"Doors That Could Take You Elsewhere" - Migration, Magic and Rancièrian Dissensus in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West

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Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West*, which was published in 2017, deals with one of the most topical and passionately discussed issues of its time: that of migration. When a war breaks out in their unnamed hometown, its two protagonists Nadia and Saeed find themselves forced to flee. The two thereupon make their way to the city of Marin in California via stops on Mykonos and in London. What makes their story stand out is that they do not travel by boat, plane or other modes of transportation that one may expect, but instead with the help of mysterious, black doors that when one steps through them transport one to a different country in a matter of seconds. But still, their journey closely resembles that

of many real-life migrants so that the novel is firmly anchored in the socio-political context of its time. The occurrence of inexplicable elements within an otherwise realistic setting is characteristic of magical realism, the mode of writing that originated in Latin America in the 1940s. As it is understood today, magical realism is the combination of the two elements that make up its name, something that is 'magical' and something that is 'realist'. The magical can be anything which stands in opposition to realism as the overall mode of a text as, in the words of Wendy B. Faris, an "'irreducible element' that is unexplainable according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated by modern, post-enlightenment empiricism, with its heavy reliance on sensory data" (2002, 102). In other words, there is a contradiction inherent to magical realism and yet the two ostensibly opposing elements exist peacefully alongside one another within the harmony of the text. Magical realism therefore holds an intrinsically hybrid character, itself the third space between two modes. That means that the magical elements' credibility is never questioned within the text. As Maggie Ann Bowers points out, magical realism relies on the reader's "full acceptance of the veracity of the fiction during the reading experience, no matter how different this perspective may be to the reader's non-reading opinions and judgments" (2004, 4). That is precisely what takes place in reading *Exit West*, where the mysterious doors operate on the same level of truth as the rest of the text.

Because it breaks with realism, which is associated with a Western literary tradition, and with Western genre categorizations magical realism is often seen as a means of non-Western rebellion against the West. Homi K. Bhabha comments in *Location of Culture* that "'magical realism' after the Latin American Boom, becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (1990, 7). Such views run the risk of oversimplification if the West is solely associated with literary realism, which is in turn associated with rationality and order, while the non-West comes to signify the magical that breaks with these ideals. Even though it is true that many postcolonial magical realist works, especially the earlier ones from South America, were in one way or another inspired by the authors' respective cultural traditions, what is problematic is the claim to absoluteness that lies at the bottom of this binarism between West and non-West; the former alone is entitled to logic and rationality, while the latter can only produce magical narratives. This two-sided depiction of non-Western magical realism is confuted by newer works such as *Exit West*. Here, the magical element is not derivative from any particular culture, which goes to show that magical realism should not be restricted to any location or context. But there is still the attempt to "undermine 'purist' representations of the world", as Elleke Boehmer calls it, that can be attributed to the hybridity intrinsic to magical realism (1995, 242).

The aim of this article is to analyse the effects that the use of magical realism has on the novel's portrayal of migration as a political issue with the help of Jacques Rancière's work on the relation between arts and politics, especially the idea of dissensus. I will argue that because of the disruptive potential that is inherent to magical realism, dissensus is at work on multiple levels within the novel. For one, the category of distance is disintegrated. The doors that take the characters from place to place drastically decrease the time that it takes to travel between these places as opposed to traditional means of transportation. If we assume, as reviews of the novel have done, that it is set in the author's home town Lahore in Pakistan, then we are talking about a 14-hour flight and a distance of over 6500 kilometres that the novel covers in minutes, let alone the fact that illegal migrants like Nadia and Saeed would most likely not take the most straight-forward route and travel by plane. However, by stepping through the doors, the characters can sidestep the crossing of actual geographical borders that, in most cases, come with either governmental checkpoints and passport controls or the dangers of illegal border crossing. Because borders are means to demarcate territory and as such can amplify distance, their disruption has a decisive impact on the novel's portrayal of distance as a concept.

