

EXPLORING MIGRATION, BORDERLESSNESS, AND TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST*: A POSTCOLONIAL MIGRATION STUDIES APPROACH

Rabia Shamim

Assistant Professor, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages (NUML)

rshamim@numl.edu.pk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23416349>

Keywords

Migration, borderlessness, transnational identity, post-colonialism, cultural hybridity, displacement, Exit West.

Article History

Received: 12 July 2026

Accepted: 28 September 2026

Published: 15 October 2026

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *

Rabia Shamim

Abstract

This study examines migration, borderlessness, and transnational identity in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* through a postcolonial migration studies perspective. It investigates how magical doors challenge geographical boundaries, how Saeed and Nadia negotiate cultural identities, and why social exclusion persists despite increased mobility. The study employs qualitative textual analysis, using close reading and thematic interpretation to examine displacement, national identity, cultural hybridity, and belonging. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity and Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity as an ongoing process provide the principal theoretical framework. Recent scholarship on refugee trans-nationality and postcolonial mobility supplements the analysis. The findings indicate that the novel questions the assumption that national borders determine stable identities. Although magical doors facilitate movement between geographical spaces, they do not eliminate xenophobia, nationalism, or cultural exclusion. Saeed's attachment to family, religion, and memory contrasts with Nadia's willingness to negotiate new relationships and social identities. Their experiences demonstrate that migration involves psychological and cultural transformation as well as physical displacement. The study concludes that *Exit West* represents belonging as a changing process shaped by memory, relationships, and intercultural encounters. It contributes to postcolonial literary criticism by demonstrating how contemporary migration fiction challenges restrictive national identities and encourages a more inclusive understanding of displaced populations.

Introduction:

Migration is a significant concern in contemporary literary studies because it raises questions about national identity, cultural belonging, political exclusion, and the relationship between individuals and geographical spaces. Wars, persecution, political instability, and economic inequalities compel people to leave familiar environments and establish new lives elsewhere. In postcolonial literature, migration also reveals how historical inequalities and contemporary political structures shape the experiences of displaced populations.

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* explores these concerns through Saeed and Nadia, two young people living in an unnamed city threatened by violence. As their environment becomes increasingly dangerous, they escape through mysterious doors that transport them to different locations. These doors transform migration from a difficult geographical journey into a speculative possibility, enabling Hamid to question the political and cultural significance of national boundaries.

The novel's central concern extends beyond physical movement. Although the characters cross borders, they continue to encounter exclusion, uncertainty, and changing relationships. Valerie Tosi examines the novel through social geography, affect theory, migration studies, and postcolonial criticism, emphasizing the intercultural and emotional dimensions of refugee experience (Tosi 59-76). Her analysis supports the understanding of migration as a process involving changes in identity and social relationships rather than merely movement between countries.

This paper argues that *Exit West* challenges fixed understandings of national and cultural identity by presenting migration as an ongoing process of negotiation. Through the contrasting experiences of Saeed and Nadia, the novel demonstrates that geographical mobility may create opportunities for transformation without guaranteeing social acceptance or a stable sense of belonging.

Problem Statement

Migration is frequently understood as the movement of people from one geographical location to another. However, displacement also transforms cultural identity, emotional attachments, social relationships, and perceptions of home. Migrants may enter new countries without achieving security, acceptance, or a sense of belonging. Similarly, removing physical barriers does not necessarily eliminate the political and cultural distinctions that separate citizens from refugees.

In *Exit West*, magical doors appear to overcome the geographical difficulties of migration. Nevertheless, the characters continue to experience marginalization and uncertainty after crossing them. This contradiction raises an important literary question: how can geographical boundaries become less restrictive while social and political exclusion continues?

The present study addresses this problem by examining how Hamid represents borderlessness as an opportunity for transformation while demonstrating the continuing influence of nationalism, cultural difference, and political power on migrant experience.

