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BORDER CROSSINGS AND THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY: A STUDY OF MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST* AND *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST*

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ABSTRACT

In the shifting terrains of contemporary global literature, only a few authors have managed to interrogate the cartographies of human existence with as much clarity and depth as Mohsin Hamid. Across his novels, borders emerge not merely as lines drawn on maps or points of bureaucratic control, but as "potent metaphors for the human condition". In Exit West (2017) and The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007), Hamid moves "beyond the physical geographies of nations to engage with psychological, emotional, cultural, and ideological thresholds." These novels probe the paradoxes of globalization, the tensions of identity, and the inescapable pull of belonging in a world marked by movement and surveillance. Through a unique fusion of realism and speculative form, Hamid reimagines the border as a site of "becoming — a liminal space in which the self is constantly reshaped, contested, and, at times, undone.".

***KEYWORDS**: Border Crossings, Crisis, Bureaucratic Control, Emotional, Cultural.*

Introduction

The concept of the border has long been central to postcolonial and transnational discourse, especially in relation to migration, exile, and diasporic identity. Traditionally conceived as static and territorial, the border in Hamid's fiction is fluid, unstable, and often invisible — but no less powerful. It functions as a "palimpsest" : a surface written over with successive inscriptions of power, fear, hope, and resistance. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the protagonist, Changez, inhabits a complex web of borders — between East and West, tradition and modernity, selfhood and alterity — and is ultimately rendered ambivalent and fractured by the very structures of power that once promised transcendence. His journey from Lahore to Princeton to Manhattan, and back again, charts not only a physical trajectory but a moral and existential reckoning with the American empire's affective and material economies. The novel's narrative strategy — a dramatic monologue set in a Lahore café — further collapses spatial boundaries, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty that mirrors the unstable identity of its speaker.

In contrast, *Exit West* offers a speculative (re)imagining of migration by dissolving the mechanisms of crossing altogether. The magical black doors scattered across the world function as portals, allowing individuals to escape zones of conflict and reappear in spaces of relative safety. These

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doors, while fantastical in form, encapsulate the urgent reality of displacement in the twenty-first century. They destabilize the "dichotomy of origin and destination", homeland and hostland, and foreground instead the "persistent negotiation that accompanies all movement." For Hamid, migration is not an aberration or crisis but the defining narrative of our age — an elemental human act that reveals the porousness of the structures we cling to for order and meaning. The protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, do not merely move across continents; they evolve through the act of moving, shedding old identities and embracing new affinities in an ever-shifting terrain of community and estrangement.

In both texts, Hamid's engagement with the border is deeply informed by the legacy of post-9/11 geopolitics. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the attacks on the World Trade Center serve as a moment of rupture — an event that triggers a global reorganization of suspicion, allegiance, and affect. Changez, once a celebrated product of the American meritocracy, becomes suspect, marked by a racialized gaze that sees him as Other. The psychological border erected between him and his American peers becomes insurmountable, revealing how national trauma can recalibrate the symbolic economies of race, class, and belonging. What was once implicit becomes explicit: the border between inclusion and exclusion, between "us" and "them," is violently redrawn. The novel' s elliptical, open-ended conclusion — the ambiguous conversation between Changez and the American stranger — leaves the reader suspended in a space of interpretive uncertainty, echoing the very condition of border existence.

Similarly, *Exit West* unfolds against the backdrop of global conflict, mass displacement, and the securitization of migration. However, Hamid's narrative resists the victimizing and pathologizing tropes often found in refugee literature. Instead of focusing on trauma alone, he imagines a form of migrancy that is transformative, even redemptive. The black doors are not sites of terror but of possibility; they reconfigure space-time and allow for the emergence of new communities forged not by blood or nation, but by shared vulnerability and imagination. In this way, the novel enacts what Homi Bhabha terms a "third space" — a zone of hybridity where new identities are negotiated and meanings are rearticulated. Nadia and Saeed, as they pass through London, San Francisco, and ultimately a quiet town by the sea, begin to shed their former selves. Their love, once a tether to the past, becomes a memory of a particular phase of becoming, no longer necessary for the selves they are evolving into. The novel suggests that borders — both physical and emotional — are not only obstacles but also thresholds, offering opportunities for reinvention and relationality.

