


Cross-cultural Ambiance in Mohsin Hamid's Novel *Exit West*

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Abstract

Hamid's novel Exit West (2017) envisions the possibility of restructuring the identity, experience, and living conditions of individuals by providing opportunities for interconnectedness, community sharing, and compassionate human standing in a cross-cultural set-up. Based on the novel's narrative, this paper highlights that individuals restricted within suffocating territorial boundaries try to escape through a magical door, as indicated in the novel, in search of a space where a multicultural milieu finds a congenial environment for living. Cross-cultural theory is the theoretical framework used to analyze the novel. Employing the qualitative technique, the paper analyzes the acclimatization process of a culturally and ethnically diverse society, including the socio-psychological behavior of people. This paper infers that when individuals confront terror and unrest in a country and culture, their escape to a new locale endows them with an unexpected welcome gesture and enhances their life and living, indicating what multicultural association can do to humanity. Ultimately, it deduces that the escape of the protagonists of the novel Saeed and Nadia from their hometown through a magic door to Greece and London before eventually settling in San Francisco for social security implies the significance of a multicultural locale. Despite their assorted upbringing, they develop compassionate feelings in the new location, internalizing the entire world as a global cultural village. The acceptance of a broader community, epitomizing the diverse spectrum of humanity, creates a milieu of harmony. This study acclaims cross-cultural assimilation for physical, psychological, and social well-being.

Keywords: Border, cross-cultural, global cultural village, magic door, relocation

Introduction

Hamid's *Exit West* deals with the safe exit and relocation of the protagonists through the magical door in a multicultural society. Magic door acts as the means for human connections across cultures since they endow an opportunity to exit from their town and settle in a new place. Moving beyond cultural borders for the safety of life highlights the results of existing topographical borders and the importance of cross-cultural society. Moving beyond the territorial border to save lives, indicates the significance of multiculturalism, which amplifies the value of a cosmopolitan society. Hence, relocation allows migrants to restructure their experiences and behaviors anew. This study analyses the cross-cultural phenomenon in the novel highlighting the significance of multiculturalism. It reshuffles the sense of

home and homeliness to the people, through the protagonists. Cross-culture redefines the meaning of physical home to the people dispersed from their hometown and leads to togetherness and bond. Cross-cultural activities promote social synchronization. Nadia and Saeed are typical figures to validate social harmonization in a new location.

Adjustment and adaptation in new locations validate the cross-cultural ambiance of *Exit West*. Global societal relation emerges due to forceful and volunteer migration and relocation. Two characters, Nadia and Saeed voluntarily move to a new location using the magic door as the exit point. The host place readily welcomes, them as people there belong to diverse nations. Cross-cultural setting supported to restructuring and repositioning individuals in the new community. The turbulence in the nations leads the people forcefully to cross the topographical and cultural border and transfer to a new realm for peace and security. The welcoming gesture of the host country supports the cross-cultural ambiance. Reflecting upon the implication of culture for societal linking, Johnson et al. (2004) assert, “Cultural processes are important and interesting because they are a medium within which powerful social relationships are played” (p.10). Once a new cultural location accepts intangible activities, cross-culture flourishes. Societal relations promote fraternity. However, Ryan (2010) details the importance of social engineering, “Climate, soil quality, and availability of building materials” (p.12) as resources for social engineering. Though it takes time, people can feel happy in a new location. He assesses the pressure of diverse values mixing in one place due to migration and refugees “Even in one location, there can be multiple cultures” (p. 22). The existence of multiple cultures is the base for harmonization. Acceptance of multicultural society gears up social congruence. Prentice et al. (2010) describes the details of the process of globalization that involves the “density of flows of people, finance, technologies, media and ideas, images and technologies” (p. xiv) that contribute to global relations. The basis for global relations is an inclusive society. Whether people from different upbringings are prepared to concede that the world has already entered into a global community.

