women are considered to be “migrant[s] through time” because they both have lived through the many changes in and around them without physically moving from their homes. Hamid brings a sense of unity, not only between the characters themselves, but also between these characters and the readers. Like these characters, even if a reader may have never experienced moving a day in their life, they can still connect with Hamid’s characters in seeing the world that has changed around them.

Collectively, the vignettes represent gender in an interesting light because the women in the vignettes barely travel through the doors. It seems Hamid represents them as homebodies – tied to one place. Only the Filipino girls, in the second vignette, are described as naïve, traveling through, and represented as damsels when followed by a suspicious man “fingering the metal in his pocket,” alluding to a weapon he may use (Hamid 31). Men are mostly described as the travelers and main characters of these stories. Even though Hamid does a phenomenal job breaking gender roles between Nadia and Saeed’s relationship, he incorporates a very realistic representation of gender roles within the vignettes. The women are portrayed as afraid, closed off, and naïve, while the men are daring, inquisitive, and interested. At times challenging heterosexual desires yet at times staying within gender conformity, the vignettes become the backdrop against which the central narrative around Nadia and Saeed comes to challenge gender norms and sexual orientation effectively in this refugee narrative.

It is important that the vignettes end with, and question, a portrayal of female characters who are portrayed as “the Other,” or as incurious and keep to themselves, while the men are represented as curious and driven. One of the most compelling arguments made by Edward Said

is the gendering of the colonized in Orientalism. Much of the historical references Said employs in his writing are mythic female figures, such as “Cleopatra, Salome, and Isis” (180), from which arise the image of the “feminine Orient” (220) throughout time. The East’s supposed “eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability” has rendered itself vulnerable to the West’s representation of it, through the depiction of gender (Said 206). In Robert Dale Parker’s words, “colonialism often feminizes the colonized, partly in an effort to masculine itself” (308). Historically, because women have always been represented as the weaker sex, it can be seen from Said’s point of view as the female body being the East because “women [are] supposedly irrational, emotional, promiscuous, seductive, dishonest, lazy,” and the masculine representing the West because “men [are] supposedly rational, dependable, hardworking, and strong,” everything a woman is not (Parker 308). *Exit West* ends by recasting the discourse of power through gender and its representation which had functioned as an indispensable part of Orientalism. This can be seen throughout *Exit West* because the vignettes illustrate migrant women as “the Other.” They are incurious and keep to themselves, while the men are represented as curious and driven.

Pointing out the success of the novel, which relies on these vignettes to effectively tell this story about refugees, is not particular to Nadia and Saeed’s country, but can apply to civilians residing in any number of cities in Muslim-dominant nations. Given the many religious and cultural imagery, the city where Nadia and Saeed initially meet approximates Hamid’s own home city of Lahore, Pakistan. Moreover, Hamid leaves the city unnamed, possibly as “a way of universalizing the predicament of refugees” (Mir 15), and readers come to understand the depictions of overwhelming violence, political strife, and warfare, to be applicable to any number of cities in Muslim-dominant nations where the state of refugee living can fluctuate and

can also “induce policies that narrow democratic choice by quarantining ethnic or political minorities, or alternatively by facilitating the marginalization of certain political factions” (Huq 4). Rather than particularizing the central narrative revolving around Nadia and Saeed, the novel provides a more general commentary on the powerful and often formerly imperialist countries and their hegemonic capabilities to control smaller and weaker nations. De-categorization, as seen in this universalizing gesture, is central to addressing legacies of earlier imperialisms, as seen in Khaled Mostafa Karam’s discussion of Franz Fanon’s theory of hegemony within society: “The categorical mentality internalized—as a result of colonial hegemony—in both the mind of the colonizer and the colonized needs to be decolonized... decolonization entails de-categorization which means re-examining the fixed racial, ethnic and national categories and their in-between boundaries, reinforced by the colonial ideology” (309). By giving the protagonists agency, *Exit West* can be seen as a novel which counters such conditioning of a pervasive mindset of the East as predetermined and impossible to undo. From the opening pages of the novel, Hamid prepares the reader for an inevitable danger waiting to suddenly happen in Nadia and Saeed’s city which appears to be stable: “In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war [...] 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” (3-4). Hamid represents a world that reflects on reality and explains that life goes on even during a war. He solidifies the nature of the failing economy and excessive violence spreading throughout the city to set the scene of what’s to come. He creates a very realistic setting and scenario of countries at the brink of war. Hamid displays to readers the never-ending change and conflict that is arising in many countries that are not theirs, building up the importance of borders, safety, and the need for escape.

