Immense Risks: the Migrant Crisis, Magical Realism, and Realist "Magic" in Mohsin Hamid's Novel *Exit West*

Ewa Kowal
Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse Mohsin Hamid's 2017 *Exit West* as a literary response to the 2015 migrant crisis. Hamid's fourth novel will be shown as, on the one hand, a formal departure from his previous works, but on the other, a continuation of the most important thematic threads in the author's output. The paper demonstrates how Hamid takes on the risky challenge of capturing the migrant experience by offering a nuanced response to the refugee crisis, which opens up the novel to interpretations from the perspectives of postcolonial studies, trauma theory, and socioliterature. Furthermore, Hamid's use of the technique of magical realism will be examined as a metaphor and an ellipsis; however, it will be argued that the novel's politically subversive potential lies elsewhere: in the formally realist vision of an optimistic resolution to the migrant crisis. This ending, for many readers unrealistic and fantastical, if not "magical," offers a "radical political engagement with the future," as it provides the author's unflagging expression of support for what he calls "impurity," as well as his appeal for strategic hope and optimism in the face of the currently dominant political discourse of fear and division.

Keywords: migrant crisis, immigrant novel, magical realism, postcolonial literature, socioliterature.

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse Mohsin Hamid's 2017 *Exit West* as a literary response to the 2015 migrant crisis. To do this, I will reflect on dominant Western representations of the crisis in other, visual, media. Secondly, the aim is to compare this novel to the author's previous three works in formal and thematic terms. Consequently, the paper considers the author's first-time use of magical realism, and shows that *Exit West*, on the one hand, belongs to the magical realist tradition of protest; however, it uses the technique only to a limi-

ted degree. Unlike in classical examples of the magical realist genre, it is not the single element of magical realism (examined as a metaphor and an ellipsis) that conveys the novel's politically subversive message. Rather, this role is fulfilled by Hamid's formally realist vision of a resolution to the migrant crisis, which can be interpreted as fantastical and even "magical" because it is optimistic. In the end, *Exit West* will be read as a nuanced literary response to the migrant crisis, engaged in political activism, promoting "impurity" and calling for strategic optimism, whose readings can be located at an intersection of postcolonial studies, trauma theory, and socioliterature.[2]

DISPLACEMENT

A decade before the beginning of the so-called European migrant or refugee crisis in 2015,[3] Zygmunt Bauman wrote about "[r]efugees, asylum seekers, immigrants [as] the waste products of globalization" (2006, 66). In his book, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*, Bauman put forward an explanation for the predominant responses to the already visible crisis:

> In addition to representing the "great unknown" which all "strangers in our midst" embody, these particular outsiders, refugees, bring home distant noises of war and the stench of gutted homes and scorched villages that cannot but remind the settled how easily the cocoon of their safe and familiar (safe because familiar) routine may be pierced or crushed and how deceptive the security of their settlement must be. The refugee, as Bertold Brecht pointed out in *Die Landschaft des Exils*, is "ein Bote des Unglücks" (a harbinger of ill tidings). (66–67)

For this reason, Bauman wrote, refugees and immigrants "are uniquely suitable for the role of the effigy to be burnt at the spectre of 'global forces,' feared and resented for doing their job without consulting those whom its outcome is bound to affect" (66). Recognising the scapegoating mechanism at work, Bauman also

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2   As well as housing studies, due to the novel's intense engagement with the ideas of home, homeland, and displacement. However, additional focus on this area goes beyond the scope of this study.
3   The term or its variety (the UN Refugee Agency speaks of "Europe's refugee crisis" in 2015 [Spindler 2015]) betrays Eurocentrism and Western-centrism, but also serves to distinguish from others the recent stage in the much older and larger phenomenon of migration.

identified the prototypical "Other's" uncanny doppelgänger role: "After all, asylum seekers and 'economic migrants' are collective replicas (an alter ego? [...] mirror-images?, caricatures?) of the new power elite of the globalized world, widely (and with reason) suspected to be the true villain of the piece" (66). The unlikely likeness is further justified: "Like that elite, [economic migrants and refugees] are untied to any place, shifty, unpredictable. Like the elite, they epitomize the unfathomable 'space of flows' where the roots of the present-day precariousness of the human condition are sunk" (66). This paradoxical affinity explains why, in the philosopher's words,

