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The Loss of the Real Tale: The Postmodern Case of Migration in Mohsin Hamid's Exit

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Abstract
We are all migrants, and with that, Hamid starts a discourse of migration that is to be either questioned or celebrated. Hamid's celebrated novel Exit West is considered an emblem of migration and hence accepted as such. The nature of migration and the notions attached to it in the novel call for an investigation into the generated view of displacement and latency of locomotion in the world of science fiction. Thus, this research paper aims to dissect the elements of postmodernity in Hamid's conception of migration, analyses his attempt at universalizing the experience of migrants, and disingenuous claim of representation in his novel Exit West. Further, this research paper takes the liberty of discussing the discourse of hyperreality in postmodernism and associates it with Hamid's utopian idea of teleportation. This research paper also claims that Hamid generates a 'hyperreal' image of the real that has absolutely no correspondence to reality and therefore, the tale of migration in Exit West is a tale of the loss of the real.
Keywords: Displacement, Hyperreal, Locomotion, Migration, Postmodernism.

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Introduction:

Migration has been a prevalent subject in literature for many decades. Its prevalence is credited to the discourse of politics and the proliferation of ideas generated by the writers who have personally experienced it. Therefore, the thematic concern of literature on migration has always been personal, regardless

of the nature of the discussion in the text. Many critics who discuss the subject of migration are mostly migrants themselves, some might even be in exile but migrants, nevertheless. The relevance of this subject to this day is more conspicuous than it has ever been in light of the recent Syrian refugee crisis and how the world has reacted to it. Many religions promote migration from one place to another, and all these examples point out one thing: it is a process that tells the tale of arduous struggles and hardships. A picture of the Syrian boy Alan Kurdi implies enough regarding the fact that migration is not pertinent to leaving a place behind and settling in another place when people, who have attempted to migrate, have lost their lives in escaping one place just never to reach another. Therefore, the process of migration is built entirely on locomotion, how it is the struggle of moving from one place to another that generates the political discourse regarding this subject matter, and it is the reason that migration literature is a sensitive field for many people- those who create this literature and those who consume this literature. Since there is a subgenre dealing with the body of literature that discusses migration, there are many examples of experimentation in the field too. Many writers have come up using the concept of utopia or dystopia- giving it an element of science fiction. In the article "The Case for and against Sci-fi," it is discussed that science fiction is usually the extension of contemporary scientific, social, and political trends, which are usually given the element of fantasy to present a sense of deliberate ruse (Abernethy 474). Many Pakistani writers have also contributed to this trend and have written many sci-fi literary pieces, including names like Usman T. Malik and Mohsin Hamid. Mohsin Hamid has come forth with the concept of migration through magical portals that can take you anywhere in the world. This element of sci-fi in the discourse of migration is something to be celebrated but Hamid's attempt at extending reality to the realm of science fiction has a parochial attitude towards presenting the reality of

migrants and enunciating the intricacies of migration.

Theoretical Framework:

To study hyperreal elements in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, this research paper uses the theory of hyperreality presented by Jean Baudrillard as its theoretical framework. Jean Baudrillard comes forward with the view that we live in times of images and replications of reality with no correspondence to the real. We try to grab at the ideas that are presented through different mediums, but we fail to realize that these ideas are the sign of their third stage- the stage where "sign hides an absence" (Barry 85). This contributes to the discourse of postmodernism that celebrates anarchy in different spheres of life.

Literature Review:

The mode of living in the twentieth century heavily relies on the narratives of hyperreality. The product of such hyperreal conditions is the elusiveness that surrounds modern man and society at large. The shaping of the culture is also dependent on the channels through which hyperreality functions and proliferates. Therefore, the discord within the debate on the legitimacy and functionality of hyperreality circumscribes culture to the materialistic aspect of reality. However, that notion also gets challenged when we analyze consumerism and commercialism playing a crucial part in a capitalist sphere of life. Stating Debord, who is of the view that "in all its specific manifestations- news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment- the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing models of social life (Arva 62), starts the debate on the extent these spectacles penetrate and shape culture, ideologies, narratives, and politics. It should be the kernel of the discussion of hyperreal and postmodernism as spectacle is more than just a collection of images: "The spectacle not only penetrates the very fabric of social relationships, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" and the spectacle that is no longer understood