In contrast to the universalizing and expansive nature of Nadia and Saeed's narrative by not assigning the particularity of their city, the vignettes reduce the events in a normally powerful nation. The novel is not simply interested in this reversal, also showing through the vignettes, that individuals in a formerly imperialist nation do not always feel empowered in their everyday life. For example, in the fourth vignette about "an accountant [living] in Kentish Town who had been on the verge of taking his own life" (129). This is the first of the three vignettes that showcases a character's decision to walk through the magical door, while the others explain the aftermath of crossing them. In this case, the accountant wishes to escape his dreadful life, but the doors provide an alternative that does not end in death. Even though we sympathize with this man, we understand that he is struggling. Nonetheless, he is given the various choices of traveling back and forth through the doors which highlights the fact that, Nadia and Saeed, by contrast, do not have such luxury in their forced survival. While the accountant feels relieved that "he felt something for a change," and does not experience fear when encountering the door (Hamid 131), for example, Nadia and Saeed are "taken by the undertow of compulsory migration and are dragged, both willingly and unwillingly into the throes of global migration" (Elakkiya 441). Through this character, Hamid demonstrates an opportunity to a man with citizenship to his country, which allows him to make a swift and easy decision that will not affect his day-to-day life; while cultured (albeit racialized) migrants/refugees, like Nadia and Saeed, struggle to do the same thing because of discrimination, stereotyping, and stigmatization of the refugee. It is in this very conflict, however, that his refugee characters obtain representation of an interiority not generally afforded to those deemed "the Other." Even if Nadia and Saeed are forced to experience an undesired migration, his protagonists are portrayed as capable beings making decisions for themselves, culminating in their decision to part ways to pursue futures of their

choosing.

Even after this escape that is successfully achieved, what is the refugee left facing? Hamid subtly incorporates the refugee spaces that Nadia and Saeed encounter vividly throughout chapters, to showcase the unbearable living conditions. While still in their hometown, Nadia and Saeed “had to be careful ... not to run over an outstretched arm or leg” when walking outside because “refugees had occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents ... between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the boundary walls of houses, sleeping rough on sidewalks and in the margins of streets” (Hamid 26-27). Hamid displays the painful truth about the living conditions of refugees who run from their homelands trying to start a new life and find safety, only to be faced with further suffering and displacement. Through the use of Nadia and Saeed’s accounts, the refugee is depicted as facing desperate and extreme circumstances of daily survival and lack of basic necessities. Readers come to empathize with the displaced and, soon after, the protagonists, as they survive such perilous and trying times. Nasia Anam’s “Encampment as Colonization: Theorizing the Representation of Refugee Spaces,” theorizes a concept known as “stuckness” which she claims occurs as “access to mobility is entirely decoupled from the subject position of the migrant [and] yet when the encampment or tent city takes on the qualities of a stable community, resembling a functioning city...it is promptly destroyed by the hegemonic state denying legitimacy and citizenship to asylum-seeking migrants” (407). Migrants must work with the resources they have to sustain themselves and survive the current circumstances they are forced into. Refugees all around the world who are seeking asylum are forced to become “migrants without mobility,” having no choice but to take up spaces on roads, city corners, and alleys for survival (Anam 407). The concept of “stuckness” has also been defined in more legal terms as the “protracted refugee situation,” described as refugees finding

themselves in “a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and social, psychological and essential needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile. A refugee in this situation is often unable to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance” (Ghufran 118). This is Hamid’s way of prominently featuring the stability and variability of our own world, and he “encourages readers to consider anthropogenic climate change and resource depletion as root causes of forced mobility” (Maczyńska 1089). His brief narration of the journey Nadia and Saeed undergo, from experiencing these issues in their home country, to then becoming the refugees they would walk past on the street, demonstrates the ever-changing social and political climate of our world. Whether it be through war or globalization, Hamid represents the innocence and humanization of his characters through acts of love, protection, and, in the end, survival.

Though Nadia and Saeed are forced into migrating through the magical doors “to [find] a way out of ... war zone[s]” and seek refuge in other countries, they are still led into “another violent place” (Geidel and Stuelke 106). Through the overcrowded refugee encampments in Greece, to the abandoned and redlined housing in London which also quickly becomes filled up, Nadia and Saeed are forced into trying to build a life for themselves with the limited resources they have and are destined to be viewed as “the Other.” Nadia and Saeed step into their new living space in London, “a bedroom with a view of the night sky” (Hamid 121). They stayed in this bedroom for a while as a comfortable and private space for themselves. However, as militants from London bombed these areas and forced many refugees into encampments, Nadia and Saeed chose to move to “the worker camps, laboring away” (169). Readers come to learn that these jobs were a way to keep refugees busy in building their own homes but even these “properties they did not own under the law” (170). The “labor was long and rigorous” which

gave Nadia and Saeed “blisters [that] had given way to calluses” (171). Hamid’s novel continues to narrate the characters’ transition from safety and citizenship to what continues to be fraught with danger and alienation, obtaining only what Caroline Koegler calls “performative citizenship,” in which they join other refugees performing “acts of citizenship, challenging some of citizenship’s legal pillars, enforcements and effects” (48). Koegler explains that refugees are forced to perform the acts of a citizen in hopes of gaining citizenship in the future through hard labor, making them “earn their keep and invest their own labour into obtaining more comfortable forms of dwelling” (55). As Nadia and Saeed migrate once again to hopefully gain a comfortable living space where they can find a new environment to fix their strained relationship, they instead end up parting ways, most likely because of the acts of violence and instability of life in the United Kingdom and its inescapable system.