> [s]eeking in vain for other, more adequate outlets, fears and anxieties rub off on targets close to hand and re-emerge as popular resentment and fear of the "aliens nearby." Uncertainty cannot be defused or dispersed in a direct confrontation with the other embodiment of extraterritoriality: the global elite drifting beyond the reach of human control. That elite is much too powerful to be confronted and challenged pointblank, even if its exact location was known (which it is not). Refugees, on the other hand, are a clearly visible, and sitting target for the surplus anguish. (66)

By 2020, globally, anguish has become even more surplus, and targeting migrants, and even non-migrant descendents of migrants, continues to be central to European and American politics. Migration was a crucial factor determining the results of both the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK, and the 2016 US presidential elections. Undoubtedly, it is for this reason that, in its sixth edition, *World Happiness Report 2018* focused on migration. Its *Overview* reminds us that "rural-urban migration within countries is an age-old phenomenon" (Helliwell, Lyard and Sachs 2018, 5) and "has been far larger than international migration, and remains so, especially in the developing world" (4). Nonetheless,

> large-scale international migration has increased greatly in recent years due to globalisation [...]. In 1990 there were in the world 153 million people living outside the country where they were born. By 2015 this number had risen to 244 million, of whom about 10% were refugees. (5)

As Hendriks, Burger, Ray and Esipova (2018) point out,

> This raises important questions in our globalizing world, where more than 700 million people currently say they would like to move permanently to another country if they had the opportunity, and where the international migrant population is expected to increase from the current 250 million to an estimated 400 million people in 2050. (46)

REPRESENTATION

Impressive as these figures are, and were during the 2015 migrant crisis, it was probably not numbers that spread panic among large sections of European and American public. Even more impactful were the images of events and its participants, at times televised live or livestreamed on social media or reported shortly after through not infrequently shocking photographs and videos – sometimes made by the migrants themselves.

Added to the initial, if not instantaneous, images of the migrant crisis have been varied, either directly or indirectly expressed, reactions and commentaries. Next to journalists', politicians' and "experts'" reports and predictions, artistic responses have also emerged, so far most numerous from visual artists[4] and filmmakers.[5] As the film critic Steve Rose has observed, migration is "one of the biggest challenges facing humanity today. But film-makers from Michael Haneke to Ai Weiwei have struggled to represent this highly sensitive issue" (2018). And as "Europe's film-makers have begun to respond, to the extent that

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4   Such as Banu Cennetoğlu (Higgins 2018) and especially Ai Weiwei (Barnes 2016; Pogrebin 2016; Tan 2016; Andrews 2017, Calderwood 2017; Hoffman 2017; Marchildon 2017; Pogrebin 2018; Ai 2018).

5   To name some titles of films created in direct response to the refugee crisis: David Fedele's *The Land Between* (2014), Panos Karkanevatos's *Riverbanks* (2015), Jacques Audiard's *Dheepan* (2015), Jonas Carpignano's *Mediterranea* (2015), Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (2016), Daniel Mulloy's short film *Home* (2016), Daphne Matziaraki's short film *4.1 Miles* (2016), Ellen Martinez and Steph Ching's *After Spring* (2016), Guido Hendrikx's *Stranger in Paradise* (2016), Simon Verhoeven's *Willkommen bei den Hartmanns* (2016), Luca Guadagnino's *A Bigger Splash* (2016), Alejandro González Iñárritu's "immersive VR installation-drama about immigrants" (Bradshaw 2017) *Carne Y Arena* (2017), Orban Wallace's *Another News Story* (2017), Francis Lee's *God's Own Country* (2017), Aki Kaurismäki's *The Other Side of Hope* (2017), Gabrielle Brady's *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* (2018). Three more films, which address the problem of migration and migrants metaphorically, are worth mentioning: the 2018 Oscar winner for Best Director, Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017), and Paul King's *Paddington* (2014) and *Paddington 2* (2017).

a nod to the migrant crisis is almost becoming obligatory at the awards-friendly end of the business" (Rose 2018), at times their works "run the risk of being artful and exploitative" (Phillips 2018).