Research Objectives

The study has five objectives:

1. To examine the representation of forced migration and displacement in *Exit West*.
2. To analyze the symbolic significance of magical doors in challenging geographical and national boundaries.
3. To investigate how Saeed and Nadia negotiate cultural identity and belonging.
4. To explore the relationship between borderlessness, social exclusion, and national identity.
5. To interpret transnational identity through postcolonial migration studies.

Research Questions

1. How does *Exit West* represent migration as a geographical, psychological, and cultural experience?
2. How do magical doors challenge conventional understandings of national borders?
3. How do Saeed and Nadia respond differently to displacement and cultural transformation?
4. Why does social exclusion persist despite increased geographical mobility?
5. How does Hamid present transnational identity as a changing process of belonging and self-definition?

This study focuses on Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, published in 2017. It examines forced migration, magical doors, border politics, the contrasting experiences of Saeed and Nadia, and the development of

transnational identities. The research employs qualitative close reading and thematic analysis rather than interviews, surveys, or statistical data.

The theoretical framework draws primarily on Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* and Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." Scholarship on postcolonial mobility and refugee transnationality provides additional critical context. The study concentrates on the literary representation of migration and does not claim to offer an empirical account of all refugee populations.

This study contributes to postcolonial literary criticism by examining the relationship between geographical mobility and cultural identity. It demonstrates that migration involves more than crossing territorial boundaries; it also requires individuals to negotiate memories, relationships, traditions, and new social expectations.

The comparison between Saeed and Nadia is significant because it illustrates that migrants do not respond uniformly to displacement. Their experiences reveal how personal agency, cultural attachments, and encounters with new communities shape belonging. The study also challenges the assumption that borderlessness necessarily produces freedom. By highlighting the persistence of exclusion, it offers a critical perspective on nationalism, refugee representation, and transnational identity.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Literature Review

Previous scholarship on *Exit West* has examined migration, magical realism, national borders, and the transformation of migrant identities. Shazia Sadaf explores the relationship between history, geography, and temporality in the novel. She argues that Hamid's speculative narrative challenges conventional geographical divisions and opens imaginative possibilities for understanding global migration (Sadaf 636-47).

Recent scholarship has further developed the discussion of transnational identity. Tosi examines the emotional and intercultural dimensions of refugee experience, highlighting how the novel connects migration with social relationships, cultural encounters, and processes of affiliation (59-76). Her approach is useful for understanding why migrant identity cannot be reduced to national origin or physical location.

Olasubomi Olumofin examines mobility, national identity, and technological surveillance in *Exit West*. His analysis situates the novel within a broader discussion of the relationship between movement and the nation-state (386-99). This perspective is relevant to the novel's portrayal of migrants whose physical mobility challenges established assumptions about national membership.

Although these studies provide valuable interpretations, the present research brings borderlessness and the contrasting identity trajectories of Saeed and Nadia into a single postcolonial framework. It examines how the removal of geographical barriers coexists with social exclusion and how migrants negotiate different forms of cultural belonging.

Post-colonial migration studies investigates how colonial histories, political inequalities, and cultural hierarchies influence mobility and belonging. It challenges the assumption that national identities are natural, permanent, or culturally uniform. Migrants frequently occupy complex positions between their places of origin and their new environments, negotiating the expectations of both.

In *Exit West*, the unnamed homeland broadens the novel's relevance beyond a single national conflict. The setting represents a society affected by violence and displacement without identifying it exclusively with one country. Similarly, the characters' movement into Western locations complicates the distinction between a supposedly stable West and an unstable non-West. Hamid presents migration as a global experience shaped by political circumstances and human relationships.

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* provides a framework for understanding identities formed through cultural contact and negotiation. Cultural hybridity challenges the idea that individuals must

preserve a pure and unchanging cultural identity. Instead, identity develops through encounters between different traditions, values, and social expectations.