It is Hamid’s sixth vignette, set in Vienna, Austria, which frames such devastating migrations for Nadia and Saeed as one example of mass displacement within the global refugee crisis, similarly embodying a legacy of imperialisms which shapes the present shared with the novel’s audience. This vignette anchors the novel in its discussions of preexisting historical events which causes instances of mass displacement in the present. In this specific vignette, Hamid blurs the lines between both stories a bit as he allows his characters to encounter one another as they walk among crowds leading into the young woman’s story, providing a seamless transition between that of Nadia and Saeed to the anonymous individual in this vignette. We follow a young woman who is commuting to a protest because “militants from Saeed and Nadia’s country had crossed over to Vienna [...] and the city had witnessed massacres in the streets, the militants shooting unarmed people and then disappearing” (Hamid 109). The woman is a supporter and protector of refugees who “planned to join a human cordon to separate the two

sides, or rather to shield the migrants” from those trying to kill them (109-110). The woman advocates for peace, overcoming threats posed by violence and fighting on the side of human compassion. The militants, on the other hand, represent those who are used by hegemonic nations for control, inciting fear and bigotry to keep their standing control and power over innocent civilians. Here, Hamid’s vignette draws from the 1947 Partition of India wherein British India (as it once was) was divided into what would soon later become two sovereign nations, India and Pakistan. This is a historical event responsible for the mass displacement and migration of “several millions of people across the borders of the two states and [has been] characterized as one of the largest periods of violence, murder, and communal hatred” (Jayagopalan 45). The partition created a divide within the people of these newly-independent nations, which Hamid points to through the chaos between the “south and east of Vienna” (111). Hamid’s representation of the partition and independence of India is more relevant than ever to discuss in the context of other migrations around the globe, alongside the mass displacement which includes Nadia and Saeed.

It is crucial to look at past events tied to the ethnic cleansing of cultures, as in the case of India, to look towards a shared global future. It is worth pointing out that Edward Said’s classic formulation of Orientalism goes back even further in history, constantly touching on the wars between Britain and France over India – Britain inevitably takes over India, creating British India. This very competition among imperialisms presupposes a perceived right of empires to gain control over places they see fit to colonize, a mindset which is still operative in the 1947 Partition of India and the producing refugee population to follow. While Said discusses the constant changes within the culture and history that was in the process of being stripped by Britain, “making possible there a real social revolution,” to “introduce into this system by

English colonial interference, rapacity, and outright cruelty [...] to the sufferings of Orientals while their society is being violently transformed with the historical necessity of these transformations” (153).⁶ This connection between the events of the Partition and the current global refugee crisis moves beyond earlier narrative representations such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), which includes a short story entitled “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine.” In that short story, Lahiri introduces readers to Lilia, a young girl who is reflecting on her childhood family dinners with Mr. Pirzada, a man “bearing confections and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family” (20), trying to make sense of his background coming from Bangladesh (East Pakistan which sought independence from Pakistan), during the height of the 1947 Partition. Hamid’s *Exit West* is not simply among the latest iteration of literary representation of the 1947 Partition, but also one which addresses the shaping of the continued mass displacement of people in our present moment as represented in the narrative around Nadia and Saeed. Unlike Lahiri’s Lilia, who herself remains unscathed by the events of Partition, Nadia and Saeed’s continued efforts to survive bring readers closer to the ramifications of European imperialisms spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The wide scope of *Exit West* in terms of history and global purview from the point of view of those who are seen as lacking in agency is a new development in Hamid’s writing. Earlier in his career, Hamid subtly incorporated moments of history to showcase the direct and indirect impacts of migration through a character given much more agency and control over his life decisions. In his 2007 novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid tells the story of a character whose life drastically changes with the attack on the World Trade Center, described as “a Pakistani man Changeez – who spent a lengthy period in America perfecting the fundamentals of business only to be ostracized following the events of 9/11” (Carter 9). *Exit West* moves

