

## Displacement and Migration in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

*One of the main worldwide challenges in the twenty-first century is migration and displacement, which are defining the identities of people and social boundaries. The literary reflection of these phenomena by Mohsin Hamid in his Exit West (2017) is presented using both realistic and fantasy narrative as the writer depicts both the emotional and ideological aspects of the migration process. This study investigates how Hamid develops the discourse of migration and displacement using language and narrative, and also find the discursive strategies pointing to the underlying power relations and ideological stance. In this study, one of the thematic analyses was used to examine important textual quotes of Exit West to examine the qualitative approach using the Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013). The interconnecting themes of identity, belonging, globalization, and resistance are examined to determine the ideological connotations of Hamid in his use of language. The discussion shows that Hamid uses figurative wordplay, transnational scenes, and sympathetic stories to disrupt the hegemonic discourses of refugees and world inequality. The research concludes that the Exit West is a counter-discursive work of literature in that it espouses empathy, inclusion, as well as reconstructions of the concept of home and identity.*

**Keywords:** Displacement, migration, Mohsin Hamid, Exit West, CDA

### INTRODUCTION

The migration and displacement has become the characteristic global processes of the twenty-first century, which has transformed social, political, and cultural landscapes on the global scale. The wars, economic differences, global warming, and globalization have left millions of people without homes in the attempt to find safety and opportunity. The scale of this human crisis can be tested by the fact that over 110 million individuals are displaced at this moment, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023). In that regard, literature has been an effective tool in terms of reflecting the experienced reality of migration, having humanistic explanations of feelings, mental and ideological aspects of displacement.

*Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid is a distinctive piece of literature commenting on the topic of global migration by mixing both realism and allegory. The story in the novel is based on the escapades of Saeed and Nadia, who escape the oppressive city that is unnamed by magical doors, which take them to other places in the world. Hamid crosses geographic and political borders, thereby making migration not just a local tragedy, but a universal human tragedy. The language and narrative techniques he employs provide

a rich platform on which to explore the ways in which discourses of migration, identity and power are produced within the modern literature.

Although, there has been an increasing amount of literature on migration, much of this is done in the thematic or sociological interpretation rather than the linguistic or ideological interpretation. The humanistic nature of *Exit West* has received much applause, yet the language used by Hamid has rarely been discussed in terms of how it itself creates and questions the mainstream discourses of displacement. However, the ideological implications that lie behind the linguistic and narrative decisions made by Hamid can be unveiled through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) which may help the reader see how the novel is an indictment of global inequalities and the way the novel alters the media discourse on belonging.

Moreover, the themes of mobility, identity, and globalization in *Exit West* have been discussed in earlier literature (Kaur, 2020; Cox, 2021; Sultana, 2021). Although, the discursive construction of these themes has not been done through a systemic study of the text using the CDA as a methodology. The link between the stylistic minimalism and metaphoric language used by Hamid to general ideological systems is missing. This study fills that gap by applying CDA and thematic analysis to explain how the narrative of Hamid deconstructs political, cultural and psychological meanings of migration.

### **Research Objectives**

- To examine the language and narratives used to construct the discourse of migration and displacement in *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid.
- To identify the discursive strategies used by the author to reveal the power relations and ideological positions portrayed in the novel.

### **Research Questions:**

1. What language and narratives have been used to construct the discourse of migration and displacement in *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid?
2. What discursive strategies have been used by the author to reveal the power relations and ideological positions portrayed in the novel?

This study adds to the intersecting nature that is developing between works on discourse and literature when it shows that CDA can reveal ideological roles of narrative language. It broadens the knowledge of migration literature that overturns the world order and promotes the compassion to displaced people. As a discursive text, the study provides an understanding of why literature can make migration more human and rebrand identity, belonging and globalization.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Migration and displacement have become one of the most acute socio-political and literary issues of the twenty first century. The issues of human mobility, changing of identity and inequality in the world have been widely discussed by scholars and critics as well as theorists in relation to how literary texts offer a representation of the complexity of these issues. The *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid is an essential input to this discussion as it is a combination of magic and realism writings that can help to reveal the emotional and ideological aspects of migration. The literature review examines previous works and theoretical viewpoints in four broad subheadings, namely, dislocation and globalisation in modern literature., The self, community and migration., discourse and border politics, power, ideology and critical discourse analysis of literary situations.