Immigrants receive an instantaneous welcome and find the presence of people from assorted upbringings in the host country due to cross-cultural ambiance and relocation. Culture is not genomic rather it is learned from one’s familiarity with community ideals in a way Hurn & Tomalin (2013) point out “Culture is a system of shared beliefs and values which are learned rather than inherited” (p.5). Socio-cultural environment shapes learned principles and standards. Multicultural society accepts the independent existence of people from miscellaneous upbringings and promotes cultural mosaic. Hurn & Tomalin (2013) assert that people have independent cultural communities, “different cultural communities should live their way of life in an essentially self-contained way” (p.193). Such communities are not scared of discernment in terms of ethnic and geographical background.

Language, art, and literature universalize the specific culture through artistic arrangements that in turn back up the multicultural ambiance. The simultaneous presence of two or more cultures, either of one nation or the other, is the primary concern of the multicultural society. Oster (2013) reasons for the fusion of distinctiveness and hints how “Language creates a new mirror in which the writer sees herself a new and which reflects her new (perhaps hybrid) identity” (p.33). One aspect of identity formation in a multicultural society is the use of language. Literary art crosses borders and universalizes the inclusive provisions. Leuthold (2011) prioritizes the significance of art for transcending the cultural border and opines, “Art has frequently developed across boundaries of place and time” (p.1). He discusses an issue that “The relationship between art and culture involves a back-and-forth movement,

two poles of thought, the contextual and universal” (p.16). Language, literature, and art accelerate the specific trend to the global village.

Migration of people from one location to the next leads to cultural pluralism in the host place. The cross-cultural phenomenon is the major issue that emerges after mass migration from one country to the next. When people move from one geographical location to another, ethnicity, color, and religion automatically get connected. Then there is a paradigm shift from monoculture to plural culture. The result is the simultaneous connection of diverse aspects of society. Smith (2008) asserts that “making connections between geography and ethnicity and color tenuous” is the “societal shift in the direction of cultural plurality” (p.2). Tomes (2013) points out that globalized village fine-tuning is conceivable through cultural transmission, “cross-culture is the scientific understanding of the behaviors and beliefs shaped and influenced by socio-cultural factors transmitted from one culture to another culture” (p.6). Geographical connection leads to cultural transmission. Geographically and socially distanced individuals mix up through “cross-culture ties to bring together such relatively unrelated areas” (p.8) for the founding of the bonds. For Tomes (2013) “Ecology, sociology, and biology” (p.9) are the key features which outline cross-cultural principles. Thus, multiculturalism is the outcome of people’s relocation. Culture is not a static space; neither is it the sole property of a specific location.

Cross-cultural ambiance takes place due to immigration, intercontinental trade, and refugees. This situation is further supported by the keen interest of people on cross border mobility for financial, recreational, social, and personal motives. Transcending territorial and cultural borders and entering into a new avenue accelerates the meaning of cross-cultural global exchange. Hamid’s *Exit West* deserves significance due to its implied value for cross-cultural ambiance. The protagonists Saeed and Nadia moved from an unnamed country to a new country through a magic door for physical, psychological, and cultural relocation. The magic door blurs the territorial boundary and works as the third space to go beyond the regional boundary. The host countries, London, and the USA receive them and people from diverse nations reside without horror as they feel at home in the new location despite their assorted backgrounds. The novel highlights the magic door, and harmonious existence in the host country to justify the significance of relocation and inclusive culture.

Review of Literature

Hamid’s *Exit West* draws thematic, rhetorical, and narrative considerations from the critics. Fisher (2019) attributes the significance of magic door as a gateway to the safety zone, “*Exit West* fantastical doors allow refugees who have access to a door to travel at will to safer or more desirable location” (p.1121) because of the “failures of modern asylum systems that prioritize border security over human rights” (p. 1134). The lack of public security pushes the characters to follow the magic door and move to the safe zone, knobs Fisher. However, Liaquat analyzes the novel from the point of view of migration trauma, “Surveillance drone cameras, helicopters, armored tanks, and robots are intensifying the traumas related to migration” (p.154). The war atmosphere of the unnamed country traumatizes the citizens and intensifies them to leave the place, The ever-present turmoil shocks the native people. In the words of Lagji, (2018) mobility and immobility simultaneously work due to contemporary orientation, “Mobility paradigm who content waiting indexes a temporal orientation of both activity and passivity, mobility and immobility” (p.12). He further specifies, “The existential and effective experiences of waiting persist even as mobility resumes” (p.2). Mir (2018) critically acclaims the novel