beyond *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, mostly focusing on the “retaliatory” racist attack targeting Muslim Americans within the U.S. after the 9-11 attacks, belying the nation’s purported embracing and acceptance of diverse cultures, through a discourse on the stereotyping, microaggressions, and displacement of Changez’s character: “[A]t least in America, he was constantly being treated as if he were a threat and constantly had to reassure others that he wasn’t. A constant, bantering performance of innocence ... is the price of toiling among the suspect classes” (Huq 10-11). Hamid’s earlier novel focused on the story of a highly successful elite transnational subject with an Ivy-league education, suddenly treated with suspicion when entering post 9-11 U.S. *Exit West* is structurally similar in terms of sudden transformation of the central characters’ lives, yet Hamid also reflects on a history left out of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The mass displacement of people owing to constant wars since 1947, first in the struggle for East Pakistan’s sovereignty immediately after the Partition of India and later due to skirmishes between Pakistan and India over the land of Kashmir and highlights the ongoing and continuous conflict in 2010s as Hamid drafted *Exit West* (Sarwar 187). The war over Kashmir has caused the deaths of “dozens and displaced thousands of civilians” from counterattacks being exchanged after the signing of ceasefires (“Conflicts Between India and Pakistan”). As a pressing issue, *Exit West* questions the immigration process and laws that were set in place for those who are displaced by armed conflict, trying to flee the country like its protagonists. As Beena Sarwar explains, the precarity of such refugees are dire: “The visa, travel and trade constraints that exist between the countries of South Asia make it the world's least connected region. Political insurgencies, fragile democratic institutions, fundamentalism, terrorism and ethnic conflicts all threaten regional peace and prosperity” (Sarwar 185). These constraints have not allowed civilians caught in the middle of the war to flee, leaving them extremely vulnerable

and trying simply to survive, each waking day. The continuous growth of the refugee crisis and lack of care from nations requires serious engagement moving forward. *Exit West* not only opens up a new way for refugees to be recognized as modern subjects held in distress shaped by the ever-changing structures of politics, democracy, and warfare, but also the novel is thus structurally designed to center Nadia and Saeed's refugeehood through the use of vignettes.

III. The Role of Technology in Representing the Modern Subject

The establishment of Nadia and Saeed as modern subjects towards the beginning of *Exit West* relies heavily on their relationship to modern technology. There is beauty in the way Hamid talks about his protagonist's separate existences. As he introduces Nadia and Saeed, readers might notice key differences between these characters in their respective relationship to cyberspace. Saeed, who "still lived at home with his parents," appreciates his culture and religion, and is fascinated with astronomy and "stargazing" (Hamid 15). This allows him to live free of his phone, which is perceived as a distraction and limits his usage. "In contrast to Saeed," the narrator tells us, Nadia saw "no need to limit her phone" (41). Social media is portrayed as an unlimited outlet for Nadia's curiosity, and she spends her time "explor[ing] the terrain of social media" or "order[ing] shrooms" (Hamid 41). While Saeed feels that allowing himself "the hour each evening" to browse the internet, forcing himself to "electronically lock away his browser ... until the following day" (40), Nadia relies on endless escapism afforded by her cellphone because "it kept her company on long evenings" (41). The unlimited use of her phone becomes more of a vice to escape from her loneliness because she is "present without presence" (40), a behavior which Lillian Naydan describes as "inhibit[ing] engagement in present-day human relationships" (439). Nadia, a character who likes to be "present without presence," serves as commentary on the overreliance on technology; the idea of being physically present but distracted through the use of devices – in a way, described as being in two separate worlds at the same time – is notable because it resists conflation with Saeed. The very recognition of these central characters as not interchangeable is articulated through their use of modern technology.

In the first half of the novel, technology also plays an important role in shaping the relatively stable and thereby privileged life that Nadia and Saeed enjoy. Still in their homeland, Nadia and Saeed's country experienced the digitization of a world that slowly deteriorates and becomes a harbinger of destruction. Technology remains important as the novel progresses, as it follows the gradual deterioration of technological infrastructures to demonstrate the eroding sense of normality and stability in their everyday life. Nadia and Saeed both work desk jobs that revolve around the use of technology, access to which is lost as the novel progresses. Television is also initially relied upon at work in providing news updates of the growing military conflict which will transform the characters' lives. At first, Nadia is seen with her colleagues spending much of a particular day "staring at the television" because "a group of militants [were] taking over the city's stock exchange" (Hamid 43), which later progresses into the militants "taking over and holding territor[ies] throughout the city [...] sometimes entire neighborhoods" (51). When Nadia and Saeed experience the breakdown of technology, no longer able to communicate with each other through their devices, the stripping away of communication comes to signal a drastic change. After a curfew had been "duly imposed," Nadia and Saeed barely have a chance to see each other, but they use their phones to keep in touch (51). Suddenly, "one day the signal to every mobile phone in the city simply vanished [...] Internet connectivity was suspended" and it was said on the television and radio that it was "a temporary antiterrorism measure" (57). The technology they relied on to keep in touch was now disconnected, especially as a tool for Nadia to escape from reality. With no forms of communication and "the day after their phone signals died," Saeed would try to make calls through his "office landline" but even then, the use of technology was impossible (62). This desperate need for connectivity was now impractical. Looking at Hamid's concept of "present without presence," it allows members of society to have

the choice to disconnect and reconnect at will. This is not a privilege that is openly accessible to migrants in situations like Nadia and Saeed's.