The analogy between doors and borders that Exit West draws is cleverly chosen for it carries a lot of metaphori-

cal implications. One need only think of the expression 'open door' to see their semantic closeness. An open border can be an open door, meaning an opportunity to start over for those who seek a better life. But like with most other opportunities or doors, not all are always open to everyone. Many countries close their borders at least partially and to some groups of people. A closed border means that the opportunity to start over and try one's luck in that country remains inaccessible. *Exit West* portrays this aspect of the analogy very well, as not any door can be taken at any time and each door will only ever lead to one specific place. What is more, some of them are blocked and closed by governments or militant groups, just like it is the case with some borders. Nadia and Saeed must pay someone to find them an exit route out of their home country. In this, they resemble those migrants who have no choice but to put their fate in the hands of people smugglers when it comes to illegal border crossings. One of the most feverishly discussed borders of recent years is that between Mexico and the USA. The novel picks up on this by depicting a Mexican orphanage:

> many of the children in the House of the Children had at least one living parent or sibling or uncle or aunt. Usually these relatives laboured on the other side, in the United States, and their absences would last until the child was old enough to attempt the crossing, or until the relative was exhausted enough to return, or on occasion, quite often, for ever (Hamid 2017, 157)

It thereby illustrates the tremendous effects that bor-
ders, and the financial imbalance between the two sides
they are separating, have on the lives of individuals. The
doors facilitate many of these issues as they enable par-
ents to go back and visit their children or to take their
children with them in a safe and easy manner. The anal-
ogy of the doors further illustrates how entering anoth-
er country might feel to some of the people that are
native to that country as if someone was entering their
private property. The primary function of doors is to
keep unwanted intruders out. In the novel, it can happen
that migrants unknowingly enter a new country through
private doors. Such is the case in the scene in which the
reader first encounters the phenomenon. It relates how a
man exits from a magical door that doubles as a woman's
closet door:

> As Saeed's email was being downloaded from a serv-
> er and read by his client, far away in Australia a pale-
> skinned woman was sleeping alone in the Sydney
> neighbourhood of Surrey Hills. Her husband was
> in Perth on business. […] Her home was alarmed,
> but the alarm was not active. It had been installed by
> previous occupants, by others who had once called
> this place home, before the phenomenon referred
> to as the gentrification of this neighbourhood had
> run as far as it had now run. The sleeping woman
> used the alarm only sporadically, mostly when her
> husband was absent, but on this night she had for-
> gotten. Her bedroom window, four metres above the

> ground, was open, just a slit. […] The door to her
> closet was open. Her room was bathed in the glow
> of her computer charger and wireless router, but the
> closet doorway was dark, darker than night, rectangle
> of complete darkness – the heart of darkness. And
> out of this darkness, a man was emerging. He too
> was dark, with dark skin and dark, woolly hair. (Ha-
> mid 2017, 5.)

The vocabulary in this scene creates an atmosphere of
danger. Mentions of an alarm system and an open win-
dow allude to a burglary. That the stranger exiting the
closet door is not a burglar but a migrant who did not
willfully enter the woman's house will become clear only
later in the novel.

It is only logical that the development set off by the
doors culminates in the dissolution of geographical bor-
ders in the novel:

> The news in those days was full of war and migrants
> and nativists, and it was full of fracturing too, of re-
> gions pulling away from nations, and cities pulling
> away from hinterlands, and it seemed that as every-
> one was coming together everyone was also moving
> apart. Without borders nations appeared to be be-
> coming somewhat illusory, and people were ques-
> tioning what role they had to play. (Hamid 2017, 155)

There is an even deeper meaning to this if one takes

into consideration the fact that many of the borders in the Middle East are fabricated vestiges of colonial times. In the sense that consensual politics are the "ways in which human communities are 'spontaneously' counted as wholes" the Western involvement in the creation of borders in the Middle East must be seen as an attempt to enforce Western consensus on other areas of the world (Corcoran 2010, 1). The sidestepping and blurring of borders in *Exit West* messes with this consensus. They therefore become an act of resistance against colonialism and against the global system of states whose aim it is to encase wealth and make resources inaccessible to the global poor.

