

## THE WEIGHT OF MANY – RUPTURED CONTINUITIES: REPRESENTATION OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND HEALING IN THE CONTEXT OF WAR AND DISPLACEMENT THROUGH THE NOVEL *EXIT WEST* BY MOHSIN HAMID

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### Abstract

*This article explores the complex portrayal of collective trauma and healing in Mohsin Hamid's novel, Exit West. It examines how the narrative surpasses traditional depictions of trauma by presenting war and displacement as collective crises rather than merely individual tragedies. The novel's use of Magical Realism, represented by the physical doorways through which refugees pass, acts as a metaphor for catastrophic upheavals in both individual and community history. Ultimately, this paper argues that healing is a process rooted in understanding, connection, and the formation of new sets, rather than a solitary effort, as people navigate their losses and seek a sense of belonging. It also concludes that trauma can catalyze transformation and unity, as well as a force of disintegration. Exit West challenges readers to reevaluate the boundaries between individual and communal history in an increasingly interconnected world by juxtaposing personal sorrow with group resilience. The study employs qualitative analysis, with the novel Exit West as the primary source and related texts and research as secondary sources.*

**Keywords:** War, Trauma, Healing, Displacement.

Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* provides a thoughtful examination of the psychological, emotional, and social impacts of war and displacement. The novel is written in a unique, expressive, and minimalistic manner that is emotionally impactful. His writing retains a global, modern sensibility while fusing aspects of magical realism with realism. Hamid often employs long sentences that reflect the cadence of oral storytelling or personal reflection. This technique creates a stream-of-consciousness effect, drawing the readers into the emotions and experiences of the characters. "It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss, young people still go to class—in this case, an evening class on corporate identity...until the instant when it does." (*Exit West*, 1)

Through its engaging narrative and nuanced character development, the novel explores issues of communal trauma and the challenging path to recovery amid political unrest and forced migration. The novel focuses on Saeed and Nadia, a young couple whose lives are disrupted by civil war and who then embark on a frightening journey through mystical doors that take them to different parts of the world. "The couple eventually become refugees when the city they live in becomes unlivable. In a magical way, they travel to Greece, London and the USA in order to rebuild their lives." (Mir, Manzoor Ahmad, 15).

The novel's emotional core is rooted in the very actual realities of trauma, grief, and the quest for meaning amid displacement, even though it employs magical realism as a narrative device. Most of the research examines how *Exit West* depicts the trauma faced by Saeed and Nadia, and their healing, where communal trauma and healing offer new insights into defining

war and displacement as a communal trauma, rather than an individual one. In addition, *Exit West* presents a relational, creative, and gradual perspective of healing. Hamid uses literary techniques to depict war and displacement, the cultural and psychological effects of communal trauma, and the potential for healing via memory, storytelling.

Hamid's choice to omit the names of the protagonists' hometowns is among *Exit West*'s most notable elements. This anonymity highlights the notion that trauma is not limited to certain regions but rather is a part of a larger global reality, universalising the experience of conflict. Even windows became death traps. "The bedroom door was shut. The window was open. He chose the window. He was through it in an instant, dropping silkily to the street below." (*Exit West*, 8) The city's anonymity enables one to impose onto it the innumerable war-ravaged cities that exist throughout the world, such as Aleppo, Baghdad, Kabul, and Gaza.

Hamid highlights the psychological effects of conflict by concentrating on the civilian experience. Like many others, Nadia and Saeed are always in a state of mourning, fear, and uncertainty. Saeed's mother's passing signifies a sea change in their lives and highlights the connection between individual sorrow and the mass carnage of conflict. The metaphor of doors is another way that *Exit West* visualises collective trauma. In addition to providing escape routes, the magical doors represent the disruption of identity, time, and space that trauma involves. The cultural, historical, and psychological conditions that have shaped migrants are taken away from them; they do not merely relocate. The ensuing confusion, which is characterised by emotions of vulnerability, grief, and alienation, is trauma in and of itself.

...a great draw for migrants this winter, and that the doors out, which is to say doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from... (*Exit West*, 100)

Even though Nadia and Saeed's journey takes up a large portion of the story, *Exit West* also features short stories of other migrants, brief windows into the lives of people passing through doors all across the world. "The door is not just a symbol for instant transportation of refugees but also a strong character influencing the lives of millions of people." (Mir, Manzoor Ahmad, 16) These tales, which range from a man in San Diego to a lady in Tokyo, highlight the worldwide character of migration and broaden the novel's focus. Hamid emphasises that trauma is a universal ailment that affects people across countries by combining these disparate accounts.

The political and physical boundaries that often control migration are dismantled by the movement through doors. In doing so, Hamid criticises the inflexibility of border regimes and nation-states, arguing that the traditional structures intended to restrict mobility are inadequate to address the human need for safety and acceptance. However, migrants do not always feel comfortable in their new physical surroundings.

Their funds were growing thinner, more than half the money with which they had left their city now gone. They better understood the desperation they saw in the camps, the fear in people's eyes that they would be trapped here forever, or until hunger forced them back through one of the doors that led to undesirable places, the doors that were left unguarded...better than where they had been (*Exit West*, 110, 111)

Trauma manifests differently. Migrants live in dirty camps on Mykonos, isolated from the outside world. They become part of a large migrant ghetto in London, where they face political and economic instability. The psychological chaos caused by trauma, a feeling of being frozen in time, disconnected from the past yet not fully integrated into the present, is reflected in these portrayals. The novel shows the cumulative effects of trauma, including daily humiliation, the stress of survival, and the loss of home. "Let us hope." (*Exit West*, 85) Trauma is well conveyed by the novel's unique narrative style, which is characterised by long, flowing phrases and a

reserved, almost clinical tone. It is common to characterise Hamid's writing as "elegant" and "measured," even when it depicts horrifying incidents. This stylistic decision reflects the numbing impact of trauma, wherein the unusual is normalised and violence is accepted as a normal aspect of life. Saeed and Nadia see the city's decline into violence, curfews, bombs, and internet blackouts in the unidentified city, which is based on Lahore. However, the story emphasises not just their dread but also everyone's. People start to share resources, listen to radio broadcasts together, and assist one another in escaping, even though their city collapses, solidarity as survival.