from the perspective of the refugee predicament of the contemporary situation, “Keeping the city unnamed is a way of universalizing the predicament of refugees” (p.15). He analyzes the catastrophic predicament of the world, “The novelist is guessing an age in which all the mankind will be refugees” (p.16). Internal turmoil is the cause of the remark. Hussain & Muhammad (2020) proclaim it as the consequence of the immigrant problem, “*Exit West* attempts his best in depicting the global immigrant crisis along with discontents of globalization in the lives of people of the modern era” (p.334). For them, the immigrant predicament is the theme of the novel. People’s displeasure and discomfort with the existing place led them to a new avenue for multiculturalism.

Critics acclaim the novel from the perspective of internal security, migration ordeal, mobility patterns, and the wide-reaching predicament of the immigrant crisis. Their additional logic is that once a nation is not secured, people quest for multiple ways to exit from the frontier. However, Hamid’s novel *Exit West* deserves importance to universalize the obligation of a multicultural society. This is the age in which people prioritize the global village. The novel universalizes the significance of multicultural society curiously and details the longing to exit the unnamed country through the magic door for relocation, and the cosmopolitan atmosphere in the host country to Saeed and Nadia. The joyous feeling of the protagonists in the new location with people from assorted nationalities and ethnic backgrounds justifies the value of multicultural society.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative research design to validate the argument that cross-cultural activities promote social synchronization. People have the internal drive to go beyond geographical boundaries for cross-cultural assimilation. The liminal space between the countries requires narratives for cross-cultural ambiance and social harmony. To justify the logic, cross-cultural studies is the theoretical framework to analyze Mohsin Hamid’s novel *Exit West*. The cross-cultural theory developed by Oster (2003), Prentice et al. (2010), Tomes (2013), and Hurn & Tomalin (2013), form the theoretical means. Textual analyses using textual evidence and warrants validate the logic through qualitative techniques. The secondary sources are research publications on cross-cultural theory and the novel *Exit West*.

Magic Door as a Metaphor for Cross-cultural Ambiance

Magic door is the metaphorical door in the novel to let people create cross-cultural and cross-country connectivity. This connectivity supports the inclusiveness and acceptance of the global village. The underlying motive for cross-cultural ambiance is fulfilled through immigrant crisis, labor migration, international trade, and lack of internal security. Consequently, people go beyond the territorial fence and integrate into the new place. Cross-cultural integration develops the nations as the global village. Consequently, nations become inclusive villages where social harmony exists despite assorted backgrounds. Strict adherence to a single culture does not gratify people in multicultural locale. Fear of cultural plurality is strong when people are habituated to cultural singularity, but a multicultural social milieu promotes socialization. The home-bound concept gets challenged by social mobility. Hamid’s novel *Exit West* embodies the cross-culture setting that respects the independent existence of the miscellaneous culture and promotes social harmony. The metaphorical door opens up a new avenue to promote multiculturalism. The protagonists pass through the magic door to exit from the physical border and enter into the world of cross-cultural possibility. The exit from their hometown endows

them with the joy of getting into multicultural settings. The study highlights that cultural and territorial boundary generates fear to open up new avenues.

Hamid's novel *Exit West* begins with the narration of the refugee problem and its consequences in an unnamed city, "A city swollen by refugees" (p.1) and disturbed by the internal unrest due to "shootings and the odd car bombing" (p.2). The unrest created turbulence among people in the nation. The repeated sound of "automatic gunfire, flat cracks" (p.15) and "helicopters filled the sky like birds startled by a gunshot" (p.32) injected terror into Nadia and Saeed's country. The experience of turbulence made society upsetting, "War in Saeed and Nadia's city revealed itself to be an intimate experience" (p.65) and the "building crushed by the force of a bomb" (p.66). The war-torn atmosphere injected psychological trauma into the characters and fueled their internal drive for cross-cultural willingness. The protagonists loved each other to live happily, but the national unrest advanced their inclination to go abroad in a multicultural social setting. When Nadia asks Saeed, "Have you ever traveled abroad?" he responds "I want to" and she immediately rejoins "Me too" (p.20). Internal desire to go to a multicultural setup fueled due to the current events of the nation. The conversation indicates their disposition to cross the border because "Nadia and Saeed, and countless others, felt marooned and alone and much more afraid" (p.55). The war-torn country enlarged the number of refugees, "Refugees had occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents in the green belts between roads" (p.23). The speaker indicates "an unprecedented flow of migrants" (p.71) and the main resolution is "how to escape from the city" (p.77). The social unrest in the nation forces people to leave the country as fast as possible. The craving to escape concurrently moved with the inclination to adopt in new culture. Though they are completely unfamiliar with the abroad situation, they are ready to move and assimilate into a new social setup.