Exit West's magical doors do not only decrease the distances between countries, but they also alter migration in several other ways. Firstly, because they shorten the time that it takes to travel they make the process a lot faster. Secondly, the doors make migrating a lot easier compared with the 'traditional' routes, because they are not as strenuous and as dangerous. There is a certain risk involved if you do not know exactly where it will take you. But none of the novel's characters get harmed in the process and it loses its peril as the novel progresses and the characters get used to it. The doors are also less expensive. Although there are some which are controlled by traffickers, the myriad of new ones that arise mean that it is possible to find one on your own for free, whereas, in reality, payments to people smugglers

accrue in nearly all cases. Lastly, taking a door requires much less physical effort and hence is not dependent upon physical health. As a result, the possibility to migrate is open to more people in the novel. All of these factors lead to the massive extent that migration takes in it. Apart from the doors, this is the one aspect where the novel is largely out of touch with reality. However, with what I have pointed out above, it is obvious that the large flows of people are a direct result of Hamid's use of magical realism. His statements in *The New Yorker* indicate that this is more than a mere byproduct. When asked about the doors, he says that "they allowed [him] to compress the next century or two of human migration on our planet into the space of a single year" (Hamid 2017). What he suggests here is that with the help of the accelerating doors the novel provides a shortened version of the future. Such a version can obviously only be a prognosis as it presupposes that migration really is a steadily growing phenomenon that will take on such a large extent at some point in the future.

Forecasting and then contracting a possible future like that is a form of disrupting history. What is more, it is another level on which magical realism may become valuable for postcolonial writing. One of the main aims of early postcolonial writing was to rewrite history from the point of view of the formerly colonised people, because so-called 'official' historical writing was written predominantly from the colonizers' perspectives. This claim was

nurtured by the larger realization that all histories are constructed or, as Rancière puts it, belong "under the same regime of truth" as fiction (2004, 38). Magical realism is able to draw attention to the constructed character of any history and thereby sets the ground for the possibility of the coexistence of multiple histories, which Stephen Slemon refers to as a 'double vision' between 'official history' and what he calls "a cluster of opposing views that tend to see history more as a kind of alchemical process, somewhat analogous to a way of seeing, in which the silenced, marginalized, or dispossessed voices within the colonial encounter themselves form the record of 'true' history" (1995, 414). A notable example in this context is Gabriel García Márquez, whose *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is commonly received as a retelling of history from the perspective of the oppressed. At first glance, this appears to be fundamentally different from Hamid's vision of a possible future. The latter does not alter existing narratives but creates a new one instead. Yet, the same postcolonial idea is detectable in both. In the words of Slemon, *Exit West* still qualifies as a "foreshortening of history" if not one that "metaphorically contains the long process of colonization and its aftermath" (1995, 411). Instead, it depicts a continuation of the decolonization project that culminates in a fictional world characterized by cultural hybridity where the borders between countries have been blurred so that one can no longer distinguish between a centre and the margins. Those who were excluded from colonial his-

torical accounts become the protagonists of this new narrative. Therefore, dissensus is at work in the novel on a historical level as well.

The decrease of distance and the shortening of time culminate in the overarching effect of shifting power relations. The consensual order determines who has the right to speak where and when based on the resources required to enter a political discourse. Rancière's argument is that it therefore leads to the exclusion of some, all while giving the outward impression that political choice is unanimous and without alternative (2010, 189). The excluded person becomes "the radical other, the one who is separated from the community for the mere fact of being alien to it, of not sharing the identity that binds each to all" (Rancière, 2010, 189). Political exclusion of this kind constitutes a migrant's reality. In most countries, the right to vote is generally limited to citizens. In a report on the political rights of refugees for the UNHCR, Ruma Mandal writes that "the vast majority of states do not give aliens, including refugees, the right to vote. Enfranchisement is still considered to be a privilege of citizenship, reflecting the allegiance between an individual and his/her State of nationality" (2003, 17). She contends that this is the case because "the granting of political rights [to aliens] is often seen as a threat to the national cohesion" (Mandal 2003, iv). This argument concurs with Rancière's notion of consensual politics, as that which "strives to reduce people to the population"

