

TRANSNATIONALISM IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST*

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Abstract

Racial and economic injustice and intolerance, and the nativist paranoia are the prominent experiences of the war-torn and poverty-stricken experience of the migrant existence in various parts of the world. The cross-border experience of the migrants, as part of their transnational ties across countries, has received much attention in the field of diaspora studies. The term Transnationalism refers to migrants' durable ties across countries. It is used to capture not only communities but also all kinds of social formations such as transnationally active networks, groups, and organizations. The paper analyses the concept of Transnationalism, with reference to the fictional world created by Mohsin Hamid in his 2017 novel *Exit West*. The novel is also studied in the light of the immigrant policy introduced by Donald Trump, the President of the United States.

Keywords: *transnationalism, immigrants, exit west, trump's immigration policy*

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The paper analyses the concept of Transnationalism, with reference to the fictional world created by Mohsin Hamid in his 2017 novel *Exit West*. The novel is also studied in the light of the immigrant policy introduced by Donald Trump, the President of the United States.

Transnationalism, a concept introduced in Migration Studies in the 1990s, refers to the everyday practices of migrants engaged in various activities, creating transnational social spaces. The activities include solidarity with networks of kinship and political participation, in the countries of emigration and immigration. It also refers to the small-scale entrepreneurship of migrants across borders and the transfer of cultural customs and practices. Transnationalism connotes the role of migrants as prominent social agents. (60).

Thomas Faist, in his essay "Diaspora and Transnationalism: What Kind of Dance Partners?" writes that Transnationalism has sparked discussions on the integration of migrants.

He poses pertinent questions on the role of migrants in the countries of settlement: “Are migrants’ transnational orientations at odds with their social integration in societies of settlement? (12). New meanings of diaspora that keep emerging do not remain bound in the imagery of the country of origin and settlement, but include countries of onward migration, thus emphasizing the focus on lateral ties. When older versions of diaspora suggest boundary maintenance, negating the integration of migrants into the country of settlement, newer notions suggest cultural hybridity.

Transnationalism deals with the changing forms of cross-border mobility and citizenship, and the (in) compatibility of the integration of migrants into the mainstream existence of the countries of settlement. When diaspora deals with the migration of a group, its representation in history and literary studies, Transnationalism refers to the transnational spaces, fields, and formations. Transnational spaces refer to a relatively stable, lasting and dense set of ties reaching beyond and across borders of sovereign states. They comprise "combinations of ties and their substance, positions within networks and organizations and networks of organizations that cut across the borders of at least two national states” (Faist 13).

Faist states that Transnationalism focuses on the grass root activities of international migrants across borders as being something distinct from the relations of multinational or transnational companies. Thus the term Transnationalism "builds upon – yet is distinct from – transnational relations in the political science sub-discipline of international relations, and differs from that used in its focus on non-state actors" (Faist 14). According to Transnationalism, the migrants and other non-state actors are the most crucial agents of the immigrant country.

Transnationalism differs from the concept of diaspora in three ways. While diaspora deals with migrating communities of particular religions, ethnicity, and nations, transnational approaches are related to all kinds of social formations that include networks of business persons and social movements. Diaspora often is linked to the relationship between the native land and a set of host countries. A transnational community incorporates a wider range of phenomena such as cross-border village communications or borderland communications. (Faist, 15).

Various approaches of diaspora deal with the collective identity of the community and transnational approaches engage in issues of cross-border mobility, such as melange, hybridity or cultural translations engaged in by people involved in cross-border mobility. Diaspora deals with formations across multiple generations whereas transnationalism deals with the recent migrant flow and focusses on one generation.

Mohsin Hamid, in his *Exit West*, deals with new dimensions of the migrant experience. Hamid is a Pakistani novelist; he is the author of *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and *Exit West* (2017). Hamid was born in Lahore, Pakistan, and he went to the USA when he was three years old. He returned to Lahore when he was nine, and went back to the States when he was 18. He was educated at Princeton University and Harvard Law School. He went to London in 2001 and worked in a law firm for eight years, and returned to Lahore in 2009. Hamid’s novel *Exit West* deals with the migrant life of Nadia and Saeed who decide to leave their unnamed city as militants secure the parts of the city in which they live.

Hamid creates a strange world, with magical doors that take people to various parts of the world. He employs magical realism to present a critique of the immigrant policies of the imperialist powers that plunder the intellectual wealth of the people of all the countries. When these centers of power are only too willing to plunder the other nations of their best brains, alluring the Third World doctors, scientists, technologists, administrators, economists, teachers and writers to the First World, they exhibit much reluctance and negligence in extending their service to the poorer sections of the nations from which they plunder. Hamid interrogates the imperialist tendencies of the First World and creates an imaginary world in which the First World is forced to acknowledge the urgency and serious nature of the immigrant condition and acquiesce to the existing and emerging demands of the immigrant experience.

The narrative of the love story of Nadia and Saeed is intercepted with mini-narratives of strange happenings in various corners of the world: the bedroom of a woman in Sydney, Australia, an alley in Tokyo, Japan, a locality in La Jolla, San Diego, California and the Jumeirah Beach Residence, Dubai. Chapters four and five of the novel give passing references on rumors about doors that could take one to faraway places, “well-removed from this death trap of a country” (69). The strange interludes in the foreign places are understood in the light of the experience of Nadia and Saeed when they exit their country through a black door in an abandoned dentist’s clinic.