The novel *Exit West* centers around the two characters: Nadia and Saeed, originally from an unnamed city. The former is of rebellious spirit having openness in terms of travel, mix-up, dress, and discourse. For her, travel is the opportunity for new experiences in a new cultural milieu, but the latter has religious convictions and his religiosity led him to be a conventional inclination. Despite their assorted background, they develop a sense of togetherness. Saeed and Nadia use the magic door to escape and get into a new location, which they imagine as a safe zone. Consequently, Nadia "Approached the door, and drawing close she was struck by its darkness...it did not reveal what was on the other side and also did not reflect what was on this side" (p.98). Her readiness to exit despite unfamiliarity signifies her willingness to cross not only the country, but also her readiness to mix up into a new culture. Though they are unaccustomed to the probable outcome of the exit from the door, they are ready to exit. Her readiness motivates her friend Saeed to follow in her footsteps. Deciding to leave, "she took his hands in hers and held them tight, and then releasing them, and without a word, she stepped through" (p.98). The Magic door is the metaphorical door that led them to the other side. Once she crossed the magic door and went to the other side, "She understood that she was in the toilet of some public place" (p.99). Saeed and Nadia flee through the magic door and move to the new place. Though it was a new place, it did not create despair for them. This is the point for the willingness to relocate. Leuthold (2011) views that "Art has the unique capacity to express the universal through the particular" (p.1). Magic door is the artistic door that universalizes the particular. The exit from the unnamed city universalizes the departure and the exit from multiple nations. The novel probes into artistic expression using the metaphorical door. The place was the public beach club having many refugees, "Everyone was foreign" (p.100). The narrator universalizes the exit through metaphorical

language. They found them “on the Greek Island of Mykonos” (p.100). Even if it was a foreign place, for the first time they felt that “The island was pretty safe” (p.101) since people belonging to multiple nations and multiple cultures assembled. Nadia adjusts easily to the new place due to her openness in terms of gender, religion, and culture. She is the typical female who is ready to welcome relocation. The same is the case for culture and nationality. Once humans cross the corporeal boundary, faith and self-confidence blur the boundary of discrimination. The relocation develops adjustment among the people in the world, as the protagonists of the novel show their easy adaptation. Showing the happy adjustment in the new location, the novelist promotes cross-cultural ambiance.

The secure feeling in the host land is the persuasive point for people’s inclusive settlement from diverse national, social, and ethnic backgrounds. Saeed’s sense of humor is the point of departure from terror to cheerfulness in a new society. Relocation generated a sense of humor and happiness. Once Nadia proposes to explore the island, “Saeed laughed and agreed” (p.108) to sight see the unfamiliar place, which leads to cheerfulness. They transcend cultural and national borders and happily relocate to the new land. It hints at the opportunity for them to flee their hometown and open up an avenue to settle down in the host place. Then, they went to London where Nadia and Saeed met people from different nations, “a dozen Nigerians, later a few Somalis” (p.120). London for them became a global cultural village. The sense of belongingness advances when the visitors feel mesmerized in a new location where the protagonists feel, “brighter than any place Saeed or Nadia had seen before” (p.141). This is a sign of the willingness to mix up in multiple cultures, “Saeed and Nadia found themselves in those warmer months” (p.167) and the sense of warmth indicates homeliness in the host place. Ultimately, they traveled to the USA where they were happier than their first home, “So they found a spot high up, with a view across and through the Golden Gate Bridge of San Francisco” (p.191). The reason for their happiness in the version of Tomes (2013) was the priority of “Shared values, understandings, assumptions, and goals” (p.8). They are ready to welcome collective values and beliefs. For a multicultural society the USA deserves significance as Hurn & Tomalin (2013) argue that “The USA is an example of the melting pot of cultures” (p.174). Innermost happiness commences after adjustment, and “One begins to feel at ease in the new culture and a sense of humor returns” (p.115). Feeling happy in a new location means the willingness to be a part of a new geography and culture. When people begin to feel fresh in a new location, they display inward cheerfulness that in turn justifies the significance of cross-cultural acceptance. Before their exit through the magic door, terror prevails in the native land. Even the unfamiliar new location is strange and uncertain, but when they reach the multicultural setting, the underlying sense of security motivates them to adjust.