and justifies exclusion in the name of "a community that gathers together a single people" (2010, 189). Additional voters would threaten the consensus. She interposes that there are certain exceptions of states which permit foreign residents the right to vote at a local level or make other formal arrangements for them to have a say[1]. However, Rancière repeatedly stresses that structural enfranchisement is not the only factor that determines the distribution of the sensible, but that whether one possesses the resources that are required to speak up and participate in politics is equally as decisive. Such resources can be time or the ability to speak a certain language and to do so eloquently and persuasively. Those who are included in the political order are, according to Rancière, "men and women of action, and more specifically those who act through speech: generals, orators, princes and princesses, lawyers, etc." (2011a, 12). Thus, the "distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed" (Rancière 2004, 12)[2]. Dissensus is any act that disrupts this order by redistributing the right to speak to include also those who were previously excluded. This is, for Rancière, the definition of politics, which he says, "reconfigures the distribution of the perceptible", "introduces new objects and subjects onto the common stage", "makes visible what was invisible" and "makes audible as speaking beings those who were previously heard only as noisy animals" (2011b, 4).

In *Exit West*, this exclusion of migrants from politics is made visible. Both in the refugee camp on Mykonos and the house in London, Nadia and Saeed live in what may be called parallel societies that exist outside of the political order of Greece and Great Britain. However, their situation in London is slightly different because on Mykonos, they live in a space allocated to them while in London they become participants in the illegal occupation of someone else's property, something that interestingly turns out to be a large-scale phenomenon. Because so many houses lie empty, their owners being foreigners who are away most of the time, those who enter them through closet or other doors decide to stay and make themselves at home. The overall effect is that "the more empty a space in the city the more it attracted squatters, with unoccupied mansions in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea particularly hard-hit" (Hamid 2017, 126). That is what happens in the house, which is also often referred to as a 'palace', that Nadia and Saeed incidentally find themselves in at their arrival. They have reservations at first, but because the luxury of a well-equipped house with a private room is too tempting after their time in the camp on Mykonos and because others are doing the same they decide to stay. When the housekeeper next shows up, the house "was already quite full, home to perhaps fifty squatters" (Hamid 2017, 123). Here it is brought to the reader's attention how much space is wasted when a house that can accommodate fifty people lies almost completely vacant,

something which is quite common in London and other expensive cities where there is a shortage of affordable living space as real estate prices soar due to foreign investment. This aspect of the novel can therefore most certainly be read as critical commentary on the housing situation in many bigger cities. But more than just that, *Exit West* undertakes a fictional redistribution of resources. It is exactly those parts of London that have become exclusive to the super-rich that are conquered by the migrants and turned into the exact opposite, a shelter for the homeless. Insofar as this disrupts the previous state of affairs, we can speak of dissensus. The result is a shift in power, as the migrants confer themselves a right the British government denies them. This is a political act not only because they fight against their exclusion but also because having a place to live is one of the prerequisites for political participation that Rancière deems so important.

When the British authorities first attempt to drive Nadia, Saeed and the rest out of the house they occupy they decide to fight back, not physically but by simply remaining where they are when prompted to leave. To their own surprise, they succeed. But the authorities soon turn to more drastic measures when they encircle the occupied areas and cut them off from all supplies so that the political exclusion of the new migrant population turns into their physical exclusion. What is clear though is that their ability to resist has forced the British authorities