It appears that in representing "this highly sensitive issue" and in addressing "one of the biggest challenges facing humanity today" there is no failsafe strategy. This statement is equally applicable to literature. James Wood has expressed this fact best in his review of *Go, Went, Gone* (2017), a novel by the German author Jenny Erpenbeck about an aging German academic who becomes acquainted with a group of African migrants: "The risks inherent in making fiction out of the encounter between privileged Europeans and powerless dark-skinned non-Europeans are immense: earnestness without rigor, the mere confirmation of the right kind of political 'concern,' sentimental didacticism" (2017).

One more danger, to echo Bauman's words quoted at the beginning, stems from the vast asymmetry of power between those privileged to represent and those (predominantly not self-)represented. As David Morley writes in *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*, "[i]f the West commonly represents the land of the migrant's dreams, for the West itself the migrant is often still figured as the scapegoat" (2000, 155). This stems from "the conventional fears of host communities of being polluted by incoming foreigners" (155), which give rise to "symbols of impurity [and] rituals of purifications" (155): historically, Morley observes, "strangers were often held at the city gates, as a 'purifying filter,' preventing them contaminating civil society" (222).

IMPURITY

In her seminal work, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, the anthropologist Mary Douglas states that "there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it *does not fit*" (2007, xvii, emphasis added); consequently, "dirt" is "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter" (44). A key tool for "systematic ordering and classification" is the creation of borders. However, as Morley observes, today, "[i]n this world of hypermobility not only are we often engaged in border-crossings of one kind or another, but the nature and functions of borders themselves are shifting" (Morley 2000, 225).

Few kinds of literature address this problem as much (and as literally) as migration or migrant literature. An example of the genre of immigrant novel, first defined in the early 1980s (Boelhower 1981), is Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. The

writer's fourth novel was published in 2017, "coincidentally in the midst of con-
troversy surrounding President Donald Trump's travel ban affecting majority-
-Muslim countries" (Day 2020), as part of his larger border-strengthening and
wall-building plan. As in Hamid's previous works, in his latest novel the author
confirms himself to be "a writer able to speak directly of and to the moment,"
showing that he "doesn't shy away from wrestling with some of the most un-
comfortable realities of the Brexit/Trump age" (Scholes 2017). In fact, one critic
calls *Exit West* "the first great post-Brexit novel" (Freeman 2016), while another
states that it "feels immediately canonical,[6] so firm and unerring is Hamid's un-
derstanding of our time and its most pressing questions"[7] (Tolentino 2017).

As Carl Wilkinson rightly observes, "Mohsin Hamid has been circling the
idea of displacement throughout his career as a novelist"[8] (2017), which encour-
ages us "to read the author's preoccupations into his biography: Hamid, after all,
is a child of globalisation himself" (Wilkinson 2017). As we read on the author's
official website, he was "[b]orn in Lahore, he has spent about half his life there
and much of the rest in London, New York, and California". He now lives in Pa-
kistan, but at the same time "possess[es] a British passport and once possessed
an American green card," and "[m]ost of [his] education has been in the Ameri-
can system" (Hamid 2014); consequently, he feels both at home and foreign in all
the above countries (Day 2020). He describes himself as a "mongrel":

> I'm a mongrel through and through. Some of us look like mon-
> grels. [...] Some of us are mongrels inside. [...] I'm that second
> type of mongrel. I've lived on both coasts of the Pacific and the
> Atlantic and far up the Asian land mass alongside an empty river
> that once flowed down to the Indian Ocean via the Arabian Sea.
> (Hamid 2017c)

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6   Bearing in mind how exclusive the traditional "literary canon" has been, one may wonder how
much Hamid, a postcolonial writer, would care for his work's potential canonisation.

