

Exploring Global Identities in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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Abstract—Identity cannot be compartmentalized, as Amin Maalouf argues. Neither is it established on a rigid core of a single affiliation like the restrictive essentialist identities of some political/religious groups wreaking havoc in the world. Identity changes encompass various affiliations in a unique way for every individual. However, this does not refer to the absence of a cultural, religious, or national identity. Maalouf's concept encourages peace. The refugee crisis and the tumultuous events of the last few decades led to a devastating confrontation between rival restrictive identities that could have been avoided if the parties and the world had given up the redundant notion of singular restrictive identities. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) tells the story of two people falling in love in a disintegrating world. Their identities change as they escape their homeland to different parts of the West, highlighting the effects of their mobility and change of places and contexts. Using Maalouf's argument, this paper investigates how characters' identities change due to the catastrophe in their own country and the world they move into. The narration's tone, details, and character delineation show identity and notion stereotyping, especially in the Muslim world. As implied in *Exit West* (the major topic of this study) but expressly addressed in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), the novelist compares a restrictive, rigid fundamentalist identity with another fundamentalist identity.

Index Terms—*Exit West*, fundamentalist identity, Mohsin Hamid, Maalouf's argument, affiliations

I. INTRODUCTION

It seems that Hamid subscribes to the same stereotypes he means to shatter. Muslims are stereotypically portrayed in some popular Western writings and media as if they have one well-demarcated identity, and Hamid, similarly, writes his novel(s) in a manner that ignores the diversity of the Muslim world, focusing on a very small minority (an austere variety of fundamentalists) as the Muslim world. This is done perhaps unconsciously with good intentions or for the benefit of luring the Western media that feed on stereotyping cultures and people to serve latent political issues.

He sets one fundamental identity against another: capitalist hegemonic against religious terrorists. Both are rock solid, intolerant, and parochial. While his protagonist (Saeed in *Exit West*), or the narrator in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), for example, tries to prove himself aligned with both identities, he subscribes to a global identity that is in love with the first and feels strong bonds with the milieu of the second (ambivalent). This ambivalence is revealed within an air of ambiguity intentionally used by the narrator, perhaps to enrich the novel with some postmodernist techniques. However, as Ambreen Hai (2020) points out, this ambiguity in the context of the fallout of 9/11 has adverse implications:

Hamid's choice to create a central, sustained ambiguity about his narrator-protagonist runs the very high risk of reaffirming readers' pre-existing pernicious negative stereotypes and undermining the apparent goals of the novel itself. (Hai, 2020, p. 3)

There is a blurring of boundaries in the sense of globalism that is mostly Western with tolerance towards a shallow, emaciated multiculturalism. Real civilizations, which are not in clash despite Samuel Huntington, like that of the majority of the enlightened West with belief in the values well-entrenched by the traditions of the European Enlightenment, are turned shallow or discarded altogether. The Muslim civilization and the beliefs of millions of non-political Muslims are also discarded or ignored.

The protagonists of *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia, go through a trajectory that slightly changes their initial reductive identities. They feel in conflict with the new environment and the new restrictive identities around them while they try to adjust. They feel the adverse effect on their relationship that deteriorates and gets disrupted. However, this trajectory, start, middle, and end, is abstract, where we have no real people, no round characters. They are like cartoon characters in children's comics but in a dystopia. Detailed analysis and discussion will elucidate how this takes place.

II. OBJECTIVES

Based on insights from cultural and literary studies, the current paper analyzes Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) as an example of contemporary writings that bear on concepts of conflict of identities, especially concerning the Muslim world. It points out misconceptions and reductive stereotyping that harm the peaceful co-existence of different civilizations.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

The study attempts to contribute to a better understanding of the thorny issue of the involvement of parts of both West and East in the rise of terrorism. It demonstrates how political issues hide behind forging false identities and ascribing a restrictive identity to parts of the Muslim world.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In a qualitative piece of research, the current paper conducts a content and context analysis of the novel *Exit West* and its larger contexts concerning some of the author's other works in addition to the broader cultural and literary contexts guided by concepts such as Amin Maalouf's deadly identities, Homi Bhabha's hybridity (or third space), Jean-François Bayart's illusory cultural identities among others.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Against a backdrop of quick-paced international mobility and tumultuous political and social upheavals that have thrown millions of people out of their homelands, an acute migration problem threatens to destabilize even developed countries. This destabilizing situation has created problems of identities that are troubling, dangerous, or even downright murderous, i.e., *meurtri ère*, as described by Amin Maalouf.

