



THE PHENOMENA OF DIASPORA AND CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST*

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Abstract

This research paper aims to investigate the complexities of diaspora as a social constructed and its implications for individual identity. The paper begins by conceptualizing the idea of diaspora through various theorists, contextualizing it within the broader framework of contemporary phenomena of migration, specifically in the light of a displacement that imposed due to a longstanding conflict. It emphasizes that those individuals that are uprooted by extreme violence, as portrayed in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West*, often carry the memories of their homeland, reflecting a deep-seated longing for belonging and identity. The narrative of Hamid's narrative reveals the multifaceted challenges faced by the protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, as they navigate their cultural identities within the realities of foreign territories. Through a review of existing literature, the paper attempts to highlight themes in *Exit West* related to technology, representation and the human condition amidst the crisis of migration. The scholars argue that the realities of diaspora stem not only from personal but are also socially constructed group identity, collective memory, and community bonds established among people. This paper identifies a significant research gap in scholarship regarding the construction of cultural and national identities within the context of diaspora in *Exit West*. By exploring the diverse identity journeys of the protagonists, this paper articulates how migration influences the ongoing evolution of cultural identities and highlights the inherent fluidity of such identities within diaspora experiences.

Keywords: *Belonging, Cultural Identity, Diaspora, Exit West, Nostalgia.*

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1. Introduction

Migration is a phenomenon which has occurred throughout human history but has deeply colored the first two decades of the twenty first century, and it has given birth to a whole new discourse, which is the discourse of diaspora. Bhawana Pokharel in her article titled *Diaspora and Diasporic Literature: Condition to Consciousness* quotes Mahesh Subedi to define the term diaspora who says, “The term diaspora in the globalized world today has become a vital phenomenon which connotes a state of a settlement or a state of being or a category of people who reside in a foreign land away from their home land for various reasons and purposes” (Pokharel 9). The dispersal of people on huge scale happened, first two decades of twenty first century, mostly because of the war on terror in the middle eastern countries, which has killed and uprooted millions of people from their homelands. Though these uprooted people have migrated, still they carry the memories of their home in their hearts. Judith T. Shuval describes diaspora as a term which in today’s world not only refers to classic groups, for instance, Jews, Greeks and Armenians, but too much wider categories which reflect processes of politically motivated uprooting and moving of populations, voluntary migration, global communications and transport. She argues, “Diaspora discourse reflects a sense of being a part of an ongoing transnational network that includes dispersed people who retain a sense of their uniqueness and an interest in their homeland. Diaspora is a social construct founded on feelings, consciousness, memory, mythology, history, meaningful narratives, group identities, longing, and dreams, all of which play a role in establishing a diaspora reality” (Shuval 43). With the concept of diaspora comes the question of identity. Does an identity changes when one become a part of the diaspora community or does it resist change? With references from Mohsin Hamid’s novel, *Exit West*, this research article will try to inform the following question;

- Why does the phenomena of diaspora happen and is it a social construct or not?
- Does the national and cultural identity of an individual changes when one become a part of the diaspora community and comes in contact with other cultures or does it resist the change?

The novel, *Exit West*, tells the story of a fictitious nameless city that is in the middle of a civil war. In the very first sentence of the novel, Hamid, describes it as a “CITY SWOLLEN BY REFUGEES but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war” (Hamid 8). Saeed and Nadia, who are lovers and residents of this city, find it unsafe for their future lives, and decide to leave it behind, and travel, through magical doors, to some other part of the world that is safe, leaving their loved ones behind. But neither their journey is free of any danger nor the places they travel to. They become a part of the

diaspora community and face various challenges, which they mutually try to overcome. As the novel progresses, it reveals what sort of cultural identities each of them holds, and how both characters navigate their identities.

2. Literature Review

Exit West was published in 2017, and though it is a relatively new text, still a huge body of scholarly work has been conducted on it, due to its popularity in both Eastern and Western academic sphere. The research and literature that already exists on the novel explore the text from the lens of posthuman perspective to immigration crisis in the novel. Clair Gail Chamber in her research article titled *The Door of Posthuman Sensory Perceptions in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West* says that Hamid's book is a window onto a technologically assisted future in which the senses are enhanced by digital advances. She argues that Hamid's refugees seem powerless, but they make use of technology in unexpected ways which appear to protect them, or at least hold at bay hostile larger forces. She points out that migration creates gulf between haves and have-nots, however, things begin to change when the powerless take hold of powerful technologies.

