

## **DYSTOPIAN FUTURES: NEW CITY-SCRAPES**

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### **Abstract**

*In the last 10 years Europe has seen unprecedented migration from the East to the West, while some countries have welcomed these migrants other countries have built walls and used riot police with tear gas to stem the flow of these unwanted strangers. In Mohsin Hamid's dystopian novel Exit West (2017), time and space collapse into the emergence of failed cities where social disorder is rife. This study looks at the possibility of constant displacement, resurgent nationalism and those who exist on the periphery of the modern. In this 'liquid modernity' people disappear through magical doors, into new worlds where there is a growing conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty is the only certainty. In these worlds, the characters act like tourists in search of multiple but fleeting social experiences. In Hamid's dystopia, there is a new world order, one of impermanence, rootlessness and the growth of securitization.*

**Keywords:** dystopia, liquid modernity, magical realism, displacement.

### **1. Introduction**

Mohsin Hamid's most recent novel *Exit West* focuses on belonging in a politically unstable global landscape where people are at the mercy of the market in a liquid, increasingly individualistic and insecure world, often forcing the populations of some countries to leave their homes in the hope of finding safety and new homes in their final destinations. Hamid reveals the ordeals refugees are confronted with in a world where negative stereotyping as well as exclusionist government policies have, according to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, reduced asylum seekers and migrants to "human waste", driving them into the dumping grounds of refugee camps or urban ghettos. The question remains, how these people, reduced to the status of waste maintain their sense of dignity, autonomy and identity in a seemingly inescapable predicament? The irony is as more and more people are displaced, so too, are the barriers created by nation states to stem the flow of human migrations, while leaving those same borders open to money, economic, technological and cultural flows.

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As a consequence of globalisation migration has turned in the opposite direction to colonial times placing the ‘immigrant’ and ‘asylum seeker’ centre stage as the new problem in the contemporary political agenda and the rising role played by the vague and diffuse ‘security fears’ in the emerging global strategies in the logic of power struggles which have “resulted in the establishment of ‘frontier-land’ conditions of a new sort of planetary “space of flows” (Bauman 2004: 7). Bauman believes this has led to a situation where “alarms about deteriorating security” have magnified internal ‘security fears’ in the West “while simultaneously shifting public concerns and the outlets for individual anxiety away from the economic and social roots of trouble towards concerns for personal [bodily] safety” (7). It is within this landscape of mass migration, constant change, political and social instability as well as the increased securitisation of the world as a barrier to these movements of people that Hamid situates his narrative. The narrative begins in the past, in an unnamed city on the brink of civil war. The city’s anonymity acts to universalise the context in which the characters find themselves. As the situation in the nameless city deteriorates even more, at the same the militants belonging to an undisclosed faction wrest control from the government forces, the novel’s protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, plan their escape. In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid explores a world in which increased securitisation fosters a ‘them’ and ‘us’ dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion and where mass communication is exploited to disseminate pictures that necessitate the use of force, drones and the army to keep those nativists safe from a unpredictable and seemingly violent other. Hamid highlights how mass communication has both negative and positive uses in exploiting fear but also of transmitting information that enables the migrant a semblance of agency. This follows a tradition of earlier dystopic writers who wrestled with the complex relation between politics and mass culture who were writing in response to specific totalitarian manipulations of the masses in the mid-twentieth century including themes of mass surveillance, behavioural conditioning, exploitation of leisure and language in creating a disciplinary power that is internalised by the masses and becomes abstract and invisible.