Saeed and Nadia encounter unfamiliar cultural practices as they move between locations. Their identities are neither entirely detached from their homeland nor completely determined by their new surroundings. Their experiences can therefore be interpreted as negotiations between continuity and transformation.

Bhabha's framework also helps explain why cultural difference cannot be understood through a simple opposition between native and foreign identities. Migration creates situations in which existing attachments are reconsidered and new affiliations become possible.

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall challenges the idea that identity is a fixed essence. He emphasizes the significance of history, representation, and cultural transformation in the construction of cultural identity (222-37).

Hall's framework is relevant to *Exit West* because Saeed and Nadia do not simply exchange one national identity for another. Their sense of identity evolves through personal memories, interpersonal relationships, and interactions with new cultural communities. Identity is consequently represented as an ongoing process rather than a permanent condition determined exclusively by birthplace. Together, Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Hall's account of identity provide a framework for interpreting the characters' changing relationships with culture, place, and belonging.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on close textual reading and thematic analysis. *Exit West* serves as the primary text, while scholarly publications on post-colonialism, migration, cultural hybridity, and transnational identity provide the secondary material.

The analysis follows three stages. First, significant narrative elements including magical doors, changing geographical settings, migrant communities, and the experiences of Saeed and Nadia are identified. Second, these elements are examined through recurring themes such as forced displacement, border control, cultural negotiation, and belonging. Third, the findings are interpreted through Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Hall's understanding of cultural identity as an ongoing process.

The methodology is interpretive rather than empirical. It does not claim to generate statistical findings about migrant populations. Instead, it develops a critical reading of the novel through textual evidence and relevant scholarship.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

At the beginning of *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia inhabit a city increasingly affected by violence. Their decision to leave is shaped by deteriorating security rather than an uncomplicated desire for adventure. Migration is therefore represented as a response to circumstances that restrict personal choice.

The loss of home involves more than leaving a physical location. The characters must also confront the disruption of familiar routines, relationships, and expectations about the future. Their departure illustrates the unequal conditions under which migration occurs: some people move by choice, while others are compelled to leave to preserve their lives.

Sadaq's discussion of migration and the relationship between geography and time is relevant to this interpretation because it emphasizes how the novel challenges conventional assumptions about place and historical continuity (636-47). Hamid's narrative consequently presents displacement as a material and psychological experience.

The magical doors are the novel's central symbolic device. They compress geographical distance and make movement between countries appear almost immediate. Their existence challenges the assumption that borders are natural and unavoidable divisions between populations. Hamid connects

the doors to the political consequences of unrestricted movement. Reflecting on changing national boundaries, the narrator observes:

“Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory” (Hamid 155).

This quotation questions the relationship between territorial boundaries and national identity. If borders become less decisive in determining where people can travel, nations may also appear less permanent and self-evident. The passage does not suggest that national identities immediately disappear; rather, it exposes their dependence on political and geographical arrangements.

The doors also challenge conventional migration systems because they allow movement without the familiar procedures associated with visas, passports, and border inspections. As a result, they expose the political power involved in deciding who may move and who must remain in place.

Sadaf similarly interprets the novel’s magical portals as a challenge to border divisions and conventional understandings of global migration (636–47). The doors therefore function as both a narrative device and a political metaphor.

Nevertheless, borderlessness remains incomplete. Although the doors reduce physical distance, migrants continue to encounter hostility and restrictions. The novel suggests that political and cultural exclusion cannot be resolved solely by removing geographical barriers.

Saeed’s experience of migration is shaped by his attachment to family, religious practice, and cultural memory. His departure from home does not eliminate these emotional connections. Instead, they continue to influence how he interprets unfamiliar environments.

His preference for cultural continuity is not necessarily an inability to adapt. It can also be understood as an effort to preserve meaning during a period of instability. When geographical surroundings and social expectations change rapidly, familiar practices may provide emotional support and a sense of coherence.