Michael Perfect has investigated the representation of refugees in his research article titled *Black Holes in the Fabric of the Nation: Refugees in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West*. The research paper argues that Mohsin Hamid's novel is not just about showing the hardships that immigrants endure but it also constitutes a reflection on how they and their journeys are represented and mediated by actually existing technologies in the world. Perfect concludes,

To insist that all refugees are human beings is vital; to insist that all human beings are refugees, however, is wrongheaded. We may all experience the 'loss' of the past as such, but this is not analogous, nor even productively comparable, to the experience of being forcibly displaced by war, persecution, or natural disaster. Fortunately, *Exit West* itself does not make such a claim – instead, it makes the far less imprudent suggestion that we are all 'migrants through time' and, to Hamid's credit, poignantly shows that any one of us could become a refugee (Perfect 23).

Jaspreet Singh in his research article titled *Envisioning Co-existence: Exploring Responses to Migration in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West* argues that by showing the dislocation of people in different countries in the novel, Hamid intends to propound the idea that migration is a universal phenomenon of our contemporary times. Singh contends, "Hamid through delineating migrants experience, their encounter with new cultures, societies and responses of native emerged out of these encounters provide a comprehensive understanding of migration in our contemporary times. It further promotes the idea of co-existence and aims at attaining a better understanding" (Singh 1818). In his research article

titled *Global Refugee Crisis: A Study of Mohsin Hamid's Novel Exit West*, Manzoor Ahmad Mir, argues that Hamid is predicting the future of human beings and is warning us about the impending catastrophe which humanity is going to face in the future. He concludes;

The novelist is guessing an age in which all humankind will be refugees. We are provided with glimpses of a migration apocalypse where everyone seems to be on the move. Wars and drastic climate changes cannot be ruled out in the time to come. All this migration gives *Exit West* a faint tinge of science fiction as well. He posits a quite different approach towards the issue of mass migration of people by presenting a totally different view of world geography and borders. The novelist is reminding us that it is imperative to rethink our beliefs of the world and our future (Mir 16).

The novel, *Exit West*, has been research by various academic researchers from posthuman perspective to discussions on representation, refugee crisis and future of mankind but, to my knowledge, has not been explored in terms of cultural and national identity construction. So, there is a research gap. This research article will argue whether the reality of diaspora is a social construct or is it a naturally happening phenomenon and how people, who become a part of the diaspora, navigate and express their cultural identities.

3. Discussion

Often, the reason for the emergence of a diaspora community is traumatic events that unfolds due to armed conflict in a region. The violent atmosphere becomes uninhabitable for the local population, and they are forced to migrate from their place of birth to another, a place that most of the times tries to resist the flow of immigrants, because its residents feel insecure and the host population fear for their jobs and their cultural values. In the novel, *Exit West*, the narrator describes to us a city that is experiencing a civil war, but largely at peace in the beginning. The local population continue their daily lives despite the lack of security in the city. Hamid narrates, "It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class—in this case an evening class on corporate identity and product branding—but that is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying" (Hamid 9). On one hand, Hamid shows the worsening situation of the city and on the other depicts the daily lives of inhabitants of the city. Restaurants, banks, cinemas, and educational institutes are open, which communicates that people of the city are not willing to leave their city. Inherently, humans create a bond with their birthplace, and they tend to hold onto it for as long as they can, unless they are forced or threatened to migrate from it. In the novel, we see that Saeed and Nadia enjoy eating mushrooms and