In *Exist West*, the language of governments and the mass media have been able to perpetuate fear of the other by exploiting images of not only the enemy within but also from outside borders in using immigration to justify the need for the erosion of individual freedoms, the need for extra surveillance and access to information as well as promoting the ‘nativist’ elements in protecting British values and life-styles from being eroded by those also seeking protection from wars and political repression. Hamid utilises literary devices to remind the reader of the link between the mass movement of people to the West is a consequence of colonial rule which ignored internal ethnic, cultural traditions as well as societal and tribal norms in imposing nation states and so-called democratic institutions in creating the tensions which exist today erupting into civil wars in those countries which were under British colonial rule and those discourses which defined the ‘native’ as inferior, form the basis in racialising the ‘other’, of those asking for asylum today. Paul Gilroy believes the national consciousness of Britain is defined now by war which “supplies the master trope and immigration constitutes the principle menace” and the nationalism portrayed through the nativist’s “assumes xenophobic, belligerent and militaristic forms” (2002: xxxiii).

## 1. Displacement

As the situation in the nameless city deteriorates even more, with public executions and fighter bombers strikes, there are “bodies hanging from street lamps and billboards like a form of festive seasonal decoration” (Hamid 2017: 81). Saeed’s mother is killed by a sniper bullet while looking for a lost ear-ring in the family car taking half her face off. Her death acts as a

signifier of the wider destruction of the norms which hold societies together. She as mother nurtures a new generation but her death acts as a metaphor for the loss of traditions and the breakdown of society. She is another invisible casualty of the war. At the same time the militants belonging to an undisclosed faction wrest control from the government forces, the novel's protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, plan their escape to safety. It is through Hamid's use of magical realism that the reader learns that even 'normal doors' "could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door"(59/70). The characters move between time and space through Hamid's use of an abrupt filmic technique, the jump-cut. The narrative jump-cuts from one terrain to another, between past and present and, where psychological and political spaces disrupt the linear progression of time. Hamid uses an email from Saeed to a client in Australia to highlight a world interconnected not only through the Internet but through movements of goods, services and people. The narrative jumps-cuts to a sleeping woman in Sydney, unaware of a man emerging from her closet, "the heart of darkness", a man "with dark skin and dark, woolly hair" who had had a life where "he knew how little it took to make a man into meat: the wrong blow, the wrong gunshot, the wrong flick of a blade, turn of a car" but he also knew that "alone a person is almost nothing" (Hamid 2017: 7). Hamid juxtaposes a reference to Joseph Conrad's novella *The Heart of Darkness*, but the implication here is that the heart of darkness is really a Australia living in fear of the other and its on-going policy of protecting its borders, the house in Sydney was alarmed, but it is Australia itself and its government's policy of placing asylum seekers in detention centres on off-shore islands, hell-holes like the Belgian Congo where Conrad's novella has been said to be set in, although Conrad himself denies this. It is a reference to Australia's 'white Australia Policy' which was superseded by multiculturalism in the 1970's but instead of becoming a white nation Australia is in fact a heart of darkness in its creation of off-shore dumping grounds for those it has condemned to human waste. More importantly, it is also a reference to Australia's colonial past and it's displacement of the indigene often condemning them to reservations, guaranteeing their invisibility by categorising them flora and fauna in a dehumanising process that wasn't reversed until 1987. It is a door like the one "with dark skin and woolly hair emerged that Saeed and Nadia move through, which initially take them from their unnamed city to Mykonos, a location synonymous with refugees from Syria trying to enter Europe. The next door leads them to London where they are confronted with 'nativist' mobs who looked to "Nadia like a strange and violent tribe, intent on their destruction, some armed with iron bars or knives" (Hamid 2016: 131) which the army was deployed and the police as well to quell the unrest from those who desired to "reclaim Britain for Britain" (132).

## **2. London a Dystopian City**

Hamid situates his novel *Exit West* in a dystopian spatiality and it is through the temporal and spatial oscillations in that he is able to link the individual struggle of his main characters Nadia and Saeed's migration to the broader geopolitical and economic contexts of the world system. Hamid jump-cuts time and space from one place to another linking the political and social issues of the plight of refugees, the growth of nationalism and political narratives which define those who belong and those who should be kept out, the othering of the asylum seeker as human waste. In Hamid's dystopian London, humanity, once the measure of all things, has been replaced by nightmarish landscapes of exploding bombs, drones, and a world divided into light and dark. In London, Nadia and Saeed are restricted to a fenced in ghetto, patrolled by soldiers and police. They arrived in "full riot gear ... armed with what appeared to be sub-machine guns" (Hamid, 2017: 124), demanding the migrants leave the dwelling they and other migrants had squatted in. During their time in London, Saeed and Nadia are attacked