Language plays a crucial role in Hamid's construction of these border spaces. In both novels, his prose is spare yet lyrical, marked by long, flowing sentences that mirror the unbroken continuum of thought and memory. This narrative style erodes the rigid demarcations of time and space, drawing the reader into a world where past and present, here and there, self and other, coexist in fluid simultaneity. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the trope of the monologue traps the reader in an "intimate, claustrophobic exchange" that constantly questions the reliability of the narrator. The line between confession and performance, sincerity and manipulation, is blurred — much like the border between citizen and enemy that Changez is forced to navigate. In *Exit West*, the omniscient narrator moves seamlessly between perspectives and locations, reinforcing the idea that human lives are interlinked across distance and difference. The magical doors may be instantaneous, but the transformation they initiate unfolds slowly, tenderly, through the rhythms of daily life in unfamiliar lands.

Furthermore, Hamid's treatment of the border is deeply political, interrogating the very structures that define who may cross and who must remain. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez's initial embrace of the American dream — his job at a prestigious valuation firm, his romantic involvement with the ethereal Erica — is conditioned by a system that rewards assimilation and punishes dissent. When he begins to question the values of this system, he finds himself alienated and ultimately expelled. His growing awareness of American imperialism, particularly in relation to Pakistan and Afghanistan, marks his transformation from insider to outsider, from believer to critic. The border, in this context, is a disciplinary apparatus — a means of sorting bodies, regulating desire, and enforcing ideological conformity.

By contrast, *Exit West* critiques the border through its very erasure. The novel dares to imagine a world in which the mechanisms of exclusion — walls, checkpoints, detention centers — are rendered obsolete. This vision is not utopian in the naive sense; Hamid acknowledges the tensions, frictions, and violences that accompany mass migration. However, he also foregrounds the radical potential of hospitality, the possibility that humanity might choose empathy over fear, solidarity over segregation. The camps that emerge in London and other cities are not merely zones of deprivation but laboratories of cohabitation, where migrants and locals must negotiate new forms of civic life. In doing so, *Exit West* proposes a politics of permeability — a world in which movement is not a threat to order but a catalyst for ethical becoming.

Hamid's fiction challenges the reader to reconsider the meaning of borders in an interconnected, crisis-ridden world. He asks: What are we protecting when we draw lines between ourselves and others? What do we lose when we refuse to cross? In both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West*, borders are not merely crossed but redefined. They become mirrors in which the self is refracted and reframed, offering glimpses of both alienation and affinity. The act of crossing — whether through a physical door or a psychological awakening — is never without consequence. It demands the surrender of certainties, the embrace of ambiguity, and the courage to dwell in the in-between.

The Global Border Regime and Hamid's Response

In the unfolding narrative of *Exit West* (2017), Mohsin Hamid mounts a quiet yet incisive resistance against what scholars have increasingly termed the "global border regime" — a vast assemblage of policies, infrastructures, ideologies, and militarized apparatuses that govern the movement of bodies across nations and within international hierarchies. According to Bellin (2022), Hamid's novel explicitly engages with the "violence produced by the global border regime," which she identifies as a structural apparatus that not only restricts movement but produces "precarity and disposability," particularly for racialized and postcolonial subjects. In this schema, the border becomes more than a geopolitical line; it emerges as a site of systemic violence, a technology of racial and economic sorting, and a mechanism for sustaining global inequalities. Yet, within this context of control, surveillance, and dehumanization, Hamid's narrative performs a subtle subversion. His portrayal of refugees, particularly Saeed and Nadia, does not capitulate to the trope of the passive, helpless migrant. Instead, he reimagines the migrant subject not as an object of pity but as a complex figure of agency, transformation, and emotional depth.

Central to Hamid's literary strategy is what Bellin conceptualizes as "disorienting empathy" — a narrative mode that deliberately unsettles the affective expectations of privileged, often Western, readers. Rather than inviting simple identification with the suffering of refugees, *Exit West* disrupts the consumption of refugee trauma as spectacle. Through its calm, almost detached prose, and its refusal to indulge in graphic depictions of suffering, the novel resists the commodification of pain that often accompanies refugee narratives. Instead of foregrounding brutality and spectacle, Hamid centers human vulnerability, resilience, and adaptation, compelling readers to interrogate their own positionalities within the systems that create and perpetuate such precarity. By doing so, he shifts the ethical burden from the refugee to the reader, asking not only that they observe suffering but that they examine their complicity in the structures that make such suffering possible.

Hamid's narrative strategy further resists the dominant logics of the global border regime through his innovative use of magical realism. The most notable manifestation of this is the novel's central conceit: mysterious black doors that open across the world, allowing individuals to escape conflict zones and materialize in new locations — Mykonos, London, San Francisco — without traversing the treacherous routes traditionally associated with refugee movement. These portals do not function as mere plot devices; rather, they operate as symbolic and structural interventions. They obliterate the physicality of borders, short-circuiting the militarized checkpoints, visa bureaucracies, and surveillance regimes that typically govern migration. In doing so, Hamid enacts what might be read as a "counterfactual utopia: a world in which mobility is not criminalized, and in which people can seek safety and possibility without enduring state-sanctioned suffering."