smoking joints while watching helicopters roaming around the city, which at times fire on those buildings that are suspected of militant presence. Those scenes suggest that no matter how much the situation gets worst, humans will always find a way to find joy in their lives. But, when a region becomes so violent that even getting out of home become a threat to life, people begin considering leaving the place which they call home, even though their hearts ach for it. Nadia's hallucinogenic drugs supplier gets killed in such a gruesome way that even reading the scene becomes hard to read. Hamid narrates, "In a few months this ponytailed man would be beheaded, nape-first with a serrated knife to enhance discomfort, his headless body strung up by one ankle from an electricity pylon where it swayed legs akimbo until the shoelace his executioner used instead of rope rotted and gave way, no one daring to cut him down before that" (Hamid 26). Slowly and gradually the militants take control of many places in the city and then standing near the window in one's own home become a life-threatening act. Hamid writes, "Saeed's neighborhood had fallen to the militants, and a small-scale fighting has diminished nearby, but large bombs still dropped from the sky and exploded with an awesome power that brought to mind the might of nature itself" (Hamid 46). The more the militants take control of the city the more people fear for their lives. So, in a space where such violent incidents happen on daily basis, living a normal life becomes an impossibility, and in pursuit of a sane life, people leave behind place that are dear to them. So, due to the creation of such violent settings migration on a mass scale occurs which subsequently gives birth to the diaspora communities around the world. The construction of diaspora is absolutely social in nature because it does not happen due to some natural calamity but mainly because of conflict of two different ideologies or religion, especially in this novel, though Hamid does not clearly disclose it, the conflict seems to have emerged from difference of ideologies. As we can observe in the novel that the militant group that is fighting against the military have very strict theological beliefs, and those who do not subscribe to those beliefs are often punished.

Diaspora is a social construct, a reality that establishes itself on memory, history, group identity, and longing for the lost home. People who belong to diaspora community often tend to construct a bond with people who belong to the same culture and country as theirs, or those people who are not of the same culture but belong to the diaspora community. One of the reasons of establishing this bond is that it gives them a feeling of home, a home that they have lost, a home which they can only visit through nostalgia. For instance, in the novel, we see that Saeed tries to make a bond with those people who live near Nadia and Saeed's place, and belong to the same part of the world from where Saeed and Nadia have migrated. That place and those people give Saeed a sense of home, where he feels accepted and valued. Hamid narrates, "AROUND A BEND, on VICARAGE GATE, was a house known to be a house of people from his country. Saeed began to spend

more time there, and he joined his fellow countrymen in prayer in the back garden, under a blue sky that seemed shockingly blue, like the sky of another world, absent the airborne dust of the city where he spent his entire life” (Hamid 81). The above discuss on longing for home and finding home in creating a bond with people of the same culture and country can be understood by quoting the following lines from the novel;

It made him feel something, not just something spiritual, but something human, part of this group, and for wrenchingly painful second, he thought of his father, and then a bearded man with two white marks in the black on either side of his chin, marks like that of a great cat or a wolf, put his arms around Saeed and said brother would you like some tea (Hamid 81).

Everything about this bearded man remind him of his people in the city, especially his father, and it is through this bearded man’s home that Saeed psychologically visits his old home in his city. The bearded man calls him brother, and it gives Saeed a sense of belonging, a place where feels at home, partially. And this is precisely what Judith T. Shuval says about the diaspora, that it is a social construct that is based on feelings, memory, group identity, and a unique interest in home. All the things come together and play a role in establishing the diaspora reality. Like Saeed, Nadia too creates a bond with the Nigerian people at the mansion in London because those are the people who can truly understand her pain and can give her some sort of comfort in those violent and difficult times. The Nigerian community is the one where she feels accepted and not considered as someone completely alien.

Homi K. Bhabha, in his book, *The Location of Culture*, argues that no culture ever exists in its pure form, and is always in a flux because when it comes in contact with other cultures, it absorbs some aspects of those other cultures in itself. And I think it can be argued that one cannot, throughout their whole life, retain a constant cultural identity, especially when that person belongs to a diaspora community. In the novel, both characters, Saeed and Nadia have very different identity construction. Saeed is a mild conservative person, while Nadia is a person of liberal attitude. Saeed holds one to some of his cultural and religious beliefs very firmly, as we see in the first half of the novel that Nadia, more than once, tries to initiate sexual intercourse with Saeed but he refuses to carry out the act because of his religious beliefs and respect for his parents, as Hamid mentions that Saeed's parents, when they were young, did not have sexual intercourse before their marriage, though they were lovers for some time. Saeed lives in his parents’ house. On the contrary, Nadia, after graduating from university leaves her parents’ home and lives alone in the city. She also, in the past, has been in a sexual relationship with her previous boyfriend. Saeed, though not much, still experiences few changes in his cultural identity, which I will discuss later.

