

## *Exit West*

### Reviewed by Anum Aziz

*Exit West: A Novel*. Mohsin Hamid. Riverhead Books (Reprint Edition), 2018. 256 pages. Paperback. \$10.40

Mohsin Hamid explores the issues of identity, migration and change in the face of a war-ridden and fast-evolving world in his fourth novel *Exit West*. This novel has been nominated for and has won multiple awards globally including LA Times Book Prize. *Exit West* follows the lives of the two protagonists, Nadia and Saeed as war and an extremist regime forces them to abandon their (unnamed) home country and search for refuge in the West. Hamid has used extremely simple, yet poignant and profound, prose intertwined with elements of magic realism to tell a story of humanity in flux through the experiences of the two protagonists. He explores the transience of human contact in the bigger scheme of the world which nonetheless forms bonds and leaves lasting impact – molding personalities and changing lives. Despite the profundity and seriousness of the subject matter, *Exit West* never becomes bleak and continues to paint an optimistic and variable picture of a world with an innate understanding of human nature and abundance of humor.

Nadia is an unconventional young woman who is estranged from her family for opting to live alone and flout convention in a highly traditional place. Saeed is a mild mannered young man who lives with his parents as per tradition and is part of a happy family. They meet in an evening class on “corporate identity and product branding” and fall in love while the world around them changes and transitions from a comparatively peaceful place to a dangerous and conflictual one, which eventually claims the life of Saeed’s mother. Grouping together for protection and security, Nadia moves in with Saeed and his father where they mourn his mother and plan an escape from this place where the new regime carries out daily killings of opponents.

Hamid has brilliantly used the elements of magic realism to draw a vivid picture of change and migration and the dangers they entail. He subtly blends in the magical elements with the real by referring to the magical “doors” as “dark rectangles” and simultaneously showing them emerge across the globe with shadowy people moving through them. These secret doors open onto new and unknown places and thus offer an escape from war. Hamid describes them emerging in mundane places but quickly reclaimed by secret agents who let

desperate people pass for a price. There is complete uncertainty as to the journey and place of arrival, depicting not only passage and escape but also danger and uncertainty of the refugee routes in the contemporary world. Nadia and Saeed hear of the portals and decide to use one to escape the dangerous and oppressive regime. As they move from their native home to Mykonos, the narrative focuses on regret and loss as the first change which makes itself apparent in their identities. Nadia's and her family's regret of never bridging the gap which becomes final in the face of war; Saeed's regret and sense of guilt and loss at giving in to his father's injunction and leaving him behind.

They use these "doors" to move from Mykonos to London and then to Marin, California. Each place of transition brings in its own challenges, hardships and dangers for them – all the while contributing to the change and development in their identities and outlooks on life. These changes transform their romantic relationship to one of familiarity and then distance. Despite the hardships, Nadia embraces the challenges more readily than Saeed and does not have difficulty in accepting and fitting in with different cultures. It is because of her initiative that they are able to find the door to London and then to Marin. Saeed, on the other hand, finds it difficult to adjust and is forever looking for a connection with home. These differences slowly transcend into the silences between them, mimicking the changes that occur in cultures and identities due to displacement and migration. Hamid intersperses the story of their journey with short narratives of similar changes occurring all over the globe, where people are coming together from all across the world and making new hybrid cultures – a dazed family emerging in a luxury building, a dark shadow emerging from a cupboard in Australia and an old "wrinkled" man emerging from a shed and taking a native for an exhilarating trip back through it. All these stories paint a picture of a world in flux, which is changing and evolving and giving birth to new worldviews and new vistas.

Nadia and Saeed's move from one part of the globe to another, leads to their unintentional yet unavoidable involvement in the conflict between natives and incoming refugees. The authorities of the host city (London) decide to provide habitation for the foreigners by starting a home building project. The influx of strangers of various ethnicities into Saeed and Nadia's daily lives, the politics surrounding such interactions, the dilemma of faith in such a diverse community all become factors in the development of their identity. Nadia, the woman who did not pray, finds it easier to adjust and move away from a culture and a country which she already sees in the past. Saeed on the other hand, is nostalgic about his home and connects with his countrymen – all the while

becoming more religious. These differences in their personalities keep expanding, slowly pulling them apart even as they try to hold on. In a failed attempt to reignite the spark between them they use another door and move to Maine. The reformation of their individual identities due to contact with diversity eventually results in them splitting, with Saeed moving on with a priest's daughter and Nadia finding a companion in a blue-eyed woman.

Hamid uses the story of their journey to create a microcosm of the globe which is constantly changing and reforming due to the onslaught of terrorism, war and displacement. *Exit West* discusses these changes with optimism for a more fluid world which oscillates between cultures and identities smoothly. So, in the end, when Nadia and Saeed meet again after fifty years in the now peaceful city of their origin and make plans to see the stars in Chile, they are different and yet the same people – reflecting real human beings and their development. Hamid's narrative is a vivid, optimistic and yet real depiction of our modern fragmented world and his recent Sitara-i-Imtiaz [Star of Excellence] from the government of Pakistan is a timely and well-deserved testament to his excellence.