### **Displacement and Globalization in Contemporary Literature**

The impact of war, colonization and globalization on people has been discussed in literature long before it began to be manifested. The idea of exile developed by Said (1993) is regarded as the unavoidable component of contemporary identity and is defined as the state of loss and a possibility to think critically. Appadurai (1996) tends to associate globalization with the emergence of so-called ethnoscaples and ideoscaples and maintains that the contemporary migration is changing the concept of space, nation and belonging.

In addition, Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie and Jhumpa Lahiri are some authors in the genre of South Asian writing who employ the migration stories to challenge the postcolonial inequalities and transnational movement (Chambers, 2019). The refugee experience of the world is described by Hamid in *Exit West* using the symbolic doors that reduce distances as a way of how globalization introduces novel modes of closeness and alienation (Kaur, 2020). As it has been observed by scholars like Cox (2021) and Sultana (2021), Hamid does not use the tropes of linear migration by making migration process both inevitable and universal. According to his story, displacement ceases being a peripheral phenomenon but a key aspect of human life in the contemporary world. The combination of the realistic and the magical helps Hamid to generalize the situation of migrants and place migration as a symbol of human interconnectedness in the fast-changing global environment.

### **Identity, Belonging and Hybridity in Migration Narratives**

The problem of identity in migration literature is closely related to the hybridity, transformation and negotiation. According to Bhabha (1994) and his concept of the third space, the homeless people live in a gray area between cultures that they keep re-creating the self. In *Exit West*, the characters of Saeed and Nadia are representatives of such fluidity, Saeed has been attached to the religious and cultural forms, and Nadia is an example of flexibility and freedom. Their relationship turns into the metaphor of the psychological and cultural bargaining that migrants have to deal with when trying to find the way between tradition and modernity.

Additionally, according to Ali (2022) and Sethi (2020), Hamid describes identity in a way that suggests fluidity as opposed to fixity. The novel is not based on the dichotomy of home and foreign by revealing that belonging may be built on emotional, but not geographical connections. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) assert that identity is dynamic and relational and *Exit West* portrays this in how characters change their discourses and language preferences types as they cross borders globally.

Furthermore, according to Nyman (2017), the narrative approach of Hamid is such that he made refugees human and not motivated as political icons. The dialogue and silences of his characters show how displacement changes not just the manifestations of external identity but also the landscape of psychology. Therefore, the identity of *Exit West* is, not fixed but performative, a dynamically changing process of negotiation which is defined by migration, memory and adaptation.

### **Power, Ideology and Border Politics in Discourse**

Migration discourse is a highly political discourse, which is connected with the issues of power, ideology and representation. The diffuse concept of power by Foucault (1980) in social institutions is echoed in the Hamid description of the borders, checkpoints, and refugee camps. Such spaces are associated with control, exclusion and surveillance - what Agamben (1998) has described as the state of exception, where refugees are beyond legal and political recognition.

According to Fairclough (2013), the language can be viewed as a tool of ideology, and how societies view migrants and refugees. The choice of neutral tone and passive constructions used by Hamid in *Exit West*

reveals the issues of structural inequalities that regulate migration rather subtly. Invisibility of power no agents are identified as the closed doors or bombings to indicate that the discourse is capable of concealing responsibility and cementing dominance as suggested by van Dijk (2008).

Thus, the linguistic caution that Hamid uses against the Western humanitarian and media discourses that sensationalize the plight of refugees has been pointed out by several scholars (Chambers, 2019; Kaur, 2020). Rather, he focuses his discourse around empathy, and migration is an experience that is humanized. Such an ideological re-framing provokes the reader to re-think the moral assumptions regarding movement, citizenship, and belonging in the globalized era.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis in Literary Contexts**

As a tool of revealing the ideological aspects of narrative structure and expression, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has come to be used more and more extensively on literature. The three-dimensional model created by Fairclough (1995, 2010) (text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice) offers the two dimensions of analyzing how texts reproduce and reflect social power. In the analysis of literature, CDA helps better see how fictional language can criticize the ideologies and provide a voice to the marginalized ideas.

According to researchers like Wodak and Meyer (2016), the interdisciplinary character of CDA renders it very suitable to the analysis of migration narratives, which act both linguistically, culturally, and politically. With thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), CDA enables a scrutiny of the linguistic micro-level and a social macro-level to be done.