as 'show' or 'entertainment', the role of it as coping mechanism becomes less relevant and how it starts to define the way people perceive themselves in relation to it becomes more relevant (62). By taking an example of virtual reality and video games to impact on the younger generation, it can be observed that their identity and mode of living are pertinent to the medium of video gaming and, by extension, the spectacles. These images and produced realities shape them as an active human agency in society. A boy named Zain Ali kills his entire family because of the induced frustration from the video game PUBG. The debate about video games and their impact on the younger generation has become more relevant with repeated violent incidents across the world. On the day of the incident, the officer said, Zain "lost his senses and after he missed a target after playing the game for hours, got hold of his mother's pistol and went to her room where she was asleep along with her other children" and shot them dead (Chaudhry para 4). The police have also stated how there have been cases of suicides that are directly related to PUBG. To say that it is the fault of a video game would be an exaggeration when we live in a world of hyperreality that is filled with images (simulacra) that have no correspondence to reality. The frustration that is built is an expected result since what is seen is not achieved, and that leads the argument to the point of what is real and what is not real. Absolute unreality is offered as a real presence, and television is an example of it as to how "the mixing of codes and unchained signifiers are presented as a reflection of reality [and] this reality stream sets the discursive conventions by which we judge truth and fiction, right and wrong in the world at large" (Rojek 280).

It is hard to extricate the truth from the lie when the entire social sphere of life is monitored and controlled by institutions that have full autonomy in a capitalist world. It is not just about capitalism; it is the mythology that surrounds us in daily

life. During childhood, bananas are recommended the most because banana is rich in potassium, but Vannessa Rissetto debunks this myth in a YouTube video where she says that this notion has much to do with marketing scheme from the 80s like the Chiquita banana commercial (1:18-1:45). Consumerism, because it relies on sign exchange value (e.g., brand X shows that one is fashionable, car Y indicates one's wealth), could be seen as a contributing factor in the creation of hyperreality or the hyperreal condition. It can also be observed through McDonald's phenomenon around the globe. Since McDonald's is taken as a cultural symbol or as one of the ethnic rituals that may "translate enduring messages, values, and sentiments into observable actions" (Want et al 3), and through this, American culture transcends its boundaries. America has controlled the media narrative through the apparatus of hyperreality and that is how the age of neo-imperialism has also prevailed. Through various media depictions and narratives and commercial values, America has successfully made itself the center of political, social, and economic discourse around the world. As Rowe argues, "Wag the Dog satirizes American's chronic ignorance of world events, thanks to news structured around entertainment and commercialism, but it also reinforces the assumption that the US is the centre of the world and that even a fictional war can have meaning and value, if it is waged by the US (Kooijman 72). He makes this argument based on the rescue mission of Jessica Lynch which also has been challenged by BCC, that it is orchestrated and scripted by the Pentagon. Such debates also refer to the signs that are produced to create a presence of absence. Many action movies, comic books, and comic movies have proliferated the soft image of America and how it has the sovereignty to wage a war on others. The Marvel-produced movie, Captain America: Civil War deals with the same notion and debates whether the team of Avengers, highly trained and modified individuals, should be given the liberty to fight across the borders

on their own accord. In the movie, the U.S. Secretary of State, Thaddeus Ross, played by William Hunt, comes forward with the Sokovia Accords that restrict Avengers from taking any actions without supervision. Ross says, "The Sokovia Accords. Approved by 117 countries…it states that the Avengers shall no longer be a private organization. Instead, they will operate under the supervision of a United Nations panel only when and if that panel deems it necessary" (23:18-24:24). Although Avengers has no corresponding reality and is a hyperreal movie, it can still be contextualized how the protagonist who seems to be carrying all American values and is always rightful stands against such restrictions. It sends the message that America, with all its righteous values, needs no supervision and, therefore, is free to act, which is often portrayed as a defense. These movies are watched and admired all over the world and it is enough to say that after the Gulf War, the portrayal of Russia in a bad light and America in a good light does make a political statement. In the book Cinema of Simulation, it is also debated that these narratives are a product of hyperrealism, and it creates a specific politically charged culture.