However, technology is also what connects Nadia and Saeed throughout a substantial part of the book and to their family and life back home. Access to technology and the internet is a necessary part of everyday life but also what consumes and corrupts society regularly. For Hamid, he believes technological development should never be greater than or exceed our own philosophies and understandings of it. He portrays technology as harmful for most of the novel through many of his characters' interactions with it. At first Nadia and Saeed are "always in possession of their phones" and yearned to learn about each other's "separate existence" and only a "few waking hours would pass without contact between them, and they found themselves in those early days of their romance growing hungry" (Hamid 40-41). However, as the book progresses, we see them using technology as a source to ignore each other. They "sat next to each other" in a tent in Greece and "caught up on the news, the tumult in the world" (Hamid 108). Even though technology allows migrants to connect to their homes and places from a distance, it also gives them an excuse to avoid one another, only driving them further apart, building an invisible boundary between them.

Hamid also represents technological advancements as a danger to society through his depiction of the "flying robots high above" (88), "three exterior surveillance feeds" (91), and "small quadcopter drones" (92). While Hamid does explain that technology can bring people together, he mostly affirms its perils, showing that it can sometimes put people in touch with others who will bring them harm. He gives an example of this dynamic through a family fleeing the country in chapter four: They are "seen blinking in the sterile artificial light ... picked up again by a second camera" and "visible in the camera feeds of various tourists' selfie-taking

mobile phones ... and then the minute ended and they were intercepted” (Hamid 91-93). Here, technology connects individuals to the outside world in an inopportune way. When the family becomes a part of the surveillance cameras, they become a target to those who want to restrict them from relocation and send them back to wherever they came from, further solidifying Hamid’s presentation of the dehumanization of the refugee through digital spaces.

When the war starts to become more serious in the unknown country, Hamid indirectly characterizes the news through Saeed’s mother as “the local press and foreign media exaggerating the danger” (52). When difficult situations arise, like the internet and power cut-off, and Saeed and Nadia finally travel to Greece, they “tried to call” and “connect with people via chat applications and social media” (108) but were having trouble, especially since they had to buy “electric power and local numbers for their phones” (107). Here, access to technology acts as yet another obstacle in the path of Nadia and Saeed as refugees. Nadia also recollects the brutality she has already experienced when seeing more violence portrayed in the news: “The fury of those nativists advocating wholesale slaughter was what struck Nadia most...because it seemed so familiar, so much like the fury of the militants in her own city” (159). After Nadia and Saeed flee, not only from their country but also Greece, and are settling into the United Kingdom, audiences see fear in Nadia’s character during the raids in London:

[Nadia] was startled, and wondered how this could be, how she could both read this news and be this news, and how the newspaper could have published this image... The news 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 was also moving apart. (157-158)

Nadia’s character here encourages readers to consider the state of a refugee existence and image.

It represents Nadia's character through an ontological doubleness where she wonders about being in the news but also having her own subjectivity in real life. This feeling that she only left one warzone to be in another, which highlights the state of constant conflict and unrest that is always surrounding refugees. This also allows Hamid to "exploit fiction's capacity to elicit empathy and identification to imagine a better world" through Nadia's contemplation (Nguyen). Hamid represents the news as a source that is "fracturing" and "pulling away" to describe its harmful effects on the views of migrants and refugees by stripping their humanity. It is creating a negative and harmful image of the refugee for those living in the countries and cities that refugees migrate to.

Critics and scholars have recognized the centrality of technology in the portrayal of refugees. For example, Michael Perfect, sees how the use of technology is central to the "lack of empathy with refugees as one of the most significant problems of its contemporary moment" (191). While Timothy K. August, scholar and author of *The Refugee Aesthetic* (2021), sees the news as a form of alienation and showcases depictions of violence that inevitably come to represent the refugee's image as "cramped bodies, with faces filled with suffering, helplessness, and endurance" (29). This discussion of technology in the novel is a device that allows Hamid's readers to empathize for his characters which plays a part in coming to recognize the refugee as human. Technology being the very thing that minimizes the humanity of refugees is what Hamid uses in his novel as a literary representation of its power. As the omniscient narrator speaks for Nadia, they also speak to the audience to extend the message about the news and its releases.