and the wider public to change their handling of the situation and has thus given the migrants back a say in their own futures. In what follows, the authorities begin to develop constructive approaches to cohabitation. The migrant population is resettled to the outskirts of London where they are promised their own places to live if they help with the construction (Hamid 2017, 167). For the meantime they are put up in temporary accommodation. While this may seem like a fair exchange that leads to the creation of hybrid spaces at first, the novel soon reveals that such is not the case. The migrants are driven away from the centre of London which thus is regained by the powerful and rich elite. In a manner that is not dissimilar from the situation earlier on, they are concentrated in one place so that a mixing with the previous population is largely prevented. Moreover, the way that the project is structurally laid out keeps intact a balance of power. Hamid reveals that no "natives lived in the dormitories, for obvious reasons. But natives did labour alongside migrants on the work sites, usually as supervisors" (2017, 176). The so-called "time tax" that is set up also favours those who have stayed in the country longer than others because it purports that "a portion of the income and toil of those who had recently arrived on the island would go to those who had been there for decades, and this time tax was tapered in both directions, becoming a smaller and smaller sliver as one continued to reside, and then a larger and larger subsidy thereafter" (Hamid 2017, 168). In other words, although the

migrants attain a change of politics they are still not actually members of the political community. Any positive changes that occur are just the results of the established system reacting to them.

Even though it is never stated in the novel, we can assume that their ongoing political exclusion is part of the reason why Nadia and Saeed decide to leave London and start over once again. Located near San Francisco, Marin, their third and, as far as we know, final place of residence, is similar to the new cities built in the outskirts of London in terms of location but it is much more self-organized. What makes it distinctively different is that its residents actively pursue the reshaping of political structures. They begin to set up an electoral system. While their goals are only tentative, they are aimed at counteracting the problematic exclusionary character of politics that Rancière also criticizes. Their experiential approach to dissensus is not to adapt the existing system but to create an entirely new one which can be adapted to the needs of the new community as they go. The chaos set off by the doors provides them with the opportunity to do so, whereas under more realistic circumstances breaking up existing political structures may be much harder. As part of the project to create an assembly, they begin to also develop a system of identification that "could be the key to the plebiscite, at it made it possible to tell one person from another and to ensure they could vote only once" (Hamid 2017, 220). While the

necessity is evident, it is also clear that, considering the intrinsic link between identity documents and systems of citizenship, such a system will result in the formation of a group, or population if you may, that includes some and excludes others. This shows us that despite their attempts to establish a more just political system, such an undertaking is not easy and there are many issues and questions yet to solve. The novel's ending leaves open how the world will further transform. We get the sense that rather than being better or worse, it is just different. What is interesting is that the city of Marin, California, actually exists and that its history resembles the events of the novel. Matt Pamatmat summarizes the history of how Marin was formed:

> The general area of Sausalito was a shipbuilding community in the 1940s that produced boats for the war effort. Black port workers left the hostile, segregated, opportunityless Jim Crow South and migrated to Marin City, cohabitating peacefully with white neighbors in a community of colleagues where everyone was provided housing. It was a community that generally got along, neighbors watching out for each other. However, after the war, as jobs disappeared, 'white flight' followed, and the remaining folks were left jobless and unskilled outside of shipbuilding. (Pamatmat 2004)

Does the author want to suggest an equally doomed future for his characters by linking the novel's plot to these developments? I think not, for the circumstances under which the novel takes place are so different that they will

most likely lead to a different output. Instead I think that this is another way in which it aims to rewrite history in favour of the disadvantaged and excluded. In a sense, the citizens of Marin are given a second chance.

Notes:

1. A notable exception is the United Kingdom, where all resident Commonwealth and Irish citizens are permitted to vote, which makes up a large proportion of immigrants. States which give out partial voting rights at the local administrative level to residents are Ireland, Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Peru (Mandal 2003, 18).

2. In this aspect, Rancière's theory closely resembles the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum which "specifies some necessary conditions for a decently just society, in the form of a set of fundamental entitlements of all citizen" (Nussbaum 2006, 155). This has brought to attention the insufficiency of granting rights if people are not capable of exercising them. Nussbaum also emphasizes that "the need to focus on capability becomes especially clear when we consider cases in which individuals are hampered in various atypical ways by the very structure of their society" (2006, 165).

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