Saeed and Nadia resided in San Francisco, where most of the people possess multicultural backgrounds. The narrator surprises the readers that “In Martin, there were almost no natives” (p.195). He means to say that Martin is completely multicultural. People belonging to diverse ethnic and national backgrounds have a sense of togetherness. The newcomers have “creative flowering in this region” (p.216) because diverse intellectuals interact with each other and generate new visions. Without discrimination between color and ethnicity, “all kinds of assembles, humans with humans” that ascended familiarity of “dark skin with light skin” and music functioned as the binding point for immigrants, “different types of music gathered different tribes of people” (p.216). This pluralism is the longing of the public. They further encounter people from diverse backgrounds becomes easier and easier and move from liberation to liberation, openness to openness, and cultural ease to ease. The multiple tribal and racial presence supports this residence as the multicultural hubbub. This is the

pivotal point of adaptability and reverence for multiculturalism. The country accelerates incorporation and inseparability. Consequently, the value of independent existence becomes global practice, “All over the world people were slipping away from where they had been” (Hurn & Tomalin, 2013, p.211). The population of the world moves away from their birthplace in search of opportunity and security. Hamid (2017) argues in the same line, “We all are migrants through time” (p.209). The narrator of the novel logically points to the hubbub of Martin, “For many of the world’s foods were coming together and being reformed in Martin” (p.217). Adaptation in the multicultural setting has become the elementary prerequisite for financial success and personal advancement that gets backed up by the cross-cultural background of the world.

The cross-cultural concept of the novel foregrounds the sense of integration and adaptation of the people who migrate to new locations from assorted ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds. The protagonists of the novel, Nadia and Saeed, adapt to new dwelling places despite their diverse cultural and national backgrounds is appropriate for progress. During their escape from the magic door, they meet people having multiple cultural backgrounds, happily assimilating. The singular cultural concept creates narrow-mindedness, and territorial nationality produces national and international civil unrest. Hamid’s *Exit West* envisions a world as a global cultural village where peace and security prevail.

Conclusion

The happy relocation of Saeed and Nadia to a new location after about fifty years in Hamid’s *Exit West* rationalizes the implication of multiculturalism for social harmony. The novel shows the atmosphere of reception and adaptation in a new location to the wider community, exemplifying the gamut of civilization. The novelist uses unrest in the unnamed city and the magic door into the new nation is meant to universalize the trend of a global cultural village. The magical door signifies how cross-cultural space provides a subtle venue for human connections across cultures by creating an opportunity to reshape one’s identity away from home. Despite diverse cultural upbringing, cross-cultural togetherness supports delivering social harmonization. Along with food and shelter, stability, peace, and security are the rudimentary requirements for the people in the twenty-first century. This study justifies that despite assorted social and cultural backgrounds, humans all over the world are similar, and they have internal derive to adjust in the multicultural setting. This co-existence leads to peace throughout the whole world. The novel suggests that people have to open up psychic, territorial, and national conventional territory boundaries for acclimatization and give up the monolithic parochial belief. This study recommends to open up new possibilities for co-existence and cooperation. Humanity prospers when people cross any type of boundary that is restrictive. Hamid’s novel therefore foregrounds the idea of crossing the national boundary for enhancing diversity and inclusion for global harmonious conversation.

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