

## EXIT WEST

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Mohsin Hamid has long been a prime example of an author who has managed to flawlessly bridge the ideological disconnect between the so-called 'East' and 'West.' His latest work, *Exit West*, could not have been published at a more pertinent time. Global conflict, reactionary nationalism and a growing refugee crisis are central in guiding the text's narrative. While the novel incorporates aspects of magical realism, through the piercing reality of the novel's themes, Hamid fashions a dystopian reality that so vastly mirrors our own. The authenticity of Hamid's work largely arises from the fact that Hamid tends to construct characters that are not constrained by involuntary factors such as gender, religion or nationality. Instead Hamid's work is scattered with individuals that very much resemble the complex people we encounter in our everyday lives; conservatively dressed liberals, loving women who resist motherhood, high-lying drug addicts, atheists, theists and everything else in between.

The novel depicts Nadia and Saeed, a young couple who meet as their city verges on the brink of civil war. For many Western readers, the characters' Muslim names will automatically evoke unconscious prejudices, raising certain expectations as to how the novel will progress. Buzzwords such as 'oppressed,' 'radicalised' and 'extremist' will spring to the forefront of conversation, however, this could not be further from the truth. Nadia and Saeed are not Muslim protagonists; they are protagonists who happen to have Muslim names. In an article for *The Guardian*, Hamid argues that 'most Muslims do not 'choose' Islam in the way that they choose to become doctors or lawyers, nor even the way in which they choose to become fans of Coldplay or Radiohead. Most Muslims, like people of any faith, are born into their religion' (Hamid, "Islam is not a monolith"). In modern British society, Islam is far too often presented as homogenous, with the assumption that all its followers share a rigid absolutism when it comes to faith. From the offset, Nadia contravenes all expectations of a Muslim woman; her liberal outlook on religion, sex and various other topics surprises even Saeed. While she may be 'clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch in a flowing black robe', (Hamid, *Exit West*, 1) she doesn't pray, rides a motorcycle and has a penchant for psychedelic mushrooms. While Hamid's portrayal of women may occasionally border on fanciful, he, nevertheless, tries to offer a diverse representation of Muslim women; something that Western literature has failed to do.

For Anita Desai, Hamid's work fills a void that has long been left empty in contemporary publication. In *The New York Review of Books*, Desai wrote a critical review of Hamid's first novel, *Moth Smoke*, arguing that until Hamid's arrival on the literary scene, 'one could not really continue to write, or read about, the slow seasonal changes, the rural backwaters, gossipy courtyards, and traditional families in a world taken over by gun-running, drug-trafficking, large scale industrialism, commercial entrepreneurship, tourism, new money night clubs, and boutiques'. Hamid's hybridity as an author, his international upbringing and adulthood have enabled him to begin to try and capture our increasingly globalised world in which contradictions seemingly coexist so effortlessly. Hamid's use of setting is central in his work; *Exit West* is set in an

unnamed Muslim city that is most likely modelled on Lahore, Hamid's birthplace. Hamid constructs his locations in a similar way to his characters, in *Exit West* he refuses to allow his imaginary city to be categorised by traditional stereotypes. Even in his earlier works, *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid resists typical misconceptions of his hometown, transforming the city into a fast-paced cosmopolitan metropolis. Canonized literature is rarely set outside of a European context, but when it is, it typically struggles to present people and locations as anything other than exotic entities designed to foment the hierarchical binary between East and West. According to Edward Said 'even in imaginative literature a rigid ideological system operates beneath a freer surface.'<sup>(12)</sup> Yet, Hamid's Lahore exists outside these boundaries, the city is not fashioned into a vehicle for self-discovery; it is neither an idealised Eastern paradise nor a product of a derelict, failed state.

While it is true that Hamid has a tendency to politicise the mundane, political ramifications aside, first and foremost, *Exit West* is a twenty-first century tale of first love and loss. Nadia and Saeed's story is not what we would describe as traditionally romantic. We watch as the couple lounge side by side on their phones, their relationship gradually evolving, familiar to the reader and yet distant from contemporary literature. However, their daily lives are rapidly transformed as their city is gradually taken over by various militias. The stakes get higher and their relationship struggles to survive as they are forced to abandon everything in order to seek refuge abroad. While the first part of the novel adheres to reality, it is in the second part that Hamid employs magical realism in the text by introducing mysterious 'doors' that enable individuals to easily pass between nations, without passports or interference from border control. In one step, the protagonists can be transported from Tijuana to Mykonos onto San Diego or Sydney. Nadia and Saeed's tale becomes one of many, as Hamid shifts the narrative focus back and forth, settling on characters who are seemingly disconnected from one another. However, Nadia and Saeed are not assured safety by uprooting themselves to a securer nation. In an allusion to the current British political climate, the couple arrive in London only to discover that 'nativist extremists were forming their own legions, with a wink and a nod from the authorities' (Hamid, *Exit West*, 132). Driven out time and time again, the couple use the doors to flee from continent to continent in order to find a home.

*Exit West* is significant to Western contemporary culture in that it is an inherently hopeful novel. In the closing chapter, Nadia returns to her city of birth only to discover that 'the fires she had witnessed in her youth had burned themselves out long ago, the lives of cities being far more persistent and gently cyclical than those of people' (Hamid, *Exit West*, 227). The doors themselves, which could potentially symbolise chaos and the breakdown of social order, are instead a symbol of reincarnation. With each passage, an individual has the opportunity to start afresh, to find love, to choose a new life. In an academic sense, *Exit West*, alongside Hamid's other works has limitless possibilities. His work could easily find a home in diaspora studies, post-colonial literature, or even women's studies. All of Hamid's work and, in particular, *Exit West*, present a literary image of our contemporary world. Fifty years from now, *Exit West* could be reflected upon as a text that devotes itself to capturing this precise moment, a time overflowing with refugee-dom, homelessness and war, and yet, an era that is more able than ever to showcase human resilience.

#### Works Cited:

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About the author

Adapted from <<http://projectmyopia.com/exist-west/>>