When Saeed and Nadia emerge at Mykonos after their first journey through a black door, and arrive at a refugee camp, we see that Nadia adopts a transcultural identity. She is very much inclusive and tries to engage with other refugees and makes a bond of friendship with a health worker who works at the refugee camp. While Saeed does not make much effort to engage with other people. Nadia tells Saeed that they have a lot of time on their hands and they should explore the island, and after her suggestion, Saeed goes on to explore the island with Nadia. Here, the identity of Nadia grows like that of a rhizome, expanding, trying to survive. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in their book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, argues, “unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even consign states” (Deleuze and Guattari 21). Same is the cultural identity of Nadia, her identity grows like a rhizome, it expands as it comes in contact with other cultures and not just cling to her own cultural roots, which makes her survival as a refugee a little easier. One of the reasons that Nadia becomes friend with the health worker is because she wants to survive in these hard times, and the company of another female, or people who are in the same situation as her, can provide a sort of comfort for Nadia. Saeed’s identity on the other hand grows like a tree, and that is why he at times feels lonely and sad for his lost home, and his father, who has refused to leave the city, a city where his wife is buried.

For people who become a part of the diaspora community, survival in the host country becomes first priority. They keep surviving in the host country by gradually adopting the host culture, and also by uniting with other immigrants, forming a diaspora community. After their travel to London, Nadia remains the same, open to engagement with people of different cultures and nationalities, who, like Saeed and Nadia, have fled from their home countries in search of a safe and better life while Saeed on the other hand tries to resist the change which comes after becoming a part of the diaspora community. The diaspora community that resides illegally at the big mansion in London is largely consistent of people who belong to Nigerian culture. Nadia tries to engage with them, while Saeed on the other hand tries to avoid them. Nadia learns bits of the Nigerian language and she feels accepted by them, and thus we see Nadia’s identity always in flux, spreading like a rhizome. She attends the meetings of the elder Nigerian people and thus acquires a special status among them. Hamid narrates, “Among the younger Nigerian people Nadia acquired a special status, perhaps they saw her with their elders or perhaps because of her black robe” (Hamid 79). She also embraces some of the elements of the Western culture too because later in the novel, when Saeed and Nadia finally separate their paths, Nadia begins a relationship with a female co-worker, which is something that goes absolutely against the culture in which she is born. On the other hand, Saeed holds onto

his cultural roots and identity. He becomes more and more spiritual with time, and tries to establish friendships with those people who have come from the same culture as his, and then at last returns to his birth place. For Saeed, prayer remains a way to connect with his dead mother and his beloved father, who refused to make the journey with him and Nadia. “He prayed fundamentally as a gesture of love for what had gone and would go and could be loved in no other way” (Hamid). He marries the daughter of a priest, whose wife has come from the same region from which Saeed has come. So, in contrast to the cultural identity of Nadia, Saeed tries to hold onto his cultural roots and longs for his lost home, and seeks for his lost home in everything that is related to his city or culture. The difference between their identities can be aptly realized from this line in the novel. “Nadia has long been and continue to be, more comfortable with all varieties of movements in her life than Saeed, in whom the impulse of nostalgia was stronger, perhaps because his childhood has been more idyllic, or perhaps this was simply his temperament” (Hamid 52). Despite Saeed’s efforts to resist change in his identity, it can be observed in the novel that his behavior changes towards the end, not culturally though. His temperament changes, and he becomes more accepting of Nadia’s decisions and her way of life.

4. Conclusion

From the above discussion it is concluded that diaspora is a social construct, a reality that is always based on memory and longing for the original home, a lost home that could be only visited through nostalgia and creating bond with people of the same culture and country. The construction of both Nadia and Saeed’s identities are different. Nadia’s identity evolves with time and she adopts a transcultural identity, as they move from one place to another, and Saeed’s identity largely remains the same, except few minor changes. He tries to hold onto his religious and cultural values. So, it can be said that when one become a part of the diaspora community, that individual’s cultural identity will undergo some changes, the magnitude of the changes can vary from individual to individual, as it depends on how much firmly that person is holding onto their own cultural and religious beliefs, and how much that person is allowing themselves to interact with other cultures.

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