7   The book was listed as "one of *The New York Times Book Review's* 10 Best Books of 2017" (Nguyen
2017), and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2017 (Day 2020).

8   Hamid's debut novel *Moth Smoke* (2000) addresses social mobility and its limitations within Pa-
kistan's class system; *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) recounts the story of a Pakistani man, first
as an aspiring capitalist in post-9/11 America and then back in Pakistan as the titular anti-American
"reluctant fundamentalist"; *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), the most directly similar book
to *Exit West*, focuses on migration from rural to urban areas in Asia and the main character's climb
up the capitalist ladder.

Although himself a member of economically privileged international intellectual elites, Hamid identifies with migrants and refugees, and likewise, imagines himself into their plight:

> It's a frightening time for mongrels. Purity seems to be all the rage. In a rage. [...]. [I]n Pakistan, quite literally the "land of the pure," where I live, we see a murderous attachment to purity so pronounced that no human being is pure enough to be safe. Sometimes I feel a sense of impending apocalypse. Driving home with my children or lying in bed with my wife, I imagine that our ancient city might go the way of those other ancient cities that straddle the hinge between Asia, Europe and Africa – the cities we read about in our newspapers and watch on our screens. I imagine a bloodbath. I imagine fleeing. I imagine leaving loved ones behind. I don't think this will happen. I think it is unlikely. But the fear is often with me. (Hamid 2017c)

Responding to the global rise of nationalism in a 2018 essay, Hamid asserts: "We are all impure," thus reclaiming the term, reappropriating it for positive use, since "[e]very child is a combination of genetic material from two different sources." However, he continues,

> because many of us deny our impurity,[9] those who are most obviously impure among us require allies. And one of their most important allies is literature. Writing.[10] Reading. When, sitting alone, we read a book, something profoundly strange occurs. We are by ourselves. We are only ourselves. And yet we contain within us the thoughts of another person, the writer. We become something bizarre. Something manifestly impure. A being with the thoughts of two beings inside it. (Hamid 2018)

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9   Hamid has written in praise of impurity also using the term "hybridity" (Hamid 2015, xiii). For more see Kowal 2017b.
10   Arguably, some literature and writing can also be, and historically have been, the enemy of those declared "most obviously impure."

THE BOOK

Exit West itself can be seen as "impure": as an immigrant novel[11] about crossing borders, it is also a "genre-blurring novel" (Sandhu 2017), thus iconically representing its "content" through its form. Like all of Hamid's novels, it also tells a love story: the two young main characters, Saeed and Nadia, meet as students in an unnamed city of an unnamed country (which brings to mind e.g. Aleppo in Syria or Mosul in Iraq). The novel's very first sentence informs us that the city is "swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war" (Hamid 2017a, 1). However, this disturbing situation, which so far everyone seems to be taking in their stride (perhaps due to [over]familiarity with it) quickly deteriorates. Successive parts of the city are violently taken over by either of the warring sides, and soon after Saeed's mother has been killed, the couple decide to flee the country. They find out about mysterious and secret doors which, for a certain price, instantaneously teleport one to distant, happier, lands. They take the risk, and first travel to a Greek island, then to London, and finally to California. In each location they encounter both more migrants and refugees such as themselves, from various parts of the world, and the locals – some of whom treat them with hostility, while others provide help. However, globally, the conflict is resolved through a peaceful and culturally productive accommodation of the migrants into the host countries. The novel does not offer a conventional happy ending for its love story: after their long journey the couple split up and build relationships with other people.[12] The novel ends in the future, when "[h]alf a century later" (227), the former lovers meet as old friends, back in their hometown, now at peace again.

Exit West is told in what by now appears to be Hamid's characteristic voice (rather than an individual character creation); the novel's third-person editorial omniscient narrator[13] presents the shifting points of view of both main characters, as well as, briefly, a few marginal ones. Such a conventional and

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11   In addition, according to Gheorghiu, "[t]he absence of the elements that could make up a historical novel and the presence of some very topical 'intertexts of the world' embedded in the narrative [...] may justify the inclusion of *Exit West* in the fuzzy category of historiographic metafiction, even without an overt signalling of the *meta*-dimension" (2018, 86).