However, Saeed’s attachments create tensions as he and Nadia develop different expectations about their future. His experience illustrates how migration may intensify the importance of cultural traditions while requiring individuals to reconsider how those traditions function in new circumstances.

Hall’s understanding of identity as historically shaped and continuously negotiated helps explain Saeed’s experience (222–37). His identity changes through migration, but it remains connected to memories, family, and religious beliefs. The novel thus challenges the assumption that cultural transformation necessarily requires the complete abandonment of earlier attachments.

Nadia responds to migration differently. She demonstrates a greater willingness to explore unfamiliar environments and construct relationships beyond established cultural expectations. Her choices suggest that identity can be negotiated through personal agency rather than inherited exclusively from family or national tradition.

Her clothing, social relationships, and participation in new communities distinguish her approach from Saeed’s. These differences should not be reduced to a simple opposition between modernity and tradition. Rather, they reveal that two people who share a homeland can develop different responses to displacement.

Nadia’s development reflects Bhabha’s concept of hybridity because her identity emerges through interaction between existing attachments and new possibilities. She does not simply abandon one identity and adopt another. Instead, she negotiates the meanings of independence, intimacy, and belonging as her circumstances change.

Tosi’s discussion of refugee transnational identities supports the importance of social and intercultural encounters in understanding the novel’s migrant characters (59–76). Nadia’s experiences demonstrate that transnational identity involves both personal choice and the opportunities or limitations created by the surrounding environment.

Although the magical doors facilitate movement, the characters’ arrival in new locations does not guarantee acceptance. In London, migrants encounter hostility and attempts to reclaim urban space for

established residents. Their presence becomes the focus of political anxieties about national identity, resources, and social change.

This situation exposes a central contradiction in the novel: borders may become physically permeable while remaining socially and politically powerful. Migrants can cross a threshold but still be denied recognition as legitimate members of a community. Exclusion therefore operates through attitudes, institutions, and public narratives as well as geographical barriers.

Olumofin's discussion of mobility, national identity, and surveillance is relevant to this contradiction. Migrant movement challenges established categories, while political systems continue to define belonging through national membership and perceived difference (386–99).

Hamid's portrayal of hostility challenges the assumption that migration itself constitutes a crisis. The novel encourages readers to consider how fear and nationalism shape public responses to displaced populations. Migrants are represented as individuals with relationships, aspirations, and personal histories rather than as an undifferentiated collective.

As Saeed and Nadia move through different locations, their relationship changes alongside their understanding of home. The place they leave remains significant, but it no longer determines every aspect of their identities. New friendships, unfamiliar social structures, and different expectations influence how they imagine their futures.

The novel also expands migration beyond geographical displacement. In the narrative's broader reflection on change, the idea that people are "migrants through time" links geographical movement with the universal experience of transformation (Hamid 209). This formulation suggests that identity changes throughout life, even when individuals remain in one place. However, the comparison should not erase the particular hardships of forced migration, including violence, insecurity, and the loss of home.

Hall's account of cultural identity helps explain this perspective. Identity is shaped by historical experience and ongoing transformation rather than preserved as an unchanged essence (222–37). Bhabha's concept of hybridity further illuminates how cultural encounters can produce new forms of belonging without requiring the complete abandonment of earlier attachments.

Home consequently becomes more than a fixed geographical location. It is also an emotional and cultural relationships that may persist, change, or be reconstructed through experience. The novel suggests that belonging can develop across multiple places without becoming permanent or uncomplicated.

The novel's treatment of migration challenges the rigid opposition between the West and the non-West. Its unnamed homeland, international settings, and diverse migrant communities make it difficult to assign cultural stability to one region and instability to another. Conflict, mobility, and cultural transformation emerge as interconnected features of the contemporary world.

This approach is consistent with postcolonial criticism because it questions the categories through which societies distinguish insiders from outsiders. Migrants cannot be fully understood through national origin alone. Their experiences involve personal choices, inherited memories, social pressures, and changing relationships.

