



Search for Transpace: A Study of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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Received: 18 Mar 2023; Received in revised form: 15 Apr 2023; Accepted: 21 Apr 2023; Available online: 30 Apr 2023

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Abstract— *The problem of refugees has spread at a large scale throughout the world in the twenty-first century. Refugees are the migrants worst-hit by their destinies as they are forced to leave their home and hearth due to some sort of political or religious conflicts, war or violence. They are completely unwanted in the country of their arrival due to fear and suspicion of the natives. At the same time refugees earnestly desire to be treated on humanitarian ground and regain the lost space in this world. Mohsin Hamid marvelously deals with this problem of refugees in his fourth novel Exit West (2017) from the transcultural lens with the hope to create a transpace for refugees. The paper examines how migrants are forced to leave their homeland as they are not considered as lawful citizen of the land and are devoid of basic human needs. The paper explores the struggle of refugees in the initial period before achieving their transcultural space in the foreign land. In addition to this, the paper also analyzes the effect of their movement, struggle and success in creating transpace on their identity.*

Keywords— *Identity, dislocation, migration, refugee, transpace.*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest challenges in the 21st century is the issue of refugees. Many people are forced to flee their homes due to various reasons such as political conflicts, religious persecution, war and violence. As a result, they are often displaced from their homes and communities, leaving behind their livelihoods, possessions, loved ones, culture and identity. The current course of humanity appears to be moving towards increasing mobility, however the idea of transcultural identity and gaining transpace is still a hardcore task especially for refugees. Refugees without having any voice or legal status are entirely dependent on the mercy of people and government of the arrival country. Those who have moved out of their country of origin due to violence are truly caught in between the culture. They are neither in a situation to go back to their country due to danger to their life nor allowed

to enter into the new one because they are considered strangers and non-entity. Amidst this confusion, a refugee attempts to move himself/herself towards the country of arrival with the hope that one day he/she would be able to create a space there.

II. TRANSPACE

Arianna Dagnino explains this concept giving it an optimistic outlook with offbeat results in her seminal book *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Modernity*,

“Transpace/transplace is the transcultural dimension that lies beyond the divides, often commercially or ideologically emphasized, of cultures. It represents a nonoppositional point of confluence or

overlapping of cultures that in many ways expands Bhabha's notion of the third space, the in-between space where hybridization occurs. It may be conceived as an exo-space or a "potential zone" (Bartoloni, "Translation" 9) not limited to the in-between but external to all cultures" (Dagnino 202).

Thus this aspect of transpace is quite significant in the ever widening world of mobility. However, contrary to this viewpoint of Dagnino, Hamid talks of struggle of dislocated people from the country of their origin who try to relocate themselves in the country of arrival and find their transpace. Hamid "humanizes a migration crisis that has become background noise to those not living it" (Clemens 91).

III. EXIT WEST

The story starts in the unnamed city worn and torn by military violence where sounds of bombs and gunshots are common and amidst this bloodshed Saeed and Nadia fall in love with each other. The atrocities committed by the terrorists against common man prevail throughout the city that forced them to think of finding their safe and secure future in the first world country. This follows a detailed explanation of their life as refugees in a refugee camp in Mykonos, Greece; in a building in Britain with refugees of multiethnic background and later in a hillside camp in America where they hope to get their own home. However, their preconceived notions turn out to be an illusion and instead of having successful and comfortable life in a foreign strange land(s) they find themselves tackling with such status as refugees and outsiders there. After a long hard struggle they are able to get hold of their life only to find themselves on the different path from each other and no longer accepting one another. Nevertheless, the circle of their life gets fulfilled with their meeting in their birth land at the end of the novel and discussing their past and present. *Exit West*, a chilling love story of a young couple facing problems in their birth land and as refugees, addresses a current global issue at a large scale - rising refugee community and their problems.

Exit West depicts the fictional reality of socio-cultural and socio-political situations in which it is written. This novel came into light in 2017 when Donald Trump strengthened his anti-immigrant campaign banning migrants particularly Muslims in his country. The text particularly addresses this ban as Hamid remarks in his interview to Terry Gross, it

"is about trying to determine, you know, who belongs and who doesn't belong in a place, above all. Of course, it also has the effect of restricting certain people's movements and in some cases, like refugees, with potentially deadly effect. But above all, it's about who has the right to move and who doesn't have the right to move. And I think that when we take the long view, the notion that some people are deemed, you know, less worthy of being able to move, to not have the right to cross borders – over time, that's going to seem to us as outmoded and as unfair, really, as racial discrimination or other kinds of discrimination" (Gross).

Thus, the novel highlights the contemporary issues of belonging and unbelonging seen through the transcultural lens. He attempts to build a space for refugees in the world that is moving towards transculturalism where different cultures meet and mingle with each other.

Hamid's description of social, cultural, economic and political situation in their homeland and the prevailing violence provides a realistic contour to the text. Violent attack is one of the main reasons of increasing refugee population. They are always in ever hanging about threat of losing their lives in such an atmosphere. Consequently, people move in search of safe place and live a dignified life to some extent though there is no guarantee of fulfillment of such dreams.

IV. HOME AND COMMUNITY

Undoubtedly, intensification of mobility affects the concept of home and the sense of safety and security offered by it. However, in a war ridden homeland, a sense of fear and distrust runs through everywhere without taking notice of caste, creed or colour, innocence or shrewdness, richness or poverty, male or female. Home as a building is not safe in the scenario of air bombing; no one is safe in such an atmosphere; even government is unable to grant security to its citizens. In addition, in this world of global mobility people are forced to be immobile by imposing restriction on freedom and movement. In this scenario, the absence of family members, relatives and friends increases a sense of anxiety and panic. Similar situations exist in the unnamed city and for Saeed and Nadia, it becomes difficult to survive in such a suffocating environment forcing them to flee from the country though reluctantly. Hamid's words "people vanished in those days, and for the most part one never knew, at least not for

a while, if they were alive or dead" (Hamid 66) highlight the intensity of (im)mobility and uncertainty that spring from clash of cultures.

Community is one aspect on which a migrant falls on for support in face of such situation as one feels a sense of belonging amidst people of own culture and land. Steph Lawler appropriately observes, "Kinship connects us to wider networks and embeds us in them, yet it is through kinship that we are produced as unique individuals" (Lawler 36). Saeed seeks for community to fall back upon even though he gets cheated by his acquaintance in the camp in Mykonos. Later, unable to mourn and not knowing how to express himself at the death of his father, Saeed yearns for the company of men from his own area, community or his own country so that he can feel belonging to his roots as, "forming a sense of commitment can be hard without a sense of community" (Iyer 24). This reflects the importance of community especially in a foreign land. Thus, a migrant, wherever s/he is, always longs for the same environment and surroundings that reminds her/him of the culture and traditions.

V. MIGRANTS VS NATIVES

Hamid depicts the contemporary migrant and anti-migrant conflict where migrants' better future and natives' attitude of non-acceptance of migrants come in direct clash. Parallel comparison and contrast of natives with refugees form the core of the novel. The detailed narration of exploitation and victimization of refugees with a balanced view given to the fear of natives marks its beauty and sensitivity. Refugees have feeling of insecurity and uncertainty as they have left their home country for better prospects and natives are apprehensive as refugees are seen as danger and burden on their land and economic sources. In one of the incidents, refugees occupy an empty building in the sub-urban area of London and natives attack refugees violently with their iron bars or knives. It seems like an attempt to claim their own space in their own country deemed to be usurped by refugees. Thus, refugees were considered as a source of problem and violence. Hamid presents an impartial viewpoint as an outsider as well as an insider who knows what it is to be a refugee and a native and how their feelings are towards each other. He does not identify refugees belonging to particular religion, country or sect rather they are presented as a universal category of humiliated and degraded beings who demand their rights as human beings. Simultaneously, his unbiased narration of natives' attempt to secure their space in their own country reflects his keen sensitivity towards current issues.

VI. SAEED AND NADIA: A STRANGE RELATION

Nadia's effort to create a transpace for herself in this vast world is due to her need to be away from the war-torn country to secure her future that transforms her identity to a great extent. Her independent and individual orientations are unfolded when Hamid told us "she was moving out on her own, an unmarried woman" and "she had a job at an insurance company and she was determined to survive, and so she did" before her love affair with Saeed (Hamid 18). She survives through the extremist activities of militants, bears gunshots in her rented room alone and moves to Saeed's home only when his mother dies as she feels Saeed needs her at this moment of crisis. She does not let go of this trait of her individuality even in the foreign land and decides to leave Saeed to live an independent life. But being a responsible person she understands her responsibility towards Saeed and remains with him "until Saeed was out of danger" (Hamid 93) as a promise given to Saeed's father. Her desire and achievement of her freedom before and after her movement reflects her love for independence and individuality at any cost.

Hamid creates a strange relationship between Saeed and Nadia that passes through many ups and downs. Being wavy it shifts from being lovers to estrangement to friendship to separation and meeting again in the country of their birth after fifty years. It would be interesting to understand the rise and fall in their relationship as Hamid represents the reality of a relationship rather than the fictional fantasy of a perfect couple compromising in spite of being in disharmony. They deal with the reality of life and that is why there is waviness in their relationship. Circumstances become the cause of transformation in their relationship. Their status as refugee, no source of earning due to lack of job, inadequate means of livelihood bring a sense of resentment and estrangement in them. But more than that perhaps their different perspectives towards life and lack of understanding each other's viewpoint are the main reason. Nadia does not like Saeed's affinity towards people of his own community and her bold and independent attitude is unacceptable to Saeed.

Their relationship reaches at a strange level where it is difficult to access what would happen. They are so attached to each other that it becomes hard to live with each other without talking. And sometimes, they could not talk without arguing evoking a sense of pain, remembering a time when they were not used to argue and therefore "they put their lack of conversation down to exhaustion" (Hamid 185). Thus, without any doubt, Saeed and Nadia are loyal to each other and do not want to "inflict a fear of abandonment, while also themselves quietly feeling the fear, the fear of the severing of their tie, the end of the

world they had built together" (Hamid 203). Their efforts to avoid the talk of moving away from each other but their desire to do so along with "each see the other find firmer footing before they let go" (Hamid 203) provide a beauty and deep sensibility to their relationship. But the rift between them widens more and more and they slip away from each other in spite of their best efforts and Nadia walks away from their shanty to live her independent life.

Their separation as a friend rather than as an estranged lover marks the beauty of their relation that turns out "to resemble that of siblings, in that friendship was its strongest element" (Hamid 203). The further beauty of their relationship lies in the fact that even after drifting apart, they miss each other and promise to meet at weekends. Weekends become once in a month and months years with busy life as life is to be as Hamid puts it, "they grew less worried each for the other, less worried that the other would need them to be happy, and eventually a month went by without any contact, and then a year, and then a lifetime" (Hamid 222). Hamid provides an extreme level of maturity and understanding to their relationship which is far beyond any obsession and jealousy.

As the beginning is, the end is also quite unexpected revealing that man needs to return home when Nadia returns to her birth land half a century later. Life comes to its full circle when she meets Saeed in the same old city and they remember their past. The city to them is familiar as well as unfamiliar, changed and unchanged after such a long time. The time they had spent in the city has become history to the present generation who are busy in their present times. Their sense of satisfaction from their life and hope for their better future keeps them working. But they are aware of the fact that mobility brings a kind of never fulfilled loss in their life as Nadia admits "when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (Hamid 94). Thus, those who migrate struggle in their life and achieve success but those who left behind are left with reminiscences only.

VII. MOBILITY AND IDENTITY

No doubt present century witnesses the strengthening of mobility, it has brought identity crisis along with it. Borders, according to Tim Cresswell, have become "one way of filtering acceptable mobilities and threatening ones – of deciding which travelers are trusted" (Cresswell 650). In addition to crossing the border, one has to cross one's culture too. The milieu in which one's faith and opinion are embedded, shattered or at least altered in a new kind of environment and one finds a sense of alienation, dislocation, loss and unbelonging. One is in a fix where he/she belongs to - to his home country or to the

adopted one. It is quite difficult for people in a foreign land to accept a person who does not belong to them and their culture particularly whose homeland is dealing with unrest and instability. In this context, Homi Bhabha rightly points out how "the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (Bhabha 13). Thus, it creates a confusing situation of belonging and unbelonging especially during the beginning period. Saeed and Nadia could not adjust themselves in a camp where they put up in the very initial stage of their migration and are in the same quandary whether they will be able to get their own home and feel a kind of belonging to this foreign land.

Nevertheless, slowly and gradually circumstances change and one mingles with people and environment creating transpace. Saeed feels emotionally attached to another girl rather than Nadia and Nadia feels herself independent and belonged after leaving Saeed. Perhaps, they are able to find themselves and their identity away from each other. They start feeling themselves socially and culturally belonged after being dislocated from their homeland. According to Dagnino such sort of culturally dislocated people "appear to outgrow their own ethnic, racial, religious, territorial identity and transcend the domestic concerns and interests of just one nation and one culture in favor of a broader, more complex transcultural identity" (Dagnino 163). However, along with feeling this transcultural identity and creating transpace for oneself, love and pull of the homeland is not less than anything else. That is why Saeed and Nadia return to their homeland. Thus, Hamid takes up mobility from broken down society to the western one and from foreignness and strangeness of a new country to its adoption and assimilation in the cultural otherness to find the transcultural space.

VIII. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the text critically examines the exploitation of migrants and victimization of refugees in the west. It is observed that refugees step towards the West for their better future and struggle hard to achieve their transpace only to find themselves caught in the conflict with natives. The invisible borders and boundaries forced the migrants to bear the pain of alienation, unbelonging and loss of identity in the initial period. Their ordeal of extreme level and reluctant leaving of birth land and loved ones to find their imaginary home away from their original home bear fruit after fighting back. But the positive outlook of Hamid in giving individuality to both the

characters where they are able to gain their home, identity and belonging along with their transpace make the text a unique one. It brings a new dimension in the study of mobility and identity in transcultural context advocating global connectivity. The in-depth study of the novel shows the universality of human experience of mobility and international borders disturbing and curbing it. Nevertheless, the transcultural orientation in life creates a global mosaic of separate entities rooted in transpace forming a complex system of cultural flows to form a kaleidoscope of multiple identities.

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