and beaten by vigilantes encouraged by government rhetoric having been given “a wink and a nod from the authorities” (132) to form legions. Saeed and Nadia were attacked by a “nativist mob” who “looked to Nadia like a strange and violent tribe, intent on their destruction, some armed with iron bars or knives” (131). Hamid mimics the catch phrase of the Brexiteers “to reclaim Britain for Britain” (132), in which the army was to be deployed to deal with the ‘migrant problem’ and for anyone else to join after having been given a week’s training. Hamid links this incident to the media presentation of Islamic State (IS) inspired incidents in London which the media has created a narrative of the ‘enemy within’, therefore creation a scenario for the need for the loss of personal freedoms under the guise of security and protection. Migrants are depicted as ‘a problem’ which needs to be disposed of like human waste, collected and placed in a purpose built disposal unit, here in dark London. Hamid contrasts London rioting, armed soldiers, vigilantism with the civil war which Nadia and Saeed had fled from. It is the dark London which Nadia and Saeed find themselves in after having been magically transported through another magical door from Mykonos to London. Here, Hamid depicts a world dichotomy of ‘them’ in light London and the migrant as ‘human waste’ corralled in a dark world, fenced in, drones provide constant surveillance information to those unnamed and invisible who keep the ‘peace’: “All over London houses and parks and disused lots were being peopled in this way, some said by a million migrants, some said by twice that. It seemed the more empty a space in the city the more it attracted squatters, with unoccupied mansions in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea” (126), where absentee landlords live elsewhere unaware of the squatters creating “black holes in the fabric of the nation” (126). The London house which Nadia and Saeed ended up living in came to be known as “Nigeria House” (142) due to the large number of Nigerians who lived there. However, as Nadia soon found out these so-called Nigerians were in fact, “half Nigerians, or from places that bordered Nigeria, from families that spanned both sides of the border” and “different Nigerians spoke different tongues among themselves, and belonged to different religions”. In addition, people spoke “different variations of English, different Englishes” (144). These images question concepts of modern nations which have constructed images of nationhood around sameness which migration disrupts. As well, under colonialism borders were drawn disregarding tribal differences and tribal concepts of territory and kinship and cultural-linguistic differences. Racism blurs difference conflating Western cultural superiority to monolithic constructs of the colonial other. However, through Nadia the reader finds out that in fact these differences in contrast to the depictions of Nigerians they have maintained their identities regardless of the nightly fights, murders and rapes. In dark London ‘nativist provocateurs’ disrupt the peace of dark London reminiscent of Nazi Germany. However, a council was set by the migrants to resolve disputes including theft, and “unneighbourly behaviour”. In this dystopian London of surveillance cameras, drones, fences and lack of law and order it is the migrants that maintain order, resolve disputes and marriage to maintain a way of living in a chaotic city whose institutions were failing.

### **3. Magical Realism**

It is Hamid’s use of magical realism which highlights Saeed and Nadia’s world in terms of the magical and the real, but it is the magical which deteriorates into a dystopic, shifting the form of the novel from social realism and eyewitness reportage evoking contemporary refugeedom to a fable about deterritorialisation, and a dystopic fiction about the consequences of a world in constant change unable to cope, paralysed in a state of fear of the ‘other’ and bounded by increased securitisation. Normality is interspersed with rumours of doors “which could take you elsewhere, often to places far away” (Hamid 2017:69). It is through Hamid’s use of magical realism that the reader learns that ‘normal doors’ could become “a special door”, and