Hamid presents a world in which all the unnamed characters leave their native lands due to impoverishment, poverty, ethnic killings, war, and insecurity. Saeed and Nadia leave their hometown as it becomes unsafe with the ruthless killing of the innocent citizens by the militants. Hamid describes a scene in which Saeed’s father witnesses a group of young men playing soccer with the severed head of a bearded man. (7). People take a desperate move to leave the country just to be able to continue living their pathetic lives.

The doors to richer countries of the world are heavily guarded whereas the doors to poorer countries do not receive any attention, in the “hope that migrants would return to their place of origin or perhaps because there were simply too many doors from too many poorer places to guard them all” (101). Migration, the act of leaving his family and loved ones behind, is such a harrowing experience for Saeed that when he gets into Mykonos, Greece, he is filled with a feeling of bitterness. They soon leave Mykonos through a door that leads them to the Palace Gardens Terrace in London. The place is soon filled with migrants from Nigeria, Somalia, and the borderlands between Myanmar and Thailand.

The novelist gives an unconventional transnational picture, a near-Utopian experience, in which the richer countries of the world accept and adapt to the various demands of the new migrant situation.

The houses, parks, unoccupied mansions and other disused spaces in various parts of the United Kingdom are peopled by millions of migrants. The natives become very less in number, and the legal residents become a minority. There are frequent riots as the nativist mobs attack the migrants, reclaiming Britain for Britain. Though there are military and paramilitary formations near the migrant settlements, and a great massacre seems to be in the offing, and announcements are on air warning people to evacuate, and rumors spread about many killings and incineration, the soldiers eventually step back.

The transnational experience of the migrants in the novel brings out the trauma of the migrant life. Yet Hamid presents a utopian acceptance of the migrants into the richest countries of the world. The inevitability of the acceptance of the presence of the innumerable doors and the unavoidable and unstoppable flow of the migrants compel the First World nations to accept the Third World into their fold. Various welfare measures are taken up by the First World for the well being of the migrants. New cities that can accommodate more people than the native population gets constructed in the First World. Saeed and Nadia are able to get employed in any country they move in, and in the USA, Nadia enjoys total freedom in practicing her sexuality as a lesbian.

Hamid's treatment of transnationalism in *Exit West* is a reaction against the 'Muslim Ban' of 2017 brought in by Donald Trump, the President of the USA. The ban is the Executive Order 13769 introduced by Trump on effect from 27th January 2017, titled Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States. The ban limited the number of refugees to be admitted into the USA to 50,000 and suspended USRAP, the U. S. Refugee Admissions Programme for 120 days. It also prevented the entry of refugees from Syria indefinitely. It suspended the entry of the people of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen into the USA.

Trump's ban met with much opposition; there were protests at various airports of the country, and lawyers offered their services free of cost to the affected people. There were many protests outside the White House, and nearly two million people signed a petition against Trump's visit to the UK. The judiciary pointed out at the unconstitutional nature of the ban, and Trump revised the ban, taking off Iraq from the list, and including two non-majority Muslim countries, North Korea and Venezuela, in the list, to make it appear secular.

Hamid, answering a question in an interview on FRESH AIR, says that *Exit West* addresses the Muslim Ban. He states that the ban tries to determine who belongs and who does not belong in a place. He also adds that the ban restricts the movement of people, particularly migrants, with a deadly effect.

And I think that when we take the long view, the notion that some people are deemed,... less worthy of being able to move, do not have the right to cross borders – over time, that's going to seem to us outmoded and as unfair, really as racial discrimination or other kinds of discrimination.

Exit West provides solutions to the horrors of the immigrant experience in many countries of the world, especially in the USA. The Immigrant issue was the most prominent issue that Donald Trump focussed on during the presidential campaign. Trump introduced the zero-tolerance policy to handle unlawful border crossing. The policy, announced by Jeff Sessions, the US Attorney General, required the detention of the immigrants, separating them from their children who were kept in Health Department custody. Even before Trump signed the executive order, on 20 June 2018, nearly 3000 children were separated from their parents. With the intervention of the judiciary, brought by the lawsuit filed by the ACLU, American Civil Liberties Union, 2600 children were reunited with their parents.

Trump reiterates the idea that illegal immigrants are criminals. But multiple studies conducted by *Social Science Quarterly* in May 2016 proved that the immigrants have lower crime

rates than the native-born Americans. The Trump administration has also abolished the TPS, Temporary Protected Status for many countries that have been affected by war or natural calamities. The TPS allowed immigrants from the affected countries to live in the USA for extended periods of time.

Trump also took serious measures to eliminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival Programme. According to the Programme, individuals who were brought illegally into the US as children can receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation. They also are eligible to receive the EAD card, popularly known as a work permit. A legal intervention has enabled the continuation of the policy. Tim Cook, CEO of Apple Inc., and 58 other CEOs of popular American companies have expressed their concerns on the immigration policy of Donald Trump. John Cassidy of *The New Yorker* writes that “Trump is the latest representative of an anti-immigrant, nativist American tradition that dates back at least to the Know-Nothings of the 1840s and the 1850s”.

Hamid's novel *Exit West* alludes to and satirizes the anti-immigrant tendencies of Donald Trump. Hamid creates a new transnational space in his novel to encounter the nativist ideology of Trump and his supporters. The novel ends with the meeting of Nadia and Saaed in their hometown, after half a century, hoping to go to Chile to watch the stars in the deserts of Chile, if Nadia is free in an evening. The idea that one can go out to a place as far as Chile, in just a free evening, to watch the stars, is the ultimate blow that Hamid aims at the imperialist immigrant policies.

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