Thus, *Exit West* considers:

[T]he ways in which capital, images, information, and misinformation are already transmitted across [...] networks, and the potential for those networks both to be

emancipatory and to exacerbate inequalities. [...] [I]t is important that the novel clearly attempts to make its readers empathize with its refugee protagonists, whilst also reminding them that their experiences of refugees are mediated by these actually-existing networks – and, indeed, that such networks are not particularly conducive to our recognizing the humanity of others. (Perfect 197-198)

Perfect emphasizes that Hamid tries to create a sense of empathy in a highly technologized world through the novel. He represents the news as having severed the tie between the empathy of the audience to the subject. The lack of reporting, misinformation or, in this case, simple lack of information, obstructs the refugee and their position in the world. How does an audience come to understand the lives of refugees when they cannot find the information necessary to empathize with them? It is this central element of the novel that Hamid strives for his readers to understand in our own world. As he shares, these events can occur to anyone, anywhere, and anytime.

Hamid represents both the viewer and subject of the news through Nadia's character. How the refugee is viewed and represented in the news is what creates the audience's notion and understanding of the asylum seeker. Hamid emphasizes the importance of being grateful for basic human rights, because "refugees are denied the legal status of being human, revealing that the existence of a right to have rights cannot be taken for granted" (Carter 2). As Nadia sits and reads the news, she realizes "the woman in the black robe reading the news on her phone was actually not her at all" (Hamid 157-158), displaying a disjuncture between how the refugee lives and is seen by audiences through popular media. All refugees are represented as interchangeable – specifically, "a person with multiple personalities [...] whose skin was dissolving as they swam in a soup full of other people whose skins were likewise dissolving" (Hamid 158), or as Perfect describes it, they are seen essentially as "a collection of body parts rather than as human

beings” (191). Hamid’s dialogue about the news is one of the most important themes of the novel not only for its impact on our current and future relations to refugees, but for the light it sheds on history. The representation of the refugee in America has been nothing but negative ever since the Vietnam War. In Timothy K. August’s refreshing work, *The Refugee Aesthetic*, he discusses the past, present, and future representations of the refugee image through media, writing, and other outlets. Like Edward Said, August considers how a particular group of individuals are narrated into history and politics through the power of nations. With his detailed discussion of the refugee through image-texts, August provides an uncommon and authentic interpretation of the refugee: “the refugee image was presented alongside images of violence [...] [and] transformed into symbols of war. [...] [R]efugee suffering and atrocity can create and/or extend the emotional and experiential gap between the viewer and the refugee by placing these refugees’ lived experiences in a different world” (34-35). These lifeless and suffering depictions, that further fetishize and exoticize the refugee, create a stigmatized understanding within multimodal spaces. The sense of muteness represented in the images of the refugee further perpetuates the notion of helplessness and pity.⁷ Writers like Hamid highlight refugee struggles and call out the power structures of different countries on the displacement of refugees living in fear and hopelessness.

Through technology Hamid displays both connection and disconnect, showcasing the barriers and division of people in the digital age. In “Digital Screens and National Divides in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*,” Liliana Naydan argues Hamid’s reasoning behind the constant use of technology:

The West never functions as the promised land that citizens of the East imagine it to be

because of the interplay of problems involving technology, violence, and forced migration. In the West, technology and violence sustain a connection to one another and produce an effect of being present without presence that in ways mirrors the one that exists in the East, suggesting that Hamid views the East and the West as similar and not as existing in the sort of binaristic opposition that twenty-first-century mass media aim to propagate and exploit. (Naydan 438)

It is fascinating to see the views of Edward Said and Mohsin Hamid when it comes to their interpretations of the East's and the West's developments. While Said believes that "the power of modern technology and intellectual will...[is] divided geographical[ly] into the East and West" (89), Naydan believes Hamid to view the East's and West's power of technology to be the same. Said's argument is highly based on the history and development of data in the West. While Hamid provides a modern interpretation of the world's views on the refugee, specifically, he interprets what it means to be an individual jumping between borders in hopes of survival.