it “could happen without warning, to any door” (70). The characters move through doors, which initially take them from their unnamed city to Mykonos, a location synonymous with refugees from mainly Syria trying to enter Europe. The next door leads them to London where they are confronted by ‘nativist’ mobs who looked to “Nadia like a strange and violent tribe, intent on their destruction, some armed with iron bars or knives” (Hamid 2017: 131) which the army was deployed and the police to quell the unrest from those who desired to “reclaim Britain for Britain” (132). London was awash with rumours those who couldn’t prove their legal residence status being taken to holding camps in the city’s green belt and “around this zone were soldiers and armoured vehicles, and above it were drones and helicopters. And inside were Nadia and Saeed, who had run from war already” (135). London is depicted in terms of militarised zones, dystopian and dangerous; a place without light. Hamid refers to it as dark London. “In dark London, rubbish accrued, uncollected, and underground stations were sealed” (142).

Hamid cut-jumps from country to country, from one situation to another, therefore it is the characters that drive the narrative. Characters appear and disappear or may appear somewhere else in the world. Hamid cuts from Nadia and Saeed sharing their first “spliff together” (Hamid 2017: 25) to the Tokyo district of Shinjuku where a man is drinking a whisky but this whisky is not Japanese but Irish. He goes outside to smoke a cigarette to find two Filipina girls, “standing beside a disused door to the rear of the bar, a door that was always kept locked, but was at this moment somehow open, a portal of complete blackness” (27). In his view, “[t]he girls were dressed strangely, in clothing that was too thin, tropical, not the kind of clothing you normally saw Filipinas wear in Tokyo” (27), providing an illusion to sex trafficking of women across the world but also racism and the fear of the other: “He disliked Filipinos. They had their place, but they had to know their place” (28). He then goes on to recall a half-Filipino boy at junior high school who he regularly beat up. Hamid in this way is able to explore the plight of the world’s unfortunate and a ‘them’ and ‘us’ dichotomy leading to exploitation and othering where difference becomes persecution. In this forever changing world, empathy becomes obsolete as humans can only develop superficially. Individualism becomes a brand to be marketed and people are divided into insiders and outsiders.

In London, he notes that “their street was under attack by a nativist mob” (131). By jump-cutting one situation to another, Hamid is able to explore social issues around migration and belonging. In London, some of other migrants (the Nigerians) who lived in the same area of London held meetings calling themselves the council, although while Nadia understands the Nigerians were in fact not all Nigerians, as Hamid cuts across categories based on defining national identities and narratives of national sameness and he also alludes to Britain’s colonial past – “Together in this group they conversed in a language that was built in large part from English, but not solely from English ... also they spoke different variations English, different Englishes” (144), suggesting different hybridities contesting narratives based on ethnic and cultural purities.

Hamid draws the readers’ attention to the ways in which colonialism and independence agreements have created a world of invisibility through the categorisation of territorial boundaries in the creation of national borders in Africa as well as other colonies, in fact wiping out of history the histories of many regional groups who make up these countries. Voices have been silenced only to re-emerge in a dystopian world where war, austerity and Brexit have seen the growth of nationalist groups in Europe and the UK as well as populist ideologies. It is also a statement about modernism’s obsession with categorising everything into monolithic sameness, obscuring difference and diversity.

Nadia is, in wearing a black robe to protect herself from unwanted male attention, a reminder of the diverse ways Muslim women use the veil and although Nadia does not pray, she also contests a view of Muslims in the West as dressing in a particular way. Like in all countries, people's relationship with their religion manifests itself in many ways. By allowing Nadia to speak for herself by not covering her face, Hamid contests literalist images of Muslim-ness although neither Saeed's nor Nadia's religion is specified, Hamid creates spaces for individual expressions of religiosity. Hamid blurs different religious voices allowing for different interpretations of modesty suggesting that even in secular places sacred space can be created. An Imam offers Saeed somewhere to stay in his house but men and women were to be separated, even those who were married, unfortunately even he and his own wife were split-up in this manner" (Hamid 2017:149). It was the only civilised thing he could do to retain his sense of normality and religiosity in the chaos of dark London, a way of retaining a sense of self and identity.