12   Religious Saeed marries a Muslim preacher's daughter, while non-religious and progressive Nadia (who covers herself in a black robe only for protection against men) falls in love with a woman.

13   This verbose and gently ironic (rather than ironically verbose) narrator sounds very much like the narrators in Hamid's last two novels, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*.

fairly loose narrative format is a departure from Hamid's previous writing, which in each of the three books featured an experimental structure.[14] This time Hamid "doesn't exert as tight a narrative grip as he did in previous novels" (Sandhu 2017); accordingly, *Exit West* is much simpler in form and has the feel of a fable.

The two features: simplicity and a fairy-tale-like quality in the form of one fantastical element are interconnected and can be interpreted as the author's chosen approach to addressing the difficult topic of the refugee crisis. While, as William Giraldi observes, Hamid "takes the […] Middle Eastern migrant crisis and injects a wizardry, an allegorical urgency, that declares this book's intention to be art" (2017), he demonstrably does not want to declare it "too artful," and thus gives up his typical inclination to experiment, and to show off his consistent mastery of a rare and challenging narrative structure. Perhaps this is because in the context of this story formal unconventionality would have attracted too much attention to itself – away from the subject matter, and thus would have been morally inappropriate. It would have also been less effective, while Hamid evidently wants to convey a clear message (specified by the end of this paper).

The author acknowledged that the simple story-telling that he adopted resulted from both his personal life (raising two children) and the world that surrounded him: "Now that I think about it, it does feel like a novel written by someone with two small kids" (in Wilkinson 2017). As his interviewer tells us, "Reading children's books and conjuring up stories has made him reconsider his work as a novelist" (Wilkinson 2017):

> I'm still interested in the form of the novel [...] but I'm less con-
> cerned with using my novels to question how the novel works.
> Now what's much more pressing is how a story can become
> as powerful as it needs to be to do the things that it needs to do.
> I'm looking at the world around me with alarm and wondering
> what the most powerful type of story is that I can write. (Hamid
> in Wilkinson 2017)

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14   *Moth Smoke* – multiple subjective and unreliable first- and second-person narrators with indi-
vidual voices taking turns to tell the story, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* – second-person dramatic
monologue, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* – second-person parody of the self-help genre. For
more see Kowal 2017a, Kowal 2014, and 2017b respectively.

OPEN DOORS

Despite the current global political trends going in the opposite direction, "[t]hroughout his oeuvre, Hamid envisions an interconnected world in which East and West inevitably meet as a consequence of complicated histories of colonization and globalization" (Nguyen 2017). In *Exit West* this interconnectivity is very direct and created through the novel's one supernatural element, namely teleportation through magical doors opening in place of ordinary doors. Hamid's migrants are not "held at the city gates," there is no "purifying filter" (Morley 2000, 222); rather, in a potentially provocative materialisation of the most sensationalist media coverage, they can appear in one's bedroom, as if having stepped out directly from one's TV screen – only to immediately disappear into the new surroundings.

The idea of the magical door in *Exit West* was borrowed not only from what Hamid was reading to his children, but also from what he himself read as a child. In an article where Hamid wrote about his childhood, and his sudden transplantation from Pakistan to the US and then to Pakistan again, the author recalled finding comfort in fantasy: "I read *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. The idea of children passing through a wardrobe into a strange and magical land seemed entirely plausible to me" (Hamid 2017b). In terms of the composition of the novel, as we read in Wilkinson, "[t]he doors" – in the novelist's words, chosen as "the formal centre of this book"[15] – "allow Hamid to focus on the experience before and after th[e] escape" (2017). The author is not interested in the journey; as he said, "[t]he journey seems the most narratively interesting part, [...] but it is the least useful part. It's the lifetime up to the journey and the lifetime after that is important."