In *Exit West*, CDA can be seen to show that minimalism, interdiscursivity and symbolic imagery used by Hamid reflect on the contradictions of globalization. The language of the novel creates empathy and dismantles hierarchies in the world at the same time demonstrating that fiction is sometimes an ideological protest. Therefore, CDA does not only contribute to the understanding of the representation of migration but also includes literature itself as a place of political and moral interaction.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this work, a qualitative research design is used based on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and aided by the thematic analysis to examine how the *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid is constructed to create the discourse of displacement and migration. The approach combines lingual, thematic and ideological approaches to comprehend how language is a manifestation and determinant of sociopolitical realities of migration.

#### **Research Design**

The qualitative design will give an opportunity to discuss the language patterns, narrative devices, and ideological connotations of the text in-depth. Seeing *Exit West* as a sociocultural and political narrative of migration, a qualitative method will offer it the scope to produce meaning beyond the textual characteristics on the surface (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research is not based on the numerical data but on the interpretive strategies that relate the use of language and power relations as well as identity formation.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is mostly guided by a three-dimensional approach to Critical Discourse Analysis developed by Fairclough (1995, 2013), who analyzes discourse on the three levels that are closely interconnected:

- Textual examination (vocabulary, grammar and cohesion)

- Technical practice (construction of text)
- Sociocultural practice (wider ideological and institutional viewpoint)

This model helps to approach the issue of the Hamid language preferences in a multi-layered manner and see the manifestation of the global power relations and migration policies in his language choices. Besides this, the socio-cognitive approach to discourse offered by van Dijk (2008) guides the study of the way in which the socio-cognitive dimensions of migrants are formed by the cognitive and social frameworks. CDA, in this context, is not descriptive only but interpretive and critical, as well, it aims to identify ideologies that are hidden in the text (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

### **Data Collection**

This study has used the novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid (2017) as its major source. The text was chosen because it directly addresses the issues of politics of displacement, identity, and border politics. The main narrative and dialogues that directly relate to migration, belonging, and identity change were obtained to conduct an in-depth analysis. The contextualization of findings and the validation of interpretive claims happened by using secondary sources like journal articles, books, and critical essays on the subject of migration and discourse (Bryman, 2016).

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The six-phase process of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke(2006) was used to analyze it:

- acquaintance with the text
- Generating initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Determining and describing themes
- Producing the report

Themes like normalization of displacement, fluidity of identity, power relations, technology and global mobility and emotional displacement were the themes of frequent analysis of text. The themes were examined against the principles of CDA to expose the ideological meanings and portrayal of social actors. Modality, metaphors, passive, and interdiscursivity are the linguistic features, which were closely considered to trace how Hamid builds up the relation of power and world hierarchies. Combining CDA with thematic analysis guarantees the micro-level linguistic explanation and macro-level sociocultural explanation.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Theme 1: The Normalization of Displacement**

Normalization of displacement by Hamid is one of the most dramatic discursive strategies in the *Exit West*. Hamid develops the theme of migration as a matter-of-fact by his minimalist and direct tone. The constant metaphor of doors serves as a linguistic and narrative tool, which breaks the geographical and time space, and makes migration an ordinary process and not something extraordinary (Hamid, 2017). This metaphor is used to undermine the dichotomy between things that are native and those that are foreign which implies that displacement is not a unique crisis but a condition common to all humankind (Cox, 2021).

The concept of the naturalization of ideology, introduced by Fairclough (2013), is relevant in this case: the speech of Hamid naturalizes the movement of people around the globe and makes the readers rethink

the limits between the countries and affiliation. The magical doors are a metaphor of escape, and uncertainty, both at the same time, the experience of both hope and fear by the refugees. The narrative voice does not sensationalize violence; it conceals it in the context of ordinary life, and linguistically does not comply with the dominant Western discourses that represent migrants as different or victims of violence (Kaur, 2020). Therefore, the definition of displacement is not simply an external phenomenon but it is a psychological reality experienced by the characters.

### **Theme 2: The Fluidity of Identity and Belonging**

Hamid develops the concept of identity as something fluid and relative, and it fits the theories of postcolonial discourse that do not assume fixed concepts of national and cultural belonging. The two main characters Saeed and Nadia experience a discursive identity change (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) as they travel through various socio-political locations. Their language usage, behavioral patterns, and relationship patterns change as an expression of displacement restructuring the self.