As Nadia and Saeed drift apart Saeed becomes closer to those he sees as familiar, the same as him and the country he originally came from:

*He was drawn to people from their own country, both in the labour camp and online. It seemed to Nadia that the further they moved from the city of their birth, through space and through time, the more he sought to strengthen his connection to it, tying the ropes to the air of an era that for her was unambiguously gone (Hamid et al 2017: 187).*

Hamid explores loss and belonging through the differing paths Saeed and Nadia eventually take as their journey progresses. Saeed returning to his homeland while Nadia remained in the United States as "they grew less worried each other 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"(222). The relationship mimics the migrants' relationship with home and belonging while Saeed looks back to a home which no-longer existed as a way of making sense of a world which no-longer makes sense, a dislocated, rootless existence while, it was Nadia who negotiated a new hybrid identity where she still wore her black robes. This grated on Saeed "for she did not pray, and she avoided speaking their language, and she avoided their people" (187). Hamid associates the end of a relationship with death and by doing this is able to depict the sense of loss people who are exiled from their homelands feel and he is therefore able to portray the temporariness and fluidity in a global world while at the time suggesting that it is only when one has left their homeland that they truly understand what has been left behind as in this ever changing world do we know "the value of things" (204).

Through the use of jump-cuts Hamid is able to highlight the consequences of this liquid world. In Morocco a mother is left alone as her husband had "not long after their marriage gone to Europe, and from which he had not returned, and from which he had eventually stopped sending money" (223). In Tijuana in Mexico near the US border, a House of the Children or orphanage sat, full of children whose parents or 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" (157). But Hamid also suggests a multi-layered situation where mothers appeared "out of a black door" into the orphanage who could only recognise her mother having "seen her on electronic displays, on the screens of phones and computers" to walk to a cantina, where the owner, with a smile bending his moustache, smiling making his "fierce visage somewhat goofy for a moment, and with that the mother and her daughter were gone" (159) is suggestive of a darker side of immigration. This is the sex trade of young girls into border towns where young girls looking for a better life disappear into brothels and invisibility, another victim of globalisation and a world where people become waste to be

disposed of in the most profitable way. Although Zygmunt Bauman believes that in contemporary consumerist culture and liquid modern existence where unviable relationships are still born, unfit and “born with the mark of impending waste”, Hamid allows for the characters to negotiate where immigration officers and quality controllers are needed. They are to stand guard on the line separating order and chaos” but in Hamid’s dystopic world of economic exploitation, inclusion and exclusion Saeed and Nadia negotiate new belongings and multi-layered identities which allow them to slip through ‘doors’ to new beginnings although Saeed remained un-moored in a fluid world by retaining a sense of a homeland which no-longer physically existed he could retain his memories by seeking out similar people who were like him.

#### 4. Conclusion

In Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* dystopian world, images of militants in an unnamed country carry out beheadings and carry out house to house searches for “people of a particular sect” checking ID’s, massacres take place in the streets of Vienna reminiscent of the Bataclan attack in Paris while pictures of Yazidi women being sold off in slave markets in Iraq and Syria are beamed across the world through the communication media, Filipina prostitutes emerge from black doors in Tokyo. Hamid is able to explore the consequences on those asylum seekers and refugees as they negotiate a hostile dystopic world of securitization, impermanence and nationalist vigilantes the characters find ways to resist being reduced to human waste which is to be used and exploited for money or disposed of through the global sex and slave trade, religious extremism, violent nationalist and anti-immigration movements through the opening of doors even normal doors to other places. Nevil Stephen argues that magical realism as a discursive tool “subverts the assumptions and conventionalities of the European realism and privileges the juxtaposition of objective and subjective realities” (Stephen 2016: 3), as *Exit West* allows for the subjectivities of the characters to develop identities to a back drop of social realism. Magical realism as a discursive tool privileges the marginalised voices with new possibilities and new realities disrupting the dystopian landscape the novel is set and the characters move through.

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