This is a radically different approach to the migrant crisis and migrants from the one that is predominant in visual (artistic, cinematic, as well as news media) depictions of the crisis and the migrants, who, with a few exceptions, are usually presented, firstly, on the move, in a boat or a dinghy, across a fence, on a road, in fact, fully identified with the motion, the flow (even when its current stage is stagnation and waiting), and, secondly, as a mass, without a past, and certainly without a future – or with both of them uniformly grim (with rare happier

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15   Another source of inspiration for this decision was Hamid's interest in technology (previously most visible in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*): "[t]he idea grew from Hamid's observation of the way technology is changing how we connect. 'Sometimes [because of e.g. smartphones] we're totally mentally absent from the place that we are in, and it is very easy for us to mentally go to places where we are not. That gave rise to the doors in the novel'" (in Wilkinson 2017).

stories). Hamid opts for a different strategy, which the literary medium allows to a much greater degree than e.g. an art gallery installation, not to mention news media. As Khaled Hosseini says, "Stories are the best antidote to the dehumanisation caused by numbers. They restore our empathy" (2018).

As a fellow immigrant novelist, Viet Thanh Nguyen observes,

> How these doors work is not Hamid's concern. The doors can be manifestations of magic realism, fantasy or science fiction, or all three, but they simply stand in for the reality that refugees will try every door they can to get out. (2017)

The doors, or more precisely the teleportation they make possible can also be interpreted as a powerful metaphor for migration and what it entails. As Hamid said in an interview, "[s]ometimes unreality can feel more real" (in Freeman 2016). The author already used the idea of teleportation before, in his second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In this post-9/11 novel, when the narrator is interviewed for a position at Underwood Samson, a consultancy firm based in New York, his task is to assess the value of a company whose only service line is "instantaneous travel. You step into its terminal in New York, and you immediately reappear in its terminal in London. Like a transporter on Star Trek" (Hamid 2007, 12). Changez's assessment is "[w]ildly overoptimistic," as his interviewer and future supervisor tells him, because his "assumptions on customers adopting this thing are way too high. Would you be willing to step into a machine, be dematerialized, and then recomposed thousands of miles away?" (13–14). In *Exit West* it turns out that very many desperate people would be willing to do exactly that, to take this immense risk. By migrating they first have to disintegrate, and then hope to reintegrate – on a personal as well as social level – through (various degrees of) assimilation into a host culture. Tragically, all too often the process ends at the very beginning, with the ultimate disintegration.

"It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born," says Hamid's narrator about the journey (Hamid 2017a, 98). This is how the doors and the teleportation are further described:

> A normal door [...] could become a special door, and it could happen without warning to any door at all. (69-70)

[...] drawing close she was struck by its darkness,[16] its opacity, the way that it did not reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end [...]. [...] Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it, and she felt cold and bruised and damp as she lay on the floor of the room at the other side, trembling and too spent at first to stand, and she thought, while she strained to fill her lungs, that this dampness must be her own sweat. (98)

the doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from – although almost no one ever did – or perhaps because there were simply too many doors from too many poorer places to guard them all. (101)

The World Happiness Report 2018 confirms this unsurprising conclusion: "most migration is from less happy to happier places" (Helliwell, Huang, Wang, and Shiplett 2018, 39); "In general, those who move to happier countries than their own will gain in happiness, while those who move to unhappier countries will tend to lose" (Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs 2018, 10). Another way in which the teleportation door metaphor works in *Exit West* is that, without expressly saying so, it suggests an analogy: the difference between a rich place/a happy country and a poor place/an unhappy country is, qualitatively, comparable to the difference between England during World War II and the magical land of Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

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16   When the doors' darkness as well as the predominantly dark(er) skin of those who pass through them are mentioned for the first time in the novel, an intertextual link unmistakably teleports us to Joseph Conrad's most famous novel. Hamid clearly parodies it and its fixation on "darkness" when he writes: "the closet door was dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness – the heart of darkness. And out of this darkness, a man was emerging. He too was dark, with dark skin and dark, wooly hair. He wriggled with great effort, [...] as though pulling himself up against gravity, or against the rush of a monstrous tide. [...] With a final push he was through, trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal. [...] His eyes rolled terribly. Yes: terribily. Or perhaps not so terribly. Perhaps they merely glanced about him" (Hamid 2017a, 6–7). Here, the migrant's animalisation is part of the parody. The tendency of Western filmmakers to depict migrants as a mass (admittedly, on the one hand inspired by their sheer numbers) creates an uncomfortable comparison with Conrad's and his European contemporaries' perception of Africans.