In Said's classic *Orientalism*, even during a different historical moment of a predigital era, he warned society about the harmful advancements of technology and its long-term effects and views of the East by the West. He urges society to not be consumed by these technological advancements that will inevitably bring more harm than good to the world through, for example, its shaping of the news. Said asserts, "One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds...This is nowhere more true than in the ways by which the near East is grasped" (26). He discusses the representation of the Middle East and the overall collective news released about them that has impacted the image of the countries and its people. Said writing this in a predigital

era, shows that he could not have anticipated that representation could have proliferated in these fast-paced ways that our digital world allows. His argument about the way information is represented through mass media, constructs a more significant issue at hand in the representation of culture and ethnicities of those in the East. These disconnects create assumptions, stereotypes, and false views about many around the world. In Said's final chapter of *Orientalism*, he discusses U.S. impact in the shaping of the East through four different factors: "legitimacy and authority to ideas about modernization, progress, and culture [...] found in social sciences" (325), the transformation of Oriental studies from scholarly to political, "the myth of the arrested development of the Semites" (307) and embracing Orientalism as valid. While Said does touch on a lot of historical contexts of France and England, he also addresses the U.S. and its impact. America asserted aspects of social sciences to Oriental studies, which Said describes as "striking" because of the "avoidance of literature" (291). He even goes as far to say that any forms of writing about "the modern Near East" is never referenced in American literature and only a disruption to the "American awareness" (291); The East as a region and its people are "in short, dehumanized" and "conceptually emasculated, reduced to 'attitudes,' 'trends,' [and] statistics" (291). Reflecting on *Exit West*, Said's discussion here creates an image of America with strategic political and economic power to display peoples and countries the way that fits them best. This is concerning to see, primarily through the eyes of the novel. However, Hamid does a remarkable job in identifying this hegemonic power between countries and the impacts of politics on targeted bodies.

IV. Conclusion

Hamid draws from his transnational background and perspective when utilizing the dialogue and thoughts of characters, as well as the eleven short vignettes about seemingly unrelated characters from other countries experiencing or contemplating relocation. *Exit West* strongly connects to Hamid's own life experiences and cultural background growing up and becoming a transnational subject. Many writers incorporate their artistic traumas, life experiences, and beliefs into their work the same way "Hamid symbolically exposes his own artistic life in his fiction in reality [...] [and] does this by focusing on [his] non-fiction where his personal confessions can be said to be the most pronounced in contrast to his fiction where these are symbolic" (Madiou and Al-Khawaldeh 5). Hamid was born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, moved to the United States to pursue education, moved to London in his thirties, and settled back into his home country with his wife and children (Byline). The novel wields its power from the formidable author himself, because Hamid is a writer who comes from a similar culture and background as his characters. Nonetheless, to make an erroneous statement such as, "artistic trauma is more often than not disguised in a work ... This condition applies to the artist and their intimacies; the more the artist tries to hide their intimacies, the clearer these become in their work," is to unfairly characterize a majority of authors (Madiou and Al-Khawaldeh 9). Not all writers incorporate past trauma into their work, as every writer has their own journey. Hamid is himself not a refugee, and he has not experienced what his characters have. He is a transnational subject whose work provides visibility to those who have no voice, no human rights, and no platform to share their experiences with the world. Coined by Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* (1996), the term "transnational subject" is defined as a movement of individuals in

“diasporic public spheres” (147). Appadurai discusses another transnational writer, Salman Rushdie, whose “commoditized trajectory brought [his work] outside the safe haven of Western norms about artistic freedom and aesthetic rights into the space of religious rage and the authority of religious scholars in their own transnational spheres” (9). Rushdie, like many other transnational figures, is “increasingly willing to place high stakes on [his] sense of the boundaries between [his] art and the politics of public opinion” (Appadurai 53). Rushdie and Hamid both write as prominent transnational figures of their time to empower the voiceless and narrate the cultural dynamics of globalization.

Hamid sends messages to his readers about what is wrong with the world’s views on migrants; in his narrator’s view in *Exit West*, “We are all migrants through time” – everyone is a migrant, and whether you have traveled, moved, or lived in the same place, the world still changes around you (209). Hamid brings a sense of unity throughout the novel, not only to the characters, but also to his readers, arguing that migration is what our species does. He also represents stereotypes and views of refugees and refugee laws on different groups of communities and cultures in *Exit West*. When interviewed by *Berkeley News*, Hamid was asked what compelled him to tell the stories of Saeed and Nadia and what exactly was happening around him at the time:

I was living in Lahore, [Pakistan] an ancient city in southwest Asia, and I was watching other ancient cities in southwest Asia being consumed by violence and war: Kabul, Baghdad, Damascus, Aleppo. I worried about something like that happening where I lived, being forced to flee. At the same time, I was teleporting through black rectangles on a regular basis, the screens of my phone and computer, on video calls and while watching television and films. And those two impulses came together and were a large

part of the impetus to write this book. (Brice)

Hamid was inspired through his own experiences of obsessively using technology and metaphorically incorporated phones and television as an extension to his magical doors. *Exit West* reflects heavily on the stories of those who were and still are helpless in the middle of war. While much of society teleports “through black rectangles on a regular basis,” many have the luxury of never having to think about civilians living in the middle of those wars. Hamid calls this luxury into question by choosing to illuminate those experiences in the novel. Not only do elements of the story play a part in Hamid’s life but also the settings. Readers follow Nadia and Saeed’s narrative through Greece, the U.K., and the U.S., which are all a part of Hamid’s life – places he felt he could write about effectively because of his relocation to these countries and his experiences there. *Exit West* unveils how all of these countries have a similar viewpoint of refugees and immigrants – they are aliens and dangerous to the stability of one’s country.