Even before 9/11, Amin Maalouf warned against deadly identities that reduce the human subject into a limited one-dimensional being confined to one aspect of a core identity flaunted against others, giving rise to raging passions and massive crimes. In his book, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (1998), Amin Maalouf defines "identity" as composed of many *appurtenances*, usually translated as *affiliations* or a sense of belonging. All our different affiliations compose our identity, which is a blend of all the elements of our persons. Identity is not an innate thing that is born in us, refusing to change or develop. However, it does not have many different identities, nor is it liable to "be compartmentalized. You can't divide it up into halves or thirds or any other separate segments" (Maalouf, 2000, p. 2). He argues that we should not judge people on one singular rigid identity. This does not negate identity or different identities. Neither does it mean that one has to renounce one's religious/cultural/national/personal identity to please proponents of globalization. People have identities, but "identity" here is not an "essence," not one particular affiliation, or "alleged fundamental allegiance, which is often religious, national, racial or ethnic," which fundamentalists flaunt proudly in the face of others" (Maalouf, 2000, p. 3).

Jean-François Bayart went even further, arguing that cultural identity is an illusion. In *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* (2005), he critiques stagnant ideas that rationalize identity and declares that fixed cultural identities do not exist. Identities are fluid; they are never homogeneous and are sometimes even invented. Ethnographically, identity "must always be mixed, relational, and inventive," i.e., it is not of an essential core (Bayart, 2005, p. 95). It is not a primordial core, but in primitive societies, "magicians ... instrumentalize this illusion to their advantage" (Bayart, 2005, p. 95). Bayart refers to Ibn Khaldun's writings where the latter denounces concepts of essentialist identity, termed "asabiyyah" عصبية, which designates the "community ... bound by ties of blood or simply a similarity of fate". For Ibn Khaldun, this "has to do with the domain of illusion (amr wahmi وأمر وهمي) and has no real foundation (la haqiqata lahu لا حقيقة له)" (Bayart, 2005, p. 91). Both Ibn Khaldun and Bayart subscribe to dynamic identities with rich affiliations.

Postcolonial studies raised interest in hybrid identities created due to colonialism and even neo-colonialism. Influenced by Edward Said's work, Homi K. Bhabha points out that a hybridization process can occur when two or more cultures come in close contact. The intermingling of these cultures creates new mixed identities, resulting in colonized subjects with a hybrid cultural identity, a mixture of their own and colonizer identities. Ambivalence develops, causing a duality and a split in identity. This new identity is not the cosmopolitan or global identity that is original with multi-layered affinities, sought by Maalouf, but a poor, impoverished imitation of the hegemonic power. This hybrid identity "can neither be 'original'—by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it—nor identical—by virtue of the difference that defines it" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 107). This ambivalent hybrid identity is subtly portrayed in the character of Saeed in *Exit West* and explicitly delineated in the character of the narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Like Bayart's negation of fixed cultural identities, leading cultural theorist Stuart Hall critiques such notions, arguing that "cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (Hall, 1996, p. 225). It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture" (Hall, 1996, p. 225). Therefore, among other theorists, Maalouf, Bayart, and Hall agree that there is no such thing as a fixed cultural identity, keeping in mind that culture subsumes religion. Moreover, postcolonial theorists attack the reductive, essentialist view of culture and identity that stereotypes the culture and identity of the other. Even after the demise of traditional colonialism, the pervasive influence of the neo-colonial powers is still there, producing shallow hybrid identities, such as that of the protagonists of Hamid's *Exit West* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In the shape of run-wild capitalism and market-economy globalization, the new imperial influences are the contemporary colonialism that creates the fermenting milieu of distorted identities. Paradoxically, some Western powers covertly support essentialist religious identities, which the same Western powers fight under the slogan of "The War on Terror".