In the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, many movies were produced as a reaction against the anxiety, disillusion, and self-doubt that characterized the cultural mood of that time. Many of these movies contain the element of hyperreal, producing the notion that out-worldly forces will be countered and giving a sense of hope. Whereas it is a positive outcome, there is also an alarming aspect attached to it. These Sci-fi and hyperreal movies, including names like E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial (1982) and Return of the Jedi (1983), "dazzle their audience with vividly dreamable narratives of good prevailing over evil through the power of the hero's untroubled faith in the justice of his cause" (Laist 1) but all these events happen to have occurred in America and an American will face the severity of the situation without breaking down. America Prevails! The relevance of

hyperreality is not only the talk of pop culture; although it is a big channel through which it operates, it also takes the help of various virtual reality mediums. Laist declares Bill Clinton a Baudrillardian president by saying, "the talk show president whose appeal to the electorate is fundamentally a matter of his fuzzy ontology and whose status as a locus of hyperreality personifies the postmodern sensibility of fin-de-millennial US society" and various presidential movies like Dave (1993), The American President (1995), [...] Deep Impact (1998) that incorporates the figure of the American President into a Hollywood scenario simultaneously reflect and enable the president's conversion into a locus of virtuality and a personification of the implosion of private and public space in the postmodern hyperspace" (85).

American culture has deeply penetrated and impacted people's lives around the world. Whether it be music, movies, or books, the prevalence of the American dream and American values are hard to ignore. Therefore, many cultures incorporate 'Americanism' and it is accepted as a holistic part of social life. Therefore, this research paper attempts to deconstruct hyperreal elements in Exit West since, through hyperreality, society's ideologies can be altered, challenged, and tempered. This way, this research opens up a discourse on the notion of locomotion under the light of modernism and what elements one should consider while producing migration literature.

Explanation:

Hamid, in his article "In the 21st Century, we are All Migrants" postulates that "to be human is to migrate forward through time," and this suggestion lays the ground for this discussion of whether the entire debate of migrant vs. natives is just that simple; it is only about accepting the fact that we inherit this instinct from our ancestors because it is in man's blueprint (National Geography). His conception regarding migration translates well in his writing when he writes

about magical doors appearing for people in crisis to leave one place and move to another that is safe. In his novel Exit West, he narrates the tale of migration through his two characters, Nadia and Saeed. All other characters are unnamed to create the sense of identity crisis and what displacement does to one's knowledge, but one astonishing thing is how he makes his characters migrate through "doors" that happen to eradicate all spatial barriers and in doing so, they eradicate the core elements of migration as well. In the novel, there is an instance where a young lady migrates through a black door and as soon as she comes to another place, she strides to an orphanage, the owner of the cantina makes "no fuss over it because the times were such" (Hamid 158) indicates how Hamid pays little attention to present a situation that has any correspondence to reality. The world Hamid presents us with is a product of hyperreality and his own conception based on the representation of reality that does not exist. Baudrillard explains the concept of 'hyperreality' as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Simulacra and Simulation 1). Baudrillard is of the view that we have created a world of representations through TV and Virtual Reality which he calls 'present-day simulators.' Still, these models do not correspond to reality but are mere fragments of images that do not exist in real life. Therefore, there is absolutely nothing we can rely on when all concepts surrounding us are 'hyperreal'. If we are to read the text against itself, Hamid presents us with a sci-fi notion of migration- a hyperreal narrative. If we are to accept 'magical doors' as a mere fragmentation of his imagination, it indicates that the rest is real, but what he portrays as the world for refugees is not real. Co-mingling what is real and what is not, this hyperreal simulates the real- the real world of migration sans its ugly truths. This hyperreality serves aesthetic purposes; for neither such portals exist, nor any migration has taken place that omits the process of locomotion. One can argue that Hamid is aiming to represent globalization and how he views the

world that has entered this era of technology with the emanation of globalization through a 'portal' absent any history and justification. In Exit West, Hamid suggests that since everyone is moving from one place to another and is not settling in for a land for more than a year, it has made the experience of staying at home a migration too. To present a globalized era of the world, Hamid writes,

> [...]every year someone was moving out and someone was moving in, and now all these doors from who knows where were opening, and all sorts of strange people were around, people who looked more at home than she was, even the homeless ones who spoke no English, more at home maybe because they were younger, and when she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it. We are all migrants through time. (Hamid 209)

His entire argument is plausible if we are to consider that this is delivered in a fictional work, but he extends his narrative by universalizing the concept of migration when he writes about this matter in an issue of National Geographic magazine. This suggests that Hamid's world is a simulacrum of his idea of migration which does not correlate with reality whatsoever. He creates this hyperreality to sell the idea of migration as something that is effortless when the discourse of migration does not revolve around the 'decision to migrate'. Goyal has also attributed the success of Exit West to the universalization in the novel ("We Are All Migrants": The Refugee Novel and the Claims of Universalism 246). Goyal discusses how Edward Said has put this warning beforehand regarding universalizing the experience of refugees and also suggested refraining from considering the literature of exile as something beneficially humanistic "because it would banalize its mutilation" (244) but Hamid has trivialized the nature of migration by reducing it to a 'noun', stripping of its stature as a 'verb'. It can be argued, in the aspects of consumerism prevalence in the theory of

hyperreality, that Hamid's consideration regarding the matter of representation is confounding with seeking validation from international platforms to regard his ideas as innovative. Yet, he claims to be telling the tale of the real.

Exit West does not point fingers at complacent institutions that have played a part in initiating adversaries among nations. It also avoids labelling conflicting forces and creates a sense of acceptance for narratives that are antinomian in nature. Hamid is of the view that he has created a representation of a Muslim woman who wears a burqa but is liberal and independent but the way he presents Nadia holds a tinge of Islamophobia in his narrative. In We Are All Migrants: History and Geography in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, referring to Nadia's black robe and Saeed's beard, Shazia Sadaf presents a critique of Hamid's effort to "reconstruct these symbols". She finds it interesting how Hamid presents a liberal woman who, for the world, may be "conservative" but is very liberal behind her facade (6). By portraying a woman who does not pray and uses a burqa as a practical choice, Hamid showcases that we have all become the product of Islamophobic hysteria. Shazia and Hamid both celebrate the representation that Hamid has created in his book and find it plausible, but stripping it down of the debate of liberalism, the acceptance of Western ideas, and portraying them as something liberal and the true nature of the character enunciates that in Hamid, there is a deeply hidden desire to be accepted by the west. Goyal puts it as something that "makes the novel available for liberal affirmation of not too much difference" (245), but if we are to negate the true values of our identities and then ask for the world to look at us as somewhat close to acceptable, then Hamid is not doing a great job of making a space for acceptance. The success of Exit West and its acknowledgement in Barack Obama's favourite book list ("Mohsin Hamid's Exit West makes it to Obama's favorite books of 2017" The Express Tribune) just serve as an indicator that Hamid produces an object that is not

concerned with its utility. Coming back to the point of consumerism, Habib, in his article "Culture and Consumerism in Jean Baudrillard: A Postmodern Perspective" says that such objects are more coordinated with the sign of what they represent than their durability as he says, "the consumption, display, and the use of the objects operate on the basics of cultural codes" (44) and Hamid's Exit West seems to be operating on the cultural codes of the west for better access to high consuming rate.

When Baudrillard calls out America to present the real by putting up the front through Disneyland, he suggests that America is trying to hide the absence through the channels of consumerism (Barry 85).

Conclusion:

The entire debate ends on the point that Hamid also favors hyperreal to set the base for better consuming channels by attracting the international audience without calling out their flaws. He does not give any indication as to who transgressors are in his text and does not present Muslims as any different to create the general idea of affirmation and acceptance and if we have to look at it this way, Hamid succeeds in giving the text that 'reach' by creating a hyperreal narrative of migration. To conclude, Hamid has done a great job in one aspect of generating a major audience for his book but somehow, he loses the essence of writing on migration, and it truly reflects in the discourse of the novel. He manages to lose the tale of the real while simulating the real and hence, Exit West becomes the loss of the real tale of migration.

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