Through his many intricate and detailed vignettes to the main storyline with Nadia and Saeed, Mohsin Hamid does a remarkable job with *Exit West*. With his breathtaking imagery and strong, compelling connections to the representations of real-life events, he leaves readers wanting more and thinking further about the state of our immigration laws and treatment of refugees. Readers are invited to question the state of technology and its effects, as well as the many disconnects that come with it. In Hamid’s novel, gender and cultural hegemony play a significant role in immigration, politics, and economic gain. It is necessary to tell the stories of those who have migrated, especially ones of refugees, because it is a current global crisis, and we as a society need to realize that all lives are equal. Many refugee events tell the stories of loved ones’ acts of survival and, in Hamid’s own words, “to love is to enter into the inevitability of one day not being able to protect what is most valuable to you” (165). Refugees are human, and it is

what Hamid strives for his audience to recognize in *Exit West*.

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Endnotes

1 “Refugeehood is the state of being a refugee, it is everything a refugee experiences being a minority within a state whether that refugee is privileged or not” (“Refugeehood”).

2 As international countries worry about their precarity, it is important to note that American publications reflect on histories of war, in relation to Hamid’s novel. American scholarship and history create “inadequate integration of experiences... reflect[ing] [on] the fields shift from a Third World liberation frame to a focus on the racialization and internal colonization in the United States” (Espiritu 3). American publications revolving around the subject of the refugee consider the sudden wars like Vietnam and Korea, the displacement of individuals post-Cold-War, the War on Terror, other religious based attacks, and the focus of writing on refugeehood in America, specifically. As an American refugee himself, Viet Thanh Nguyen states, “To be an immigrant is to be part of the American Dream. To be a refugee is to be part of the American Nightmare” (August 108). Nguyen being one of many scholars and writers to tell his story to the world, reconfirms the notions of reflection on refugeehood in the United States.

3 “The traditional notion of the bildungsroman features a male protagonist who demonstrates ‘heroic’ achievement by overcoming social and moral obstacles, defining a unified, autonomous self, and developing ethical authority through the narrative” (Salvator 155). M.H Abraham describes the genre as “the subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist’s mind and character, as he passes from childhood through varied experiences and usually through a spiritual crisis into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world” (Salvator 156). It is also the process of following a character’s moral, emotional, and psychological growth throughout a novel. It follows a protagonist journey through different social, political, or identity conflicts that resolve at the end, providing a sense of relief and comfort to the character. This is mostly represented through male characters but challenged by female writers, like Toni Morrison, to say that female characters can also play the role of the hero in bildungsroman novels.

4 Tying back to the novel genre of bildungsroman, Salvator looks at Toni Morrison’s discussion within *Playing in the Dark*: “Without mentioning the term itself, she discusses an antithetical situation in *Playing in the Dark* when she embraces sociologist Orlando Patterson’s idea: ‘[W]e should not be surprised that the Enlightenment could accommodate slavery.’ She notes, significantly, that ‘the concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom ... like slavery’ (38). Similarly, nothing in Morrison’s work highlights the ignorance an oppression of her anti-heroines like the knowledge and freedom achieved—even in relatively small ways—by the alternate characters. Thus, Morrison refashions the female bildungsroman into a paradoxical form that manifests the birth of a new African American womanhood” (158).

5 Leslie Bow’s review of *Playing in the Dark* both highlights and extends Morrison’s concept. She also leaves readers reflecting on the academic legitimacy of her work and its ties to Edward Said’s Orientalism, that she would highlight as “one ‘ghost in the machine’... a ghost whose presence is echoed ... in the twentieth-century Orientalist presence what Morrison establishes for an Africanist one, that its racial ‘service’ to the nation goes beyond occasional appearance of a servant ... in the nineteenth-century American Literature” (558-562).

6 This reflects heavily on Karl Marx’s own stand for justice in “The Future Results of British Rule in India,” wherein he states, “England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia” (Marx).

7 Digital media shapes our thoughts and understanding of all political topics occurring internationally and locally. In the discussions of news, it “contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrase(s), stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts and judgments” (d’Haenens and Joris 12). Angela Naimou comments on this delegitimization of crises, saying: “Whether reporters name it ... the ‘European refugee crisis’ to invoke an ethics of hospitality or a politics of exclusion, the point here is that the crisis ... is denied its condition as legalized, chronic, and routinized violence inflicted on those already seeking refuge from violence” (227).