In “Identity in the Globalizing World” (2001), Zygmunt Bauman explains that identity is not static; it denotes no essentialist ideas or solid core. The idea of identity changes with the changing times, and in our “liquid modernity” (p. 125), it has become more self-determined and more of a task than a state. Individuals are no longer required to conform to the strictly well-entrenched solid norms to establish their “Identity.” The notion of identity has become more fluid with no permanence. Bauman (2001) says that “modernity replaces the determination of social standing with a compulsive and obligatory self-determination” (p. 124). Because of the changing times and the invasive effects of globalization, it is perhaps more accurate not to speak of identities, inherited or acquired, and instead speak of “identification, a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged” (Bauman, 2001, p. 129).

VI. CONFLICT OF ALLEGED IDENTITIES

In *Exit West*, published during the international refugee crisis, Pakistani author Hamid does not write about Lahore or any city in Pakistan, but some abstraction of a place. However, the given details situate the action somewhere in Syria or Iraq, presumable Aleppo or Mosul. The action is delocalized to faintly resemble the East-West conflict of identities. The text creates no sense of living characters with nuanced identities or localized politics. The dystopian environment is created by both militant and government forces who are both Muslims, just like the two main characters. They all fit the hazy category of “the Muslim” as distinct from the category of the West, also fundamentalist. In Hamid’s earlier novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), the protagonist-narrator, Changez, epitomizes “the image of a dangerously Eastern or ‘Muslim’ inscrutability inadvertently relies on a one-dimensional image of Muslim religiosity that broadly typifies Hamid’s work” (Mian, 2019, para. 5). Changez confesses that he is a lover of America (stereotyped as one-dimensional, ruthless, and ultra-capitalist) and then adds later that he was “remarkably pleased” that the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed in 9/11. “I was pleased at the slaughtering of innocents” (Hamid, 2007, p. 43). This character oscillates between a stereotypical rigid Islamist identity and a stereotypical rigid American ultra-capitalist financial-wise identity. The odd mixture does not give him a global identity but rather an ambivalent hybrid of a drastically distorted identity. He is not a Muslim in the tradition of Averroes (rationalist and almost secularist), Ibn Arabi (sufi who loves God and all humanity, including all religions, sects, and even pagans and atheists), and the great majority of the ‘ordinary’ Muslims around the world. Neither is he “a lover of America” of Thomas Jefferson, the founding fathers, the enlightened humanity lovers, i.e., the great majority (Hamid, 2007, p. 1). The global identity denotes varied affiliations that include sensibilities shared by people in the Middle East who happen to be Muslims, Christians, etc., and in the West, who happen to be Christians, Muslims, etc.

Naturally, the novel *Exit West* does not mention the stereotypical identities or conflict and change explicitly. However, these concepts are dealt with extensively and assumed to agree with the intended reader's views. The intended reader is presumably the Western casual reader unaware of details concerning the Muslim world but wonders, “Why do they hate us?”

The novelist does not try to enlighten the casual reader about the misguided question and the false assumption that most Muslims hate the West, especially the USA. Using an enthymeme rhetorical technique, he builds an argument implicit in the narrative that condones the prevalent misunderstanding. An enthymeme is a syllogism with one premise omitted, the major premise, which jumps to a conclusion by deceiving the listeners, making them think that they agree with the used logic. For instance: 1. Major premise: all rich people are dishonest; 2. Minor premise: John is rich, 3. Conclusion: John is dishonest. The listener would not accept the conclusion because the major premise is not universally true. Nevertheless, when the speaker cunningly assumes that the major premise does not need to be mentioned as it is universally accepted (it is a fact; you and I know that this is how things are in the real world), the innocent listeners think that they agree too. Applied to the current novel, the implicit major premise is that there is no such thing as a moderate Muslim or a Muslim/Arabic civilization in the first place; the Muslim world has a homogenized restrictive identity that is violent, intolerant, and conducive to terrorism. Implicitly establishing a misguided static idea, the novel glosses over the image of the Muslim Orient and lingers in describing the effects on the main characters.

While the events dealt with in the novel are the direct result of political strife within a highly politicized situation, local and international, about the strife for power with all the concomitant repercussions, the novelist ignores this framework completely and narrates the events as if they take place in a science fiction involving beings landing on earth from another planet. This may explain the shallow depiction of action, context, and character identities. Bağlama (2019) explains the effects of depoliticizing *Exit West*, showing how Hamid “individualizes one dimension of the totality of an epoch” while creating “mythical narratives which objectify, dehumanize, marginalize... refugees within the framework of the dichotomy of ‘them’ and ‘us’” (Bağlama, 2019, p. 156). This reductive approach is similar to the stereotyping of the old orientalist mindset of “them” and “us” and co-opts the refugees in global capitalism.

This approach, which *demonizes refugees* is described elsewhere by Amanda Lagji (2019) as “reductive ... emptying out refugees’ distinctive experiences of violence, dispossession, and devastating loss” (Lagji, 2019, pp. 218-19). In *Exit West*, the narrator opines, “We are all migrants through time” (Hamid, 2017, p. 115), and in an interview conducted by Caitlin Chandler (2017), Hamid refers to the problem of refugees and migrants, saying, “I think that if we can recognize the universality of the migration experience and the universality of the refugee experience—that those of us who have

never moved are also migrants and refugees—then the space for empathy opens up" (Chandler, 2017, para. 13). These techniques that intend to give the novel a sense of universality diminish the presumed message of the novel while not adding a universal literary value to it. In this way, the identity of the protagonists and even that of the unidentified refugees cannot escape stereotyping. For a work of art to reach a world audience, it has to be first immersed in its local context since "the poet," said Goethe, "should seize the Particular, and he should, if there be anything sound in it, thus represent the Universal" (Goethe, 2014, p. 269).

VII. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Exit West tells the love story of Saeed and Nadia, who accidentally meet at an evening class in a mythical city in a country torn by strife between presumably government forces and Islamist militants. The city is on the verge of collapsing into chaos. The style is deliberately pared down to a nondescript dialect and void of even traces of any cultural background:

A young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her. For many days. His name was Saeed and her name was Nadia and he had a beard, not a full beard. (Hamid, 2017, p. 1)

Hamid writes in a style that ranges from simple sentences like in children's stories to more sophisticated long paragraphs, each made up of one long stretch of a sentence—a blatant attempt to experiment with language in the spirit of some modernist and postmodernist writers. Additionally, as Mushtaq Bilal points out, "Hamid's attempt at 'packaging' the refugee experience in an extremely pared-down language" is a part of delocalizing places, which affects the delineation of characters as well since Saeed and Nadia, for instance, are simply any persons from the South (Bilal, 2020, p. 420). Bilal further questions the validity of texts written by a writer such as Hamid himself, who has no lived experience dealing with people and events similar to the characters and events portrayed in the novel:

From a moral point of view, one could wonder if Hamid, with his elite social class background, Ivy League education, and his working experience at a global management firm like McKinsey & Company, should be writing regarding the refugee experience at all, something he has not experienced in his life. (Bilal, 2020, p. 420)

The explanation could be that these characters are depicted as stereotypes with restricted static identities.

The narrative continues just a few pages about Saeed and Nadia in this non-descript land of some Muslim country. Then, it is suddenly interrupted with a couple more pages of an incident that takes place in the Australian Sydney neighborhood of Surry Hills. Sydney, London, California, and other Western locales mentioned in the novel—all have names and particularities, not like the Muslim World, which is all the same, described in a non-distinct hazy cloud of anonymity and conspicuous or latent violence. The incident in Sydney has no pertinence to the text's events, themes, and general sensibility. Its inclusion can be explained away in the spirit of some postmodernist novels, which tend towards fragmentation and problematizing the concept of meaning. However, the choice of the two vague persons involved, a white-skinned innocent woman lying in bed and the dark-skinned burglar, can be interpreted as further entrenching of stereotyping people: White good! Black bad!

On Mykonos Island, the first step in their attempt to exit to the West, the first wave of change develops; Saeed now harbors a feeling of bitterness:

... and there concealed tried to kiss him under the open sky, he turned his face away angrily, and then immediately apologized, and placed his cheek against hers, and she tried to relax against him, cheek to bearded cheek, but she was surprised, because what she thought she had glimpsed in him in that moment was bitterness, and she had never seen bitterness in him before, not in all these months, not for one second, even when his mother had died, then he had been mournful, yes, depressed, but not bitter, not as though something was corroding his insides. He had in fact always struck her as the opposite of bitter, so quick to smile. (Hamid, 2017, p. 57)

As a typical run-on sentence, the first sentence (not quoted in full) is 180 words long. Saeed experiences an unconscious change in his feelings towards Nadia, a change that grows steadily with their migratory passage from one stage to the next. Nadia was, and is, Westernized in sensibility and mannerisms, while Saeed retains his Pakistani/Muslim/traditional ways and sensibilities. However, he is only a Muslim in the superficial way of observing rituals and some restrictions. The exit westward affects him more deeply than it does Nadia. As he neglects his prayers while migrating west, and his bond with Nadia deteriorates and falls apart eventually, he goes back to his prayers:

Now, though, in Marin, Saeed prayed even more, several times a day, and he prayed fundamentally as a gesture of love for what had gone and would go and could be loved in no other way. (Hamid, 2017, p. 111)

Nothing is revealed about the Muslim faith's cultural values and philosophical depth. His is the veneer of the Islamic attire and beard with some rituals and morality reduced to some practices. Moreover, Saeed, Nadia, or the narrator never stopped momentarily to ask themselves why the horror around them occurs and whether the perpetrators are Islamists. Are they representatives of any portion of the Muslim world? The style used to depict some of the horrors around the novel's Muslim protagonists, Saeed, Nadia, Saeed's father, is a matter-of-fact, calm description of daily events that stir no questioning in the minds of the onlookers.

The following samples of the narrative reflect the taken-for-granted world of the Islamist militants as if nothing is surprising or unsettling for a decent, docile Muslim such as Saeed. Nadia's dear beloved cousin, a physician working in the West, comes home to this unidentified city and gets blown up in a car bomb:

... who, along with eighty-five others, was blown by a truck bomb to bits, literally to bits, the largest of which, in Nadia's cousin's case, were a head and two-thirds of an arm. (Hamid, 2017, p. 16)

Another local man is beheaded:

... 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, 2017, p. 21)

Even Saeed's mother is not spared the brutality as the narrator nonchalantly narrates:

.. a stray heavy-caliber round passing through the windshield of her family's car and taking with it a quarter of Saeed's mother's head. (Hamid, 2017, p. 29)

Saeed comes across a herd of young men playing soccer in the street; he approaches them to discover:

... young men, and they were not playing with a ball but with the severed head of a goat, and he thought, barbarians, but then it dawned upon him that this was the head not of a goat but of a human being, with hair and a beard. (Hamid, 2017, p. 46)

The narrator never stops for a second to ponder about the meaning of all that, and more importantly, about who these people are and whether they belong or do not belong in his country. He also does not highlight that many of these Islamists are recent converts who converted overnight and rushed to carry machine guns to spray bullets into the hearts of their non-Muslim compatriots. The style is complacent and void of any semblance of thinking, wondering or trying to understand.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017) deals with critical issues: the massive migration west, the devastation in some Muslim lands, and the conflict of identities experienced by millions of refugees migrating from countries in the East and South to Western countries. These issues baffle the readers who want to know *why* this is happening. As novels, and art in general, give a concrete picture of the topics they engage with, this novel attempts to present its theme through events and characters, i.e., to concretize it. However, it fails to do so since it lumps all the necessary details of the context into one aspect, the atrocities committed, in a vague way. The reader is presented with an abstract notion of violence. It is there. Where? By whom? What for? Who are these people? Are they representative of the population and the prevalent culture, including the religion, of this country or city, which readers instantly realize is Aleppo or Mosul? What about the rest of the concrete picture on the ground? Is this the Muslim world? Are there other people, Muslims (the large majority by far), who are different with great culture and valued humanistic ideals?

The taken-for-granted total picture depicted of the unidentified country is abstract and entrenches a misguided stereotype about the Muslim world, reinforcing Islamophobia. The novel traces the changes that take place in the identities of the protagonists. A change occurs, but the rigid identities do not improve. Saeed is a one-dimensional character who reduces his religious identity to mere observance of rituals in a sporadic way. He changes slightly due to the confrontation with other migrants and the changes of place, events, and contexts. Eventually, he realizes his change and returns to the rituals with increasing regularity. Nadia is already semi-westernised in a shallow, superficial way. She is at odds with her initial cultural environment. Thus, she undergoes no identity change. The change in her consciousness is an expected reaction to Saeed's changing attitude towards her. Both characters represent types with singular affiliations. Despite the atrocities they witness and their hardships, they end up where they started. No development enriches their reductive identities and endows them with an identity like that sought by Amin Maalouf, eschewing the rigid core of a single affiliation and seeking a dynamic identity comprised of several affiliations that create an understanding conducive to peaceful co-existence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research at Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University under the research project (PSAU/2022/02/20618).

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