As an example, the religious orientation of Saeed and secular independence of Nadia represent a conflict between adhering to the roots and adjustment. Their conversation is more reminiscent of linguistic negotiation where Saeed employs phrases that refer to homeland and Nadia utilizes linguistic phrases that are more globalized, which marks the intertextual existence of various cultural discourses (Hamid, 2017). The linguistic hybridity is a challenge to the essentialist perspective of identity. By the omniscient but detached voice of the narrator, Hamid locates identity as a performance and a moving, vibrant, and dynamic one, which resonates with the idea of Bhabha (1994) of the third space. This discursive construction allows the reader to regard migration as not only a loss of home but also a place of cultural and linguistic renewal. Here we can see the concept of interdiscursivity as it is implied by Fairclough (1995) the fusion of religious, political, and global capitalist discourses reflects the hybrid world that migrants are in. These switches between the local and the global scenes in the story also further highlight the point that the sense of belonging is no longer physical but emotional and relational.

### **Theme 3: Politics of Borders and Power Relations**

The revelation of power imbalance within the global migration politics is another significant discursive theme in *Exit West*. The example of borders being both physical and ideological structures introduced by Hamid criticizes the unequal mobility of the globalized world (Chambers, 2019). The magical doors look like they are neutral, only that their access is socially and politically mediated: some of the characters can easily pass through the doors, others die or vanish in the process.

Foucault (1980) conception of power as diffuse and institutionalized in the novel is reflected in the discourse of the novel. The closed doors represent the surveillance, control and exclusion by the influential states. In linguistic terms, Hamid uses passive constructions (doors were found, people were moving) to hide the sources of power, which can be seen as a critique of invisibility of the agents of global migration flows (Ali, 2022). The global settings of the war-political city with no name and London, Mykonos, and Marin serve as discursive sites in which the exercise of power is revealed to work in various ways depending on space. Refugee camps are characterized by a discontinuous syntax and imagery of the lack of a specific place by stressing on physical and social marginalization. The neutral tone of the narrator contrasted with the emotionally charged incidents to produce a discursive tension that provokes critical thinking on the subject of Western humanitarian rhetoric as compared to the actual circumstances of displacement.

### **Theme 4: Technology and the Global Imaginary**

The migration discourse of Hamid is closely connected with the digital realm. He builds the global imaginary that Appadurai (1996) describes using the examples of smartphones, messaging applications,

and social media. Technology is symbolic as it brings the displaced in touch with their past and each other, as well as serves as the reminder of their loss of touch with the physical space. The fact that Nadia is on her phone even at refugee camps is an indication of the mediated essence of contemporary displacement. According to Hamid, the digital world enables refugees to build virtual community across borders. This is supported linguistically with deictic shifts, which blur space, here, there and everywhere. The narrative approach corresponds to the concept of technologization of discourse of Fairclough (2010), in which the language use is adjusted to technological mediation and reforms social relations.

This thematic construction shows the ideological paradox of globalization: the assurance is that technology can connect, but it is also the source of strengthening the economic disparity and isolation of feelings. The objective tone of the narrative by Hamid encourages the readers to be critical about whether technological access can indeed democratize mobility, or continue to be just a disguise to cover the underlying systems of exclusion (Sultana, 2021).

### **Theme 5: Emotional Displacement and Psychological Displacement**

Lastly, the emotional aspects of the migration processes are predetermined in the novel by metaphors of darkness, silence, and distance. These linguistic markers employed by Hamid represent psychological dislocation, i.e. the feeling of being out of place despite being located physically. The emotional distance that builds up between Nadia and Saeed is an indication that displacement subordinates intimacy and identity. The free indirect discourse used by the narrator enables the amalgamation of inner thoughts and external events because of the psychological loss of identity among people who have been displaced. This rhetorical device can be reconciled with the socio-cognitive model proposed by van Dijk (2008) in the context of which the discourse can create and recreate the cognitive processes of trauma, fear and resilience. Hamid avoids melodramatic descriptions of the plight of refugees with understated emotional narrative and a broken story line, which instead creates a meditative discussion that figures out the experience of migrants as a human being. Such sympathetic narration is ideologically used to challenge the prevalent western discourse that tends to dehumanize the refugees and turn them into numbers or dangerous entities.

These interconnected themes allow Hamid to create a discourse that once again envisioned migration as a reality of the global space and as an intensely personal voyage. The linguistic and narrative options he employs disrupt traditional structures of nation, culture and belonging. Through neutrality, metaphor and hybrid identities, he reveals the ideological anomies of globalization, mobility as freedom and exclusion. As it is demonstrated in the analysis, *Exit West* is a counter-discursive text that contradicts the common discourses of refugees as passive victims. In its place, Hamid displays migration as a process that leads to the redefinition of the collective future of humanity. This is in line with the statement of Fairclough (2013) that discourse is a place of ideological struggle where meaning and power is a constant negotiation.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

As it is shown in the analysis of *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid crafts the discourse of migration and displacement using the subtle language tactics, metaphorical images, and the lack of an emotional narration that all belong to the challenge of Western mainstream narratives about refugees. The results indicate five thematic dimensions that work together and are interconnected: normalization of displacement, fluid identity, power and borders, technology and globalization and psychological displacement that help to establish a subtle portrayal of the migrant experience.

To start with, the description of migration by Hamid as a normal and natural occurrence redefines the concept of displacement as a universal human experience instead of a geopolitical crisis. The repetitive metaphor of the doors disrupts the borders between countries, cultures, and classes and builds migration

as a liberation and uncertainty (Hamid, 2017; Cox, 2021). This is in line with Fairclough (2013) opinion that discourse makes ideological views seem more natural, welcoming the readers to rethink the exclusionary conceptions of belonging. Second, the liquidity of the self of Saeed and Nadia describes how migration reacts the subjectivities of personal and cultural identities. Their language and manner of behavior reflect the hybridity idea put forward by Bhabha (1994) where displaced people occupy the third space in between the traditional and modern.

The language of boundaries and authority also displays the unequal aspect of international movement. Hamid reveals the role of control, surveillance and privilege in the migratory experiences through passive constructs and underlies with understated violence (van Dijk, 2008). Technology turns out to be a kind of unifier and divider, the representation of digital home among physical alienation (Sultana, 2021). Lastly, displacement is highlighted as an inner conflict which is emphasized by the emotional and psychological fragmentation the protagonists went through. The low-key narration voice fails to be sensational, which makes it empathetic but not pitiable. Altogether, the discourse offered by Hamid humanizes migration and criticizes structural inequalities, which makes *Exit West* a counter-narrative to the mainstream political discourses about refugees.

## CONCLUSION

This study has critically analyzed the *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid as a discourse of displacement and migration by applying the critical discourse analysis and the thematic analysis in the novel. The analysis showed that the story of Hamid extends further than presenting migration as a physical process; it reforms it as an existential and ideological one, which restores the identity, sense of belonging and human relations. In a spare prose, symbolic metaphor, and a detached narrative voice, Hamid provides a global and immensely human view of what migration entails that is not imposed by terror, nationalism, and exclusion. The metaphorical use of the term doors in the novel makes the use of doors unstable in the traditional concept of territory and boundary, where migration is depicted as a feature of human life that is ongoing and unavoidable. This figurative framing contradicts the political discourses that represent refugees as foreigners or dangers. Rather, Hamid has made displacement a norm and this has placed it within the global context. By thus doing so, he sets up what can be termed as a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the power structures that are in place (Fairclough 2013).

Further, the change of the identity of Saeed and Nadia is an indication of how displacement leads to hybridity and negotiability between cultural identities and contemporary world conditions, as suggested by Bhabha (1994) as the third space. The changing nature of their relationship reflects the psychological cost of migration of loss, nostalgia and accommodation, and the point that the experience of migration is internal and external in equal measure. Another aspect that the novel points out in the paradox of technological globalization is that on the one hand, the world-connecting technological globalization brings the displaced people together, on the other hand, the globalizing technologies tend to make people more isolated emotionally. The subtlety in Hamid language reveals the interplay of power, technology and ideology in creating the contemporary refugee experience. To sum up, *Exit West* creates a personalized, compassionate, and politically conscious discourse regarding migration. Combining realism and allegory, Hamid challenges the reader to think of displacement as a condition of change rather than face it as an identity crisis. His story reconstructs the meaning of movement and the sense of belonging to an ever-divided world and calls out to readers to be humane and united globally.

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