However, the function of the doors extends beyond logistical convenience. As Faiz et al. (2020) observe, these portals serve as "thresholds of transformation," metaphysical rites of passage that radically reshape the inner lives of those who cross them. In this way, the act of migration is reimagined not as a linear journey from point A to point B, but as an existential crucible in which identity, relationships, and self-perception are continuously reconfigured. For Nadia and Saeed, each crossing marks a profound rupture — not only with physical space but with emotional and cultural anchors. Their passage through the doors destabilizes conventional understandings of time, space, and selfhood, propelling them into liminal zones where new forms of belonging and estrangement emerge. In this sense, the novel engages with the phenomenology of migration — the internal, often ineffable experiences of dislocation, reinvention, and solitude.

Crucially, the novel refrains from romanticizing this transformation. The crossings are not painless, nor are they framed as liberatory in any simplistic sense. For Saeed, migration often intensifies a longing for the past, for the familiarity of cultural and religious routines, and for a continuity that has been irrevocably disrupted. He clings to rituals and memories, seeking stability amid the flux. For Nadia, by contrast, migration offers a kind of emancipation — not from place alone, but from patriarchal constraints, familial expectations, and prescribed gender roles. Her refusal to wear traditional garb once she leaves their home country is emblematic of her desire to inhabit a self beyond normative frameworks. Thus, while both characters move through the same portals, they experience the crossing in radically different ways, shaped by gendered and psychological subjectivities. Hamid's treatment of their divergent trajectories affirms the complexity of migrant experience, resisting homogenization and instead foregrounding heterogeneity and nuance.

This narrative complexity stands in sharp contrast to the logics of the global border regime, which functions by reducing migrant subjects to legible, manageable categories: legal/illegal, citizen/non-citizen, refugee/economic migrant. These binaries are central to what Nicholas De Genova (2002) terms the "border spectacle" — a performance of sovereignty that simultaneously renders the migrant hyper-visible and socially invisible. By constantly categorizing, criminalizing, and regulating migrant bodies, the state reasserts its authority, transforming migration into a spectacle of control. Hamid's doors, in contrast, collapse the infrastructure of this spectacle. In bypassing the state's checkpoints, his characters also bypass its gaze, emerging not as spectacles of crisis but as agents of quiet survival and adaptation. Hamid thereby dislocates the power of the state to determine who may move and who must remain, offering a literary alternative to the harsh realities of contemporary border politics.

Yet Hamid does not fully discard the emotional and ethical challenges that such mobility entails. The novel is saturated with scenes of communal negotiation, intergenerational conflict, and cultural misunderstanding. The refugee camps that emerge in cities like London are microcosms of global inequality, sites where histories and identities clash and intermingle. These spaces do not promise utopia; rather, they stage the difficult work of coexistence. In depicting these moments, Hamid avoids the pitfalls of sentimental cosmopolitanism. He does not suggest that cultural difference will simply melt away under the force of proximity. Instead, he underscores the labor of hospitality — the negotiations, failures, and small solidarities that make shared life possible.

Moreover, Hamid's representation of migration offers a philosophical meditation on impermanence. The doors, though magical, do not guarantee stability. Each crossing demands a relinquishing — of home, of relationships, of versions of the self that may no longer be sustainable. In one of the most poignant arcs of the novel, the bond between Nadia and Saeed, once passionate and urgent, begins to fray. As they move further from their place of origin, their emotional synchronicity diminishes. They become, not adversaries, but strangers to each other's evolving desires. This narrative choice is profoundly significant. It signals that displacement is not only about loss and trauma but also about growth, divergence, and the difficult beauty of becoming other than what one once was. Migration, in this sense, is not a tragedy but a passage

— an unfolding of potentialities that often demand the shedding of old skins.

In resisting the victimization of his characters, Hamid also resists the moral economy that typically governs refugee representation in Western discourse. Too often, refugee subjects are portrayed as passive recipients of charity or as existential threats to national identity. These representations strip migrants of complexity and render them as either pitiful or perilous. Hamid's characters, by contrast, occupy a rich spectrum of motivations, flaws, dreams, and contradictions. They are neither saints nor villains. They are human — radically and vulnerably so. This humanization is a political act, one that challenges the dehumanizing language of policy, media, and populist rhetoric. It insists on the irreducible dignity of the migrant, not as a type but as a person.

In this light, *Exit West* can be read as both a literary and ethical intervention. By weaving magical realism into the deeply political fabric of forced migration, Hamid renders the realities of our world strange — not to escape them, but to see them more clearly. His speculative gesture does not negate the suffering embedded in border regimes; rather, it reconfigures how we imagine and respond to that suffering. He invites readers to shift from empathy as consumption to empathy as confrontation — to move from feeling for the refugee to reckoning with the conditions that produce refugeeness in the first place.

Exit West enacts a profound response to the global border regime — one that eschews spectacle in favor of interiority, that disrupts dominant narratives of migration through formal innovation, and that foregrounds the ethical responsibility of readers who are not merely witnesses but participants in the global order. Through magical doors, disorienting empathy, and character-driven nuance, Hamid proposes a radical rethinking of what it means to move, to belong, and to inhabit the liminal spaces between departure and arrival. In doing so, he offers not a solution to the border crisis, but a literary space in which to imagine its undoing.

Magical Doors: Reimagining Mobility and Identity

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* is perhaps most memorable for its startling speculative device: the sudden appearance of black doors that allow individuals to traverse great distances across the globe instantaneously. These "doors" are portals in a literal sense, but more profoundly, they are metaphors for altered spatiality, temporality, and subjectivity in an age defined by displacement, globalization, and migratory precarity. Unlike traditional refugee narratives that meticulously chart the harrowing physical journeys through militarized landscapes, Hamid's narrative bypasses these material perils to focus on the metaphysical, emotional, and existential metamorphoses that accompany forced migration. The black doors collapse time and space, subverting conventional narratives of border-crossing and instead privileging the interior transformations that migration precipitates. They are both escape routes and thresholds—liminal zones through which identities are unmoored, relationships are reshaped, and the very notion of belonging is interrogated.

As Faiz et al. (2020) argue, these magical doors function as complex symbols of "fluid identity" and "hope," while simultaneously being imbued with "anxiety and paradox." Their magic lies not in the ease they provide but in the disorientation they produce. The doors offer neither explanation nor instruction; they simply exist, sudden and miraculous, allowing movement without justification. In doing so, they perform a radical literary act: they deconstruct the material violence of border regimes by imagining a world in which no visas, fences, or biometric scans dictate human mobility. Yet this utopian gesture is tempered by a deeper awareness of migration's costs. The doors, though effortless in their physical mechanics, do not erase the psychic trauma or cultural rupture that displacement entails. Indeed, what is startling in *Exit West* is not merely the speed of travel but the slow, cumulative unraveling of identity and intimacy that migration occasions.

For the protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, each crossing through a door precipitates subtle but significant shifts in self-perception and relational dynamics. At the beginning of the novel, they are framed as contrasting yet complementary figures: Saeed, devout and family-oriented, embodies a kind of rootedness; Nadia, secular, independent, and rebellious, signifies mobility and rupture. Yet these initial markers are neither stable nor predictive. As the narrative unfolds and the two characters move

from their unnamed, war-torn city to Mykonos, London, and finally Marin County in California, their identities begin to drift apart—not merely in opposition to each other but in response to the new cultural, emotional, and ideological landscapes they encounter.

This evolution is particularly apparent in the transformation of Nadia's independence. Initially, her self-sufficiency is a radical form of resistance—she lives alone, rides a motorcycle, and defies gender norms in a conservative society. Her black robe, worn as a strategic shield rather than a religious statement, marks her as someone who navigates patriarchal spaces with subversive cunning. However, once outside her country, the same traits that once empowered her become sources of alienation. In foreign lands, her independence is no longer exceptional; instead, it becomes a point of divergence from Saeed, whose sense of cultural dislocation intensifies. Nadia's adaptability allows her to immerse herself in new communities, particularly in the London commune, where she finds solace among other migrants and forges alternative familial bonds. For Saeed, however, these changes signal a loss of shared ground. His attachment to ritual, memory, and his father's values becomes more pronounced in exile, anchoring him to a past that Nadia increasingly outgrows.

This emotional divergence is not framed as betrayal but as a natural, if painful, outcome of dislocated lives. Hamid is acutely aware that migration does not merely change one's address; it alters the architecture of love, desire, and kinship. As Nadia and Saeed pass through door after door, they do not become unrecognizable to one another, but they do become strangers to the versions of themselves that first fell in love. Their journey thus dramatizes the dialectic between mobility and identity: to move is not only to arrive elsewhere but to be reconstituted in ways that may render past affinities obsolete. In this sense, the doors operate as both spatial and narrative devices. They compress geography but elongate the emotional distance between people, highlighting that what is lost in transition may not always be retrieved on the other side.

The magical doors also call into question the fixity of national and cultural identities. By circumventing the literal borders of nation-states, the novel metaphorically dismantles the very idea of nationality as a primary organizing logic of human experience. Hamid does not ignore the fact that migrants often face hostility, racism, and xenophobia in their host countries; rather, he recontextualizes these encounters within a broader philosophical meditation on the contingency of belonging. In London, for example, Nadia and Saeed live in a house occupied by dozens of other migrants from across the globe. The house becomes a microcosm of global disarray—a fragile experiment in coexistence that reflects both the tensions and possibilities of a world without borders. Here, identities are no longer anchored to singular narratives of origin; instead, they are constantly negotiated, improvised, and redefined in relation to others.

Such a vision aligns with postnational theorists like Arjun Appadurai (1996), who suggest that globalization has created "diasporic public spheres" in which identity is no longer tied to territorial belonging but to flows of culture, capital, and memory. In *Exit West*, the characters are not only physically mobile but ontologically decentered. Their pasts trail them like shadows, but they do not dictate their futures. Migration, then, becomes a site of radical becoming—a space where the self is at once destabilized and reassembled. The fluidity symbolized by the doors underscores this process. Unlike passports or checkpoints, the doors do not ask who you are or where you are from; they simply allow passage. Yet that passage carries a cost: it disorients, fragments, and demands reinvention.

Hamid's prose style mirrors this thematic fluidity. His sentences flow with minimal punctuation, often extending across pages in a kind of syntactic migration. This formal choice reflects the novel's conceptual emphasis on continuity and change, on the liminal spaces between identities, places, and times. The reader is swept along, not unlike the characters, through a narrative rhythm that resists finality. The lack of quotation marks, too, blurs the boundaries between narration and dialogue, between interiority and externality, reinforcing the novel's interest in ambiguity and permeability. Just as the doors collapse spatial boundaries, the language collapses linguistic and narrative conventions, producing a text that itself migrates across literary genres—part romance, part fable, part political allegory.

The slow dissolution of Nadia and Saeed's relationship is perhaps the novel's most poignant allegory for the transformation of identity in diaspora. Their love does not end in rupture or violence; rather, it dissolves through difference, like land eroded by water. This narrative decision resists the melodramatic tropes often associated with romantic tragedy. Instead, Hamid offers a quieter, more elegiac portrayal of divergence—a recognition that shared history is not always enough to sustain future continuity. In the final pages of the novel, when Nadia and Saeed meet again after years apart, they do so not with longing or regret but with a kind of gentle estrangement. They are both changed, not in ways that render the past false, but in ways that make its reclamation impossible. Their farewell, like the doors themselves, is understated yet profound—a portal not into new territory but into the acceptance of multiplicity.

By centering the emotional and existential aspects of migration rather than its logistics, Hamid reorients the discourse on refugees and migrants away from surveillance and securitization toward intimacy and subjectivity. The black doors symbolize not utopia but possibility—not an erasure of borders but a reimagining of what lies beyond them. In this reimagining, identity is not a passport but a process, not a lineage but a layering. The characters who walk through the doors do not escape history; they carry it with them, sedimented in their gestures, speech, and silences. But they also carry the capacity to become other than what history has prescribed.

In this way, Hamid's magical realism performs a critical function. Unlike the magical realism of Latin American or African traditions, where the magical is often embedded in indigenous cosmologies or historical trauma, *Exit West* employs magic as a speculative rupture in contemporary realism. The doors are not explained, nor are they mystified. They simply are. This absence of exposition foregrounds their symbolic role: they are metaphors for both rupture and continuity, for the inexplicability of exile and the absurdity of border violence. They allow Hamid to sidestep the pornographic detail of refugee suffering, not to minimize its reality but to prioritize the human over the spectacular.

So, the black doors in *Exit West* serve as more than narrative shortcuts—they are the novel's central philosophical proposition. Through them, Hamid invites us to reconceive migration not as a problem to be solved, but as a fundamental condition of human life. The doors collapse borders, but they also collapse certainties—about love, about identity, about the fixity of the self. Each crossing is a small death and a new birth, a shedding and an acquiring, a becoming that refuses closure. In this sense, *Exit West* is not merely a novel about refugees; it is a meditation on the ontology of movement, a literary cartography of what it means to be human in transit.

The Border Within: Changez and the Specter of Americanism

In stark contrast to the overtly global and fantastical mobility of *Exit West*, where magical portals enable literal migrations across space, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* operates in a more claustrophobic, psychological terrain. Here, the border is not a barbed-wire fence to be crossed, nor a door to be opened, but an invisible, insidious line etched within the self. Mohsin Hamid's 2007 novel explores a more intimate form of alienation—one that emerges not from displacement across geographical boundaries, but from the ideological and affective realignments that occur when one is confronted with the incompatibility between one's identity and the national mythos into which one has tried to assimilate. The protagonist, Changez, does not physically migrate after the midpoint of the narrative; rather, he experiences a profound internal migration, a re-bordering of the self that is enacted by the surveillance, suspicion, and symbolic violence of post-9/11 America.

Sayar Ahmad (2021) identifies this as a tale of "ideological bordering"—a process by which Changez, initially embraced by the very core of American elite institutions, becomes a pariah, not because of something he does, but because of what he becomes in the eyes of the state and society after the geopolitical rupture of 9/11. This internal border, unlike the visible and securitized crossings of *Exit West*, is psychological and spectral. It emerges from the dissonance between Changez's self-perception

and the way he is perceived by others. His story is a slow and painful retreat from a world he once believed to be hospitable, only to discover its foundational exclusions.

Changez begins as the consummate immigrant success story: a brilliant student from Lahore who earns a scholarship to Princeton, graduates with distinction, and is recruited by Underwood Samson, a prestigious valuation firm in New York. He embodies, at least superficially, the ideals of the American Dream—meritocratic ascent, individual excellence, and global ambition. Yet even at this height, subtle fissures appear. He notes the performative nature of his American identity, the necessity of playing a role, of donning a cultural costume to be granted belonging. The border between self and performance is already tenuous, but it is the events of 9/11 that render this border a violent rupture.

In one of the most controversial and discussed moments in the novel, Changez recounts that upon watching footage of the Twin Towers falling, "I smiled." This moment is not presented with triumphalism but with profound complexity. The smile is not celebratory but indicative of a sudden, involuntary realignment—a crack in the edifice of his assimilation. It is as though something within him, long suppressed, surfaces in response to the shattering of a dominant structure. This moment marks the beginning of his ideological exodus, not toward militant fundamentalism, as the title might misleadingly suggest, but toward a deeper critique of the American imperium and its disavowed violence.

In the aftermath of the attacks, Changez's identity undergoes a transformation, but it is a transformation foisted upon him rather than chosen. He becomes hypervisible, his brown skin and beard now read as semiotic signs of potential threat. The very traits that once allowed him access to elite spaces—his eloquence, cosmopolitan polish, and analytical acuity—become suspect. He narrates how strangers begin to stare, how airport security treats him with escalating hostility, and how his mere presence becomes politicized. This is what Sara Ahmed might call "affective economies of fear," wherein certain bodies become sticky with threat, becoming containers for national anxieties. Changez's body, in this affective economy, becomes bordered—not in space, but in meaning.

This transformation is further exacerbated by his deteriorating relationship with Erica, his American lover, whose grief over the loss of her ex-boyfriend Chris becomes a metaphor for America's melancholia—a refusal to let go of an idealized past. Erica's increasing withdrawal into memory parallels Changez's own growing disenchantment. Her inability to see him outside the lens of her trauma, her desire for him to become a stand-in for Chris, reflects a deeper cultural pathology: the American refusal to recognize the "Other" except as a projection of its own loss or longing. Erica cannot love Changez on his own terms; she can only desire him as a vessel for nostalgia. Likewise, post-9/11 America cannot integrate Changez except as an object of suspicion or assimilation.

Sayar Ahmad's observation that Changez becomes "neither fully American nor wholly Pakistani" situates him within what Steven Vertovec calls a "transnational identity"—a subject formed at the intersection of global flows but belonging to neither the center nor the periphery. Changez is profoundly transnational, but not in the celebratory sense that globalization studies often champion. His is a fractured transnationalism, one marked by contradiction and exile. He is deeply shaped by American values—discipline, ambition, pragmatism—yet increasingly alienated by America's refusal to see him as more than an ethnic signifier. At the same time, his return to Pakistan is not portrayed as a triumphant homecoming but as a reluctant retreat, a retreat that contains both defiance and melancholy.

This sense of internal division is mirrored by the novel's narrative structure: a monologue directed at an unnamed American interlocutor in a Lahore café. The confessional tone, laced with irony, accusation, and ambiguity, creates a constant oscillation between intimacy and threat. The reader, positioned alongside the American stranger, is forced into a state of interpretive instability. Is Changez a harmless professor telling his story, or a veiled threat? Is the stranger a CIA agent, a tourist, or an assassin? This narrative ambiguity enacts the very epistemological crisis that Changez experiences—a crisis where certainty dissolves, and suspicion becomes the dominant lens through which identities are read.

The narrative thus performs the "very bordering it critiques." Just as Changez becomes unknowable to the American gaze, the text renders him opaque to the reader. This narrative opacity is a form of resistance; it refuses the transparency often demanded of "brown" subjects in the Western literary marketplace. Hamid denies the reader a stable moral compass, forcing them to sit with the discomfort of unknowing. In this way, the novel enacts a form of what Homi Bhabha might call "strategic essentialism"—a temporary adoption of identity as camouflage, not capitulation.

Changez's ideological journey can also be read through the lens of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, where the colonial subject internalizes the values of the colonizer, only to be rejected and othered when those values no longer serve the dominant order. Like Fanon's native intellectual, Changez begins by emulating the center, only to be disillusioned by its hypocrisies. His eventual rejection of Underwood Samson, the emblem of American economic rationalism, is not merely political but existential. It marks a refusal of the reductive worldview that prioritizes valuation over value, efficiency over empathy. The firm's mantra—"focus on the fundamentals"—becomes a synecdoche for neoliberal capitalism's erasure of humanity in favor of profit. Changez's resignation is not just an act of defiance but a reclaiming of moral agency.

In the final moments of the novel, as the American grows increasingly agitated and Changez walks him through the darkening streets of Lahore, the narrative reaches its most intense ambiguity. The border here is no longer geographical, political, or even ideological—it is narratological. Who controls the story? What is left unsaid? What lies beyond the final page? This open ending refuses resolution, echoing the larger theme of identity as a site of ongoing negotiation rather than fixed essence.

Hamid's literary strategy in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is to turn the gaze back on the West—to interrogate its narratives of innocence, progress, and exceptionalism. The novel does not provide easy answers, nor does it offer redemptive arcs. Instead, it dwells in the uncomfortable space of liminality, where borders are neither fully crossed nor entirely intact, where the self is both fractured and remade. Like *Exit West*, it is concerned with movement, but here, the movement is inward—a migration of the soul from enchantment to estrangement, from assimilation to ambivalence. If *Exit West* imagines a world where borders dissolve, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* reminds us that some of the most insidious borders are the ones we carry within.

From Utopia to Dystopia: Borders as Spectacle and Surveillance

Mohsin Hamid's fictions may begin with the allure of escape, with the seductive fantasy of a borderless world, but they are far from naïvely utopian. If *Exit West* dares to imagine an architecture of transit devoid of visas, guards, and national gatekeeping—where black doors open instantaneously from war zones to European cities—it quickly dismantles this dream with the sobering reality of what comes after. The border, in Hamid's oeuvre, is not a single line one crosses and is free; rather, it is a hydra-headed system of surveillance, classification, and social control that follows the migrant across continents. In both *Exit West* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, borders are not merely geopolitical—they are epistemological, affective, and embodied. They reside in systems, languages, and gazes. They are projected onto bodies and dwell in the everyday rituals of suspicion and belonging. Far from disappearing, borders are (re)territorialized through spectacle and surveillance.

In *Exit West*, the surreal mechanism of the "black doors" seems at first to subvert the dominant global border regime. These magical portals bypass the harrowing trials of Mediterranean crossings or asylum bureaucracy; they enable characters like Saeed and Nadia to leap from crisis zones into the heart of the Western world. But this fantasy of instant mobility is quickly tempered by Hamid's insistence on realism. As Noah Bellin (2022) argues, Hamid is less interested in imagining a utopia than in holding a mirror to contemporary migration anxieties. The magical doors are not symbols of unrestrained freedom; they are portals into new regimes of marginalization. Upon arriving in London, Saeed and Nadia find themselves not in a promised land but in a beleaguered refugee encampment, subject to surveillance drones, hostile police forces, and armed vigilantes who patrol the "natives and migrants" divide. The supposed sanctuary of the West reveals itself as a palimpsest of exclusionary politics.

Indeed, Hamid uses spatial metaphors to explore this reconstitution of borders. In London, migrants are forced to inhabit the shell of an abandoned mansion in Kensington—a place once filled with luxury but now repurposed as a segregated zone. The grandeur of the setting cannot conceal the essential fact of containment. Here, the border is not an entry-point but a persistent architecture that regulates visibility and movement. As Saeed and Nadia navigate this precarious space, they are constantly subjected to scrutiny—not only from official institutions but from the social gaze, from assumptions embedded in language and posture. They are surveilled not just by cameras but by cultural attitudes that mark them as the perpetual "other."