Furthermore, by relying on this metaphor, Hamid avoids the risk of mis-representation, sensational exploitation, or otherwise not giving justice to the migrants' experiences during their arduous journeys, which often constitute the unspeakable. In this way, the magical portal works as an ellipsis. It has the quality of economical efficacy, since the readers can immediately fill in the doors' "darkness," the information "gap," with at least partial meaning, relying on a large "database" of migrant crisis imagery supplied by other media.

The same can be said about Hamid's approach to depicting war and violence, where the unspeakable is even more likely to be accompanied by trauma. As Nguyen says, "[r]efusing to dwell on the morbidity of [war scenes], Hamid declines to turn the destruction of the city and its people into a spectacle" (2017). Rather, Nguyen continues,

> [e]xamining the destruction at a slight remove, Hamid discourages readers from pitying the city's residents. Instead, focusing on Saeed and Nadia, and removing the particularities of the city, the country and its customs, Hamid aims to increase the depth of a reader's em-pathy for characters who can be, or should be, just like the reader. The reader, of course, must think about what would happen if her own normal life was suddenly, unexpectedly upended by war. (2017)

Thus *Exit West* promotes empathy and identification with the refugees, but without overly universalising a refugee's or a migrant's experience. The novel offers only two universalist claims: "loss unites humanity, unites every human being" (Hamid 2017a: 202) and "We are all migrants through time" (209). Al-though undoubtedly well-meaning, such platitudes can be seen as inadvertently trivialising the plight of migrants; it is therefore fortunate that they are rare.

HOPE

Exit West, not only, as was said above, iconically represents its content through its form, but also – in fact, like most literature – serves as a kind of mental tele-portation device itself. Where Hamid wants to teleport us above all is a more hopeful future. While addressing a "highly sensitive issue," "one of the big-gest challenges facing humanity today," carrying immense risks for writers and all artists, "Hamid's traumatized fantasia" (Giraldi 2017), critics conclude, "is ultimately more hopeful than not" (Sandhu 2017). "In *Exit West*, [Hamid] imagines a hopeful, positive outcome to large-scale immigration that runs

counter to much popular anti-immigrant rhetoric" (Wilkinson 2017). Nguyen calls Hamid's "gentle optimism, this refusal to descend into dystopia" what is most surprising about his novel, stressing that it "does not lead to utopia," either (2017).

Utopia and dystopia are relative concepts. There is a moment in the novel which would have seemed dystopian in the West three, even two decades ago, but now merely echoes terrible events that have already happened on multiple occasions in very ordinary, sometimes random locations. This is when ISIS-like "[m]ilitants from Saeed and Nadia's country" who "crossed over to Vienna" massacre unarmed people in the streets (Hamid 2017a: 104), triggering a mob attack on innocent migrants on the one hand and a demonstration in their defence on the other, also attacked by the mob. There are other moments where Hamid imagines plausible scenarios of escalation of the already existing conflict and consequent violence, which may appear fairly dystopian. In the novel's near--future London, there are more riots, and "nativist extremists," supported by some politicians (132), advocate "wholesale slaughter" of migrants (156). After the local authorities have cut off electricity in districts of the city populated by migrants (some of them squat in the most expensive, and uninhabited, real estate in the world), there are "murders and rapes and assaults as well" (142). In "dark London, rubbish accrued, uncollected, and underground stations were sealed," with trains running but avoiding these stops as if they were plague hotspots. Saeed and Nadia hear that "military and paramilitary formations ha[ve] fully mobilized and deployed in the city from all over the country" and they know that "the battle of London would be hopelessly one-sided" (159). "The operation to clear the migrant ghetto" begