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Author(s): Sercan Hamza Bağlama

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## Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*: Co-Opting Refugees into Global Capitalism

Sercan Hamza Bağlama\*

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### Abstract

In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid fictionally reimagines and universalises migrant/refugee experience by providing a realistic snapshot of the social, cultural, economic and political circumstances in their specific historical forms and reveals the psychology of loss, displacement and unbelonging leading to the victimisation of the protagonists in a foreign land. In order to critically analyse the victimisation of the refugee characters at a linguistic level in relation to the narrative of the West about migration and refugees in the twenty-first century, this study will focus on *Exit West* and explore the development of the central bias against migrants and refugees construed through metaphorical delegitimation and discursive stigmatisation within the framework of the dichotomous construction of “them” and “us”. Over the course of the study, through a critical reading of the novel, this study will also discuss that the social, cultural and economic interpellation of the refugee characters into the dominant system in a western country should be taken into account within the context of the depoliticisation process of the refugee “crisis” in the world since apolitical humanist arguments, unable to materialistically articulate the problems, reproduce the binary paradigms of the orientalist mind-set and practically perpetuate the cultural, social, ideological and economic domination of global capitalism.

**Keywords:** Mohsin Hamid; *Exit West*; Refugees and Migrants; The Dichotomy of “them” and “us”; Victimisation; Interpellation

### Introduction

*Exit West* (2017), the fourth novel by Mohsin Hamid, the Booker-nominated Pakistani author, revolves around a young couple, Saeed and Nadia, who are caught up in the vicious grip of civil war, famine, oppression, poverty and corruption in an unnamed city and struggle to flee from their war-torn country through magical doorways leading to different locations around the world. Written after the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump, a period during which questions of national identity, border and security were considered as a top priority, the novel makes use of our familiarity with current issues regarding the predicament of global capitalism such as fundamentalism and transnational terrorism resulting in internally and externally displaced asylum seekers trapped between worlds. The novel, in

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\*Sercan Hamza Bağlama; Assistant Professor Dr., Department of English Language and Literature / Postcolonial Studies Application and Research Centre, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Çanakkale, Turkey. Email: sercanhamza@gmail.com.

doing so, provides a realistic snapshot of the nature of migration in the twenty-first century and fictionally exposes the traumatic realities, fear, danger, loneliness and victimisation shared by refugees.

Hamid reveals the insidious transformation of an ordinary life into chaos and turmoil in a war zone with truck bombs, sniper rifles, armed militants at checkpoints and constant surveillance and, rather than fictionally mediating brutal and devastating physical hardships encountered during refugee journeys, uses doors<sup>1</sup> – a manifestation of magical realism in the novel – in order to mystically transfer his characters from their homeland to a new life in the West, which reminds the readers of the long journey of Syrian refugees to Europe. He tacitly attempts to articulate the backdrop of the global refugee and migration “crisis” and vividly manifests the universality of migration and the psychology of exile, loss, dislocation and unbelonging in a foreign land through different occasions and imagery sprinkled throughout the novel.

Literary texts might be seen to aesthetically depict an imagined totality of socio-cultural and socio-political circumstances and relations in their specific historical forms, to contain their own subjective truths and to expose the totality in which they are produced. Although a writer might have a relative autonomy while creating his/her fictional work, it is highly likely that s/he might directly or indirectly be affected and informed by social material processes in a given time period and that his/her fictional characters might, therefore, manifest the actualities and socio-economic forces of a particular period within a larger context. In other words, a writer reveals social, economic, political and cultural contradictions and conflicts and articulates one dimension of the total structure of an epoch through his/her subjective position in relation to a socioeconomic order. In this context, this study will focus on Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, a political commentary with an aesthetic individualisation of social reality, in order to analyse the narrative of the West about migration and refugees and to investigate the development of the central bias against refugees construed through the use of metaphorical delegitimisation and discursive stigmatisation. This study will also discuss that the lack of political articulation reflects itself in the protagonists of the novel, Nadia and Saeed, who are motivated by their individualistic motivations, rather than an organised and collectivised politics, and seem to internalise the rhetoric of the western political establishment regarding neoliberal internationalism, multicultural coexistence and multi-ethnic democracy, which interpellates them into western capitalism at the end of the novel.

### **The Process of Delegitimisation and Stigmatisation**

In order to critically understand various forms of harassment, violence, assault and exploitation faced by refugees in different parts of the world and to explore the ethical and moral impasse they run through, the ideological representation of refugees should also be addressed at a linguistic level. The delegitimisation of the status of refugees can, for that reason, be located within the framework of ideological discourse in which refugees are debased and degraded through negative associations whereas locals identify themselves with refinement, progress, civilisation and moral virtue: “[O]ur good things are emphasised and our bad things de-emphasised, and the opposite for the Others whose bad things will be

enhanced, and whose good things will be mitigated, hidden or forgotten” (Dijk 2006: 126). This strategy has a binary nature and systematically operates within a discursive space. It inherently dictates itself across different texts and naturally creates a new social and cultural reality through refugee myths, resulting in the dichotomy of “them” and “us”. Such an ideological positioning of locals, an in-group, towards refugees, an out-group, consolidates the outsider stereotype, creates a general feeling of insecurity and intolerance and legitimises “us” by delegitimising ‘them’ through different mythical narratives.

In the novel, the authorial voice of Hamid’s third person narrator might seem to otherise and delegitimise refugees discursively; *however*, his narrator *parodically* makes authorial comments in order to *mock* and *deconstruct* the ideological complexity and mythical power of the stereotypical representation of refugees on different platforms such as news media and political deals, and this makes the novel more realist, radical and revolutionary in its critique of the discursive construction of refugees as a potential threat. Considering this argument, the novel wittily reveals the objectification and commodification process of refugees in the world through the intentionally-used metaphorical expressions, such as “swollen” (1), “occupied” (23), “concentrating” (135), “scores” (161), “millions” (162), “strayed” (175) and “bodies” (177), which are successfully incorporated into its fabric. The novel, in this context, exposes the fact that refugees are dehumanised, that a distance between refugees, “them”, and locals, “us”, is created, and that any positive feelings and emotions towards “them” are suppressed because they are perceived only as numbers and commodified objects that can be counted, located, traded, exchanged and distributed (Arcimaviciene and Bağlama 2018: 7).

In a wide array of online sources, especially in various western media sources (Arcimaviciene 2019), the negative characterisation of refugees through verbal occurrences evoking natural phenomena – naturally massive and forced movements which are not predictable and cannot be controlled – generates a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty. Refugees are not any longer perceived as inanimate objects but as natural forces which can damage and eradicate the national welfare system in “our” – “us” – country, which is, again, brilliantly captured and mocked throughout the novel by Hamid. The use of such verbs as flow (71), hit (107), pour into (104, 126), overflow (107), stretch (107), fill (107) and clear (159) shrewdly manifests the case in which the myth of threatening otherness is consistently construed, emotional attachment from “them” is intensified and human dignity and equality are undermined.

The construction of a stereotypical refugee identity also operates through the discourses of criminality and terrorism. The negative perception of “us” about “them” is crystallised through criminal lexis, whereas threat to life is metaphorised by relating “them” to terrorism directly and indirectly (Arcimaviciene and Bağlama 2018: 10). In this respect, the issue of the representation of the refugee characters in *Exit West* might at first sight seem to be ambiguous and problematic considering the complex addressivity of Hamid’s narrative. On the one hand, the novel foregrounds the differentiation of the refugee groups in terms of cultural, economic and social practices; on the other hand, it reproduces many stereotypical refugee images and perceptions for the addressee belonging to mainstream white society, which, in a way, reinforces and heightens the prejudices of the western world against “them”. To exemplify, in one episode, Saeed and Nadia hear a rumour that a new door to Germany

has been found and make a payment to a people smuggler, who coincidentally happens to be a friend of Saeed back home, in order to help them escape since the door is firmly protected. However, they understand that they have been swindled when that person does not appear next morning (109). In another episode, militants from somewhere in the Middle East cross over to Vienna and shoot unarmed people (104). There are many other similar episodes in which some migrant groups detonate bombs (168), carry out knifings (176) and shoot a police officer in the leg while a migrant ghetto is evacuated (160).

Such a portrayal of the migrants and refugees within the text actually supports the argument that the refugee presence in the West is the main source of the problems and that they are innately the perpetrators of terrorist attacks and crimes. However, in order to subtly criticise racism and xenophobia, Hamid simultaneously debunks and deconstructs such racial, cultural and continental codifications by contextualising the terrorist events and criminal cases within a specific set of social, political and cultural conditions and by characterising the refugee groups as individuals with different personalities and traits rather than as the representatives of a certain religious or political or subcultural group: “There were families with an eye on the future and gangs of young men with an eye on the vulnerable and upright folks and swindles ... Decent people vastly outnumbered dangerous ones” (101).

From a different perspective, the novel also reveals that locals or in-groups are not a homogeneous group and rejects any kind of generalisation based on the tendency to naturally associate the white European population with racism, segregation and unfairness. In a way, it debunks the arguments of counter racism which categorises and codifies all “white” Europeans as enemies having racist and xenophobic inclinations. To comment, in some parts of the novel, the nativist extremists reclaiming Britain for Britain, forming their own legions “with a wink and a nod from the authorities” (132), intending to attack migrants (104, 131), advocating a wholesale slaughter (156), destroying dwelling units and severely beating some refugees (175) are subtly portrayed through Hamid’s unobtrusive political commentary. In the other parts of the novel, the volunteers genuinely helping the refugees and providing food, shelter, medical supplies and emergency assistance to them are depicted. In one episode, for instance, a young girl around eighteen years of age in Mykonos cleans and dresses the wound of Nadia by holding her arm gently and shyly, often meets Nadia happily to have a coffee or a joint and helps Nadia and Saeed find a way off the island (114-5). In this regard, through different occasions from the “two” sides, the novel, again, displays that each occasion – whether it is good or bad – should be contextualised within its own social, cultural and political totality and that racialized generalisations, as seen in both cases, draw a normative frontline and hierarchy between “them” and “us” by demonising “them” and legitimising “us”.

### **The Process of Interpellation**

The process of interpellation – the social, cultural and economic operation of power within the logic of the dominant system – might be said to have two distinct aspects since both refugees and locals, as a consequence of this continuum, internalise the inaccurate representation of the “self”, perform the narratives of the dominant power structures in return

for recognition and visibility and *reproduce* the social relations of power. In order to exemplify this argument, I will firstly focus on the case of locals. Considering the dialectics of race and class, the dichotomous construction of “them” and “us” within the context of refugees and locals seems to be particularly instrumental for the capitalist class – also one of “us”; in fact, the *real* “us” – as a discursive formation. In the “developed” nations mainly consisting of those from a working-class background as in a typically class-divided society, unskilled refugees/migrants working in low-paid and dirty jobs lead skilled local workers to align themselves with the white supremacy myth of the ruling class. This functions as an illusionary apparatus for local workers to exert their own beings and instinctual human qualities under the alienating conditions of the money-oriented world and, therefore, offers local workers an imaginary compensation for the processes of dispossession and exploitation they run through in real life (Marx 1870<sup>2</sup>; Miles 1984; Wallerstein 1991; Callinicos 1993; Memmi 2000). The appeal of the superiority complex to local workers, basically operating through racial antagonisms, deepens the division among workers from different cultures, ethnicities, races and religions, makes local workers feel significant and acknowledged and absorbs their directionless anger against the Establishment. They, perceiving themselves as part of the ruling class and feeling that they are the *real* owners of their country, assume that migrants/refugees are responsible for instability, insecurity, social unrest, poverty and the vast majority of crimes committed in their country.

In the novel, the represented experiences of the local and nativist<sup>3</sup> characters – critically laying out the novel’s authentic portrayal of the social, cultural and economic realities of complex historical occasions pertaining in the world in the twenty-first century – reinforce the arguments above, although they might sound somewhat reductionist and deterministic. For instance, the refugees imagine that the locals live in posh neighbourhoods, dine in elegant restaurant and ride in shiny black cabs (142), whereas the refugees mostly live in worker camps bounded by perimeter fences, eat meals composed of grains, vegetables, some dairy and a little meat and pay taxes to the locals: “A mutually agreed time tax had been enacted, such that a portion of the income and toil of those who had recently arrived on the island would go to those who had there for decades” (168). The natives, unlike the refugees, work as supervisors or operators of heavy machinery and giant vehicles, speak “proper” English, *devise* methods in order to make use of so many migrants *efficiently* and do not even have lunch among the migrants who labour *under* them (176-7). Such a superiority complex within the context of the novel offers the locals a comfort zone in which they, albeit through illusory fulfilments, struggle to actualise their basic recreational functions and instinctual impulses in their human nature and feel proud, honoured, appreciative, meaningful and, therefore, more *powerful*. It helps them escape from the perceived unpleasantness of the surrounding conditions and assert their own authority and dominance over the refugees by discursively embracing the “us” identity against “them”. Since the locals consider the refugees responsible for all the problems experienced, they see the world through the filter of the ruling paradigm, the *reality* is distorted and their anger is directed towards the refugees. This functions as an ideological façade, masks the contradictory relations of production – the root cause of the social and economic problems – and facilitates the process of exploitation in favour of the bourgeoisie, which consequently legitimises the hegemony of capital and interpellates the locals into the dominant economic system theoretically and practically. In other words, while

the bourgeois class consolidates a *cheap refugee labour force* by perpetuating the colonial fantasies of racial, cultural and social superiority, it also secures its own economic and social stability and future through the them-us contradiction – another realistic element which is, though not consciously tactical, unearthed through the course of the novel.