Tosi's analysis of transnational identity supports this interpretation by emphasizing the significance of cultural encounters and social affiliations in refugee experience (59–76). Hamid's novel thus presents belonging as relational and provisional, shaped by the possibility of connection as well as the experience of exclusion.

Findings

The analysis produces five principal findings.

First, migration in *Exit West* is represented as a multidimensional experience involving physical displacement, emotional uncertainty, and cultural transformation.

Second, the magical doors challenge the apparent permanence of national borders. However, they do not eliminate the political and social structures that regulate migrant belonging.

Third, Saeed and Nadia demonstrate different strategies of cultural negotiation. Saeed maintains stronger attachments to family and tradition, while Nadia explores greater independence and new forms of affiliation.

Fourth, geographical mobility does not guarantee social acceptance. Xenophobia, nationalism, and exclusion continue to shape migrant experiences after arrival.

Fifth, transnational identity emerges as a dynamic process shaped by memory, relationships, personal agency, and intercultural encounters. These findings support the argument that Hamid challenges fixed definitions of national and cultural identity.

Conclusion:

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* presents migration as a process that transforms geography, identity, and belonging. Through the magical doors, the novel challenges the assumption that national borders are permanent or self-evident divisions. Yet the continuing exclusion experienced by migrants demonstrates that the disappearance of physical barriers does not automatically produce social equality.

The contrasting journeys of Saeed and Nadia reveal that migration produces different responses to cultural change. Saeed seeks continuity through family, religious practice, and memory, whereas Nadia negotiates identity through independence and new relationships. Their experiences demonstrate that identity is shaped by personal agency as well as cultural and social circumstances.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Hall's understanding of identity as an ongoing process provide useful frameworks for interpreting these transformations. Scholarship on refugee transnationality further emphasizes the importance of social relationships, emotional attachments, and intercultural encounters in understanding migrant identity (Tosi 59-76).

Ultimately, *Exit West* challenges rigid distinctions between national belonging and foreignness. It presents identity as an evolving process shaped by history, movement, and human relationships. The novel's contribution to postcolonial migration studies lies in its insistence that migrants should be understood not simply through the borders they cross, but through the complex lives, attachments, and possibilities they carry with them.

Reference

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 222-37.
- Hamid, Mohsin. *Exit West: A Novel*. Riverhead Books, 2017.
- Olumofin, Olasubomi. "Rewriting the Nation: Mobility, Technological Panopticism, and Identity in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2025, pp. 386-99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2435972>.
- Sadaf, Shazia. "'We Are All Migrants through Time': History and Geography in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 56, no. 5, 2020, pp. 636-47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1820667>.
- Tosi, Valerie. "Inhabiting a Chaos-World: Refugee Transnational Identities in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017)." *Il Tolomeo*, vol. 26, 2024, pp. 59-76. <https://doi.org/10.30687/Tol/2499-5975/2024/01/004>.
- Bellin, Stefano. "Disorienting Empathy: Reimagining the Global Border Regime through Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." *Literature Compass*, vol. 19, no. 12, 2022, article e12694. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12694>.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 222–37.
- Hamid, Mohsin. *Exit West: A Novel*. Riverhead Books, 2017.
- Khanna, Stuti. "A Narrative House of Mirrors: Reading Language and the City in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West*." *Journal of Global Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.5744/jgps.2024.2289>.
- Lagji, Amanda. "Waiting in Motion: Mapping Postcolonial Fiction, New Mobilities, and Migration through Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." *Mobilities*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2019, pp. 218–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2018.1533684>.
- Olumofin, Olasubomi. "Rewriting the Nation: Mobility, Technological Panopticism, and Identity in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2025, pp. 386–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2435972>.
- Sadaf, Shazia. "'We Are All Migrants through Time': History and Geography in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 56, no. 5, 2020, pp. 636–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1820667>.