This process continues in Marin, California, where Nadia attempts to assimilate into a commune of progressive, well-meaning Westerners. Even in this ostensibly inclusive environment, she is haunted by the subtle violence of being interpreted, of having to explain her choices, beliefs, and body. Her clothing, especially her decision to keep wearing her black robe, becomes a contested signifier. It is no longer a symbol of rebellion as it was in her homeland, but now an object of curiosity and coded judgment. The border, here, is sartorial and linguistic—it resides in the semiotic layers of everyday life. Nadia, like many migrants, finds herself caught in a politics of representation, where she must constantly narrate and justify her presence.

This echoes Hamid's treatment of borders in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where the protagonist Changez becomes a living site of ideological warfare. Unlike Nadia and Saeed, who physically traverse international boundaries, Changez's crossing is internal—he migrates through affective and epistemic realms, from belief to doubt, from enchantment with America to estrangement from its mythologies. Yet the border he faces is no less real. After 9/11, his body becomes indexed by the American security state as a possible threat. Surveillance becomes a way of life—he is watched, interrogated, and interpreted with increasing intensity. As he grows a beard and begins to question America's role in global violence, the gaze upon him hardens. The border becomes personal: it exists in the way strangers stare at him on the subway, in the differential treatment he receives at airport security, in the way his very demeanor is parsed for loyalty.

Here, Hamid critiques not only the political machinery of surveillance but also its cultural scaffolding—the stories societies tell to justify watching, excluding, and punishing the racialized other. Patriotism becomes weaponized, used to delineate who belongs and who must prove their belonging. Changez, who once flourished under the meritocratic ideal, is now estranged by the very values that promised him inclusion. His skills, education, and charisma are no longer passports but liabilities. He becomes a figure of ambivalence, viewed with both envy and suspicion, an embodiment of what Jasbir Puar might call the "terrorist assemblage"—a body overdetermined by global anxieties and racialized discourses.

This return of the border through spectacle and suspicion shows that Hamid's novels are deeply attuned to the logics of neoliberal multiculturalism: a world in which the fantasy of open borders and global citizenship exists side by side with the hardening of carceral regimes and state surveillance. Even in the most "open" cities of the West, the migrant remains vulnerable, always on probation. As Bellin argues, the narratives Hamid crafts do not idealize mobility but rather expose its hidden costs. The migrant is not a figure of pure agency or victimhood but someone caught in a web of structural violence and intimate negotiations.

What both *Exit West* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* share is a fundamental insight: that borders, in the 21st century, are no longer simply about entry and exit. They are inscribed into systems of perception and narration. The very idea of "home" becomes unstable, and with it, identity. Hamid's migrants are always in motion—not just geographically but ontologically. They are never fully arrived, never fully integrated. They are made to perform their legitimacy, to prove their allegiance, and to survive the slow violence of conditional hospitality.

In this way, Hamid joins a larger tradition of postcolonial writers who interrogate the fantasies of cosmopolitan inclusion. The notion of the borderless world is unmasked as a myth sustained by

structural inequity. The doors in *Exit West* may be magical, but what lies beyond them is all too real: police, checkpoints, coded language, bureaucratic indifference. Similarly, Changez's journey is not a descent into extremism but a recognition that even the most fluent migrants are subject to revocation.

Hamid's novels suggest that in a world where mobility is both fetishized and feared, the migrant becomes a paradox: celebrated as a symbol of global fluidity yet disciplined as a figure of risk. The border no longer ends at the customs line; it stretches into classrooms, kitchens, relationships, and inner dialogues. It is there when Nadia hesitates before speaking; it is there when Changez notes how his colleagues begin to look at him differently. It is a border of the mind as much as of space.

Conclusion

Thus, the utopia of borderlessness that *Exit West* hints at is never fully realized. It is compromised by the dystopia that inevitably follows, a world where the migrant remains a liminal subject, suspended in a state of becoming. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, this dystopia is quieter but more insidious—a suffocating atmosphere of suspicion and the slow erosion of identity. Together, these texts warn us that borders do not disappear; they evolve. They cloak themselves in bureaucracy, in empathy, even in progressivism. They watch, sort, and narrate.

Hamid does not allow us to forget that every act of crossing contains its own aftermath, and that even escape has a price. In his world, to migrate is not just to move—but to be remade, watched, and endlessly translated.

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