The ideological interpellation of the refugee characters, particularly Nadia and Saeed, is, in a similar way to that of the locals, based on the acceptance and internalisation of the cultural, social and economic codes of the dominant power structures. This process also lacks a political stance and critical questioning; however, unlike the case of the locals, it reconstitutes the real nature of their identities *within* the framework of the “good and acceptable refugee” image which can be seen as a follow-up of the colonial discourse. Since the “them” identity is systematically reproduced as the weak one within a western discourse, the realities of the refugee characters are redefined through the narratives of “us” which are softly presented as truth, reason and knowledge. In order to sustain their political existence and not to be excluded in a place far away from where they were born, they *apolitically* attempt to be part of the mainstream society by embracing the discursively construed “them” identity within an “us” episteme and materialise the ideals of production in relation to the money-oriented world.

To illustrate, Saeed and Nadia – never inquiring why there is a civil war<sup>4</sup> back home and why they need to pass through many different countries in search of a better life for *themselves* – find a job in a ring of new cities built near London to accommodate more people than London itself. As a cheap refugee labour force, they, like other migrants in the worker camp, clear terrain, build infrastructure and assemble dwellings from prefabricated blocks; in return, a home on forty square metres of land with a connection to all the utilities of a modern life is promised to them. Despite the lengthy and rigorous labour, their blisters and callused hands and feeling slightly hungry all the time, they are not far down the list and look forward to moving into a house of their own (167-9). In another episode, Nadia and Saeed notice that the driver of the digging machine, a local guy, is married to a non-native wife who looks like a native person, can speak English *properly*, though having a different accent, and works as a supervisor in one of the food preparation units. Such examples of “delayed gratification” – to use the term of Richard Sennett – indirectly posit the idea that the refugees can also climb up the career ladder and live in great conditions just like the locals if they patiently work hard and act in accordance with the “good and acceptable refugee” image. This implies that the country of the locals, which is the United Kingdom in this specific example, fairly works for everyone irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion, sect, gender, colour, locality and so on, that there are no structural class limitations for an individual and that upward mobility can be placed as the collective goal of their nation to make their country *great again*. This, therefore, colonises every aspect of their life, tacitly disciplines them and functions as a persistent pressure to orientate their energies to the needs of the market, resulting in their interpellation into the “us” order *economically*.

In the novel, the foreman of Saeed is depicted as a “knowledgeable and experienced” local (176) who is admired by the refugees working *under* him since he has a kind of “charisma”, although he does not care about being admired (178). By looking at him and the other locals, they try to understand their *new* home, its people and their manners and habits, which starts to gradually change them (178). Saeed even takes advantage of speaking *proper*

English, and this locates him between the foreman and the other refugees in the team, as a result of which the foreman sits next to him when they have a lunch (177). On one occasion, in order to ingratiate himself with *his* foreman, he even goes up to him and thanks for everything he does for the migrants; however, the foreman does not reply to him at all. The rationalisation of the natural *superiority* of the locals, which is an extension of the monologic discourse of orientalism, essentially debases the refugees and degrades them to the point of nothingness and nonexistence because they associate themselves with backwardness, deprivation, irrationality and strangeness while identifying the locals – the occident – with normality, wisdom, truth, virtue and maturity. This, in fact, reinforces the arguments of the dichotomous construction of “them” and “us” and, therefore, interpellates the refugees into the boundaries of the dominant system *culturally and socially*.

At the end of the novel, Nadia and Saeed arrive in California where they settle down and enjoy a multicultural utopia with almost no natives. Such an optimistic end might sound like a desirable and utopian future for the protagonists; however, it needs to be analysed critically. This kind of *apolitical humanism* is divorced from the realities of the totality and, for that reason, legitimises the myth of multicultural existence and multi-ethnic democracy in a western capitalist club, the United States, and seems to be functional for igniting empathy and tolerance for those in need of help, which constructs the West as benevolent and consolidates its discursive hegemony and moral superiority. It does not either lead to a favourable consequence for Nadia and Saeed because their *apolitical* tendency to make a fresh start in life in the USA and to protect their personal worth within the dynamics of an oppressive and homogenising society perpetuates the existence of the social, cultural and economic forces that create their own desperate situation rather than transforming or eradicating it radically. The codes of such a reconciliation also remain within a self-centred and isolated sphere and subordinate them to the prevailing mode of production, capitalism, in relation to the essentialist constructions ascribed by “us”.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), the second novel of Hamid, Changez, a bearded Pakistani man, tells about his life back in the USA to an allegedly nervous American stranger. Towards the end of the novel, the American visitor asks whether Changez has ever heard of the janissaries, and explains that they were Christian boys captured by the Ottoman Empire and trained to be loyal soldiers in a Muslim army (172). When Changez starts to think that he, as an analyst in a US consultancy firm, is a servant of the American Empire and a modern-day janissary (173), he decides to return back to Lahore, Pakistan where he works as a professor of finance at a local university, criticises the militarism of the foreign policy of the United States and actively participates in nonviolent demonstrations against the policies of the West. In this context, unlike Changez who has political beliefs and can transform them into direct action and collective struggle, the gradual social, cultural and economic interpellation of the refugee characters in *Exit West* makes them “modern-day janissaries” since this process, as discussed above in detail, invisibly leads them to adopt the prescribed truths of “us” by manufacturing consent.

## Conclusion

In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid aesthetically individualises one dimension of the totality of an epoch, reimagines and universalises migrant/refugee experience and provides a realistic snapshot of the social, historical, cultural and political actualities of the twenty-first century through his tacit political commentary. Although the authorial voice of his third person narrator seems to delegitimise refugees discursively, his narrator actually mocks the discursive victimisation of refugees on different platforms and critically deconstructs mythical narratives which objectify, dehumanise, marginalise and otherise refugees within the framework of the dichotomy of “them” and “us”. The gradual interpellation of Hamid’s refugee characters into the logic of the dominant economic system in a western country can be investigated in relation to a wider narrative of “white” supremacy and capitalism and exemplifies and concretises the case of refugees from many different backgrounds in the world. As the core reason of why there is a civil war in a remote part of the world is never taken into account with a materialist explanation, the process of the depoliticisation of the refugee “crisis” by means of “magic words” – such as freedom, stability and the right of refugee’s freedom of movement– and apolitical humanist arguments divorced from the socio-political whole practically sustains the global domination of the capitalist mode of production. It justifies the binary paradigms of the orientalist mind-set as the dichotomy of “them” and “us” is constructed upon the artificial binary opposition between the Orient and the Occident, leading the West to take its “historical” responsibility, export democracy, bring order and ironically help those in a desperate situation. As in the specific context of the refugee characters, Nadia and Saaed, this process also depoliticises refugees and make them “modern-day janissaries” – to use the metaphor of Hamid. Consequently, they struggle for acceptance into community as part of the “good and acceptable refugee” image in return for acknowledgement and visibility, and this essentially promotes the interests of “us” and legitimises the liberal centrist hegemony regarding the refugee “crisis” in the world.

## Notes

1. The magical doors only go one way and there is no way back once someone leaves. The door motif in *Exit West* is reminiscent of C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), a fantasy novel which is set in Narnia, a land full of mythical creatures and animals that can talk, and focuses on four children living in a large and old country house after a wartime evacuation and visiting Narnia through a secret passageway in a wardrobe in order to save Narnia and their lives. As stated by Hamid in an interview: “Yes, [the doors are] a bit like ‘Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe’. But the doors, although they’re not true to physics, I think they’re emotionally true to our current technological reality. You can open your computer and look at somebody via Skype. And it looks like you’re looking at a window. Or I can step on an airplane, as I did the other day, and within a few hours be in New York” (2017).
2. See [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/letters/70\\_04\\_09.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/letters/70_04_09.htm).
3. The term “nativist” has a negative connotation in the novel.

4. In *Discontent and Its Civilisations*, Mohsin Hamid points out that “globalisation is a brutal phenomenon” and that “it brings us mass displacement, wars, terrorism, unchecked financial capitalism, inequality, xenophobia, climate change” (2015, xi). So, the civil war in the first part of the novel might be associated with the process of globalisation.

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## About the Author

**Sercan Hamza BAĞLAMA** graduated from the Department of English Literature at Hacettepe University, Turkey in 2010. He, then, completed his PhD under the supervision of Prof. Patricia Waugh at Durham University, UK in 2018. He visited the University of California, Berkeley as a research scholar in 2017. He now works in the Department of English Literature at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey. His research interests lie in

post-war British literature, literary theories and political philosophy. His book entitled *The Resurrection of the Spectre: A Marxist Analysis of Race, Class and Alienation in Post-war British Novel* was published by Peter Lang in 2018.