Nadia and Saeed dwell with other refugees from various conflicts when they get to the camp on Mykonos. Despite the challenging circumstances, they share a common identity as migrants. The refugee camp turns into a microcosm of the world crisis, a place where people unite and create new, shared bonds in spite of hardship. They gradually begin sharing food, starting tiny gardens, and establishing order. They can start to heal because of the collective cooperation. "Collective trauma underlying the world's ills and highlights the opportunities we have to heal our community and ourselves." (Thomas Hübl, 3)

Tensions increase in London as more refugees enter through the enigmatic doors. Conflicts between migrants and natives lead to the eventual implementation of a militarised zone. This illustrates a worldwide identity issue rather than merely a personal migration narrative. A negotiated peace follows violence. In a self-governing area, migrants are allowed to live and work. A type of societal healing is this shift from conflict to orderly coexistence. Toward the end of their voyage, Nadia and Saeed go to Marin, California, where immigrants are starting over. In terms of collective healing, this is arguably the most symbolic and positive event. In addition to recovering, the migrants rebuild society.

Hamid interjects brief vignettes throughout the novel that depict anonymous persons using the doors, such as a Syrian war survivor, an Amsterdam old guy, and a Tokyo girl. These bits serve as a reminder that the displacement is worldwide. Everyone shares in the healing process. The problem affects everyone, not just them or us. Additionally, the omniscient narration periodically pans out to provide a more comprehensive philosophical analysis of migration and human history. Readers are reminded that displacement is a common aspect of human existence rather than a novel experience by these asides, which position individual trauma within a communal historical continuum. By arguing that refugees are consistent with more general human tales of survival and adaptation, Hamid opposes the propensity to view them as anomalies or exceptions.

In order for the characters to deal with trauma and navigate their identities, memory is essential. For Saeed, tradition, family, and religion are all very important aspects of remembering. He longs for a sense of belonging, prays frequently, and keeps pictures of his parents. Nadia's memory is more conflicted; she rejects her family and doesn't conform to social norms. Their divergent approaches to trauma are reflected in their different memories: Saeed embraces rupture and reinvention, while Nadia seeks continuity with the past.

Their romantic relationship ultimately ends as a result of these conflicting coping mechanisms. They drift apart as they travel through various locations and have their identities reshaped by their experiences, not because of conflict, but rather because trauma has irrevocably changed who they are. Their departure is presented as a silent acceptance of change rather than a failure. The novel's examination of recovery gains depth from this emotional candour. According to *Exit West*, healing can sometimes entail letting go, moving on, and letting new selves emerge rather than reconciling or returning.

The value of interpersonal relationships as a remedy for trauma is also emphasised in the novel. Society can be shattered by collective trauma, but it can also strengthen bonds. Nadia and

Saeed join an unofficial migrant colony in London. Despite its difficulties, this society is an effort to create new kinds of belonging that are based on vulnerability rather than nationality. Even if they are brittle and fleeting, Hamid contends that these kinds of solidarity provide glimmerings of hope in a world that is in pieces.

*Exit West*'s subdued insistence on hope is arguably its most radical feature. The novel never gives up despite its grim subject matter. Healing requires the emergence of new life forms in the wake of tragedy rather than a return to a pre-trauma state. The final scene, in which an older Nadia reunites with Saeed in their unnamed city, which is now serene, reflects this. They look back on their pasts without resentment, each having built their own life and overcoming their tragedies without being defined by them.

This conclusion defies the traditional narrative arc of either a victorious resolution or a devastating loss. Rather, it presents something more ethereal and compassionate: the notion that healing is a continuous, unfinished, and intensely personal process. "Healing is good, and wounds are bad." (Garrett Thomsan, 33) According to this perspective, *Exit West* engages in what postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha refers to as the "vernacular cosmopolitanism" of the displaced, which is characterised by an openness to hybridity, plurality, and contingency.

In doing so, Hamid challenges prevailing discourses that see migrants as either dangerous outsiders or passive victims by letting his characters develop, change, and move on. He recasts them as change agents, both for themselves and the communities they live in. According to this perspective, healing is the ability to live with trauma, give it meaning, and use it to establish relationships with others rather than the erasure of it.

Mohsin Hamid provides a profound reflection on the collective pain caused by displacement and war, as well as the brittle yet enduring human capacity for healing, in *Exit West*. The work explores the existential and emotional aspects of migration by going beyond traditional refugee narratives with its intellectual depth, symbolic imagery, and lyrical language. It acknowledges trauma as a universal burden that cuts across boundaries and views recovery as a chaotic, nonlinear, and intensely relational process rather than a solution.

*Exit West* encourages a more creative and sympathetic approach to the reality of displacement in the end. In an increasingly walled, bordered, and divided world, Hamid's idea of doors, of portals to new selves, new lives, and new solidarity, is both relevant and essential. The novel serves as a reminder that, just as trauma may be collective, healing can also be a group effort involving bravery, creativity, and compassion.

Hamid's *Exit West* transcends the individual to highlight the common tragedy of migration and war, and the potential for recovery via collaboration, community, and redefining boundaries. Instead of delivering a conventional tragedy, the novel makes the argument that a better, more inclusive future is achievable through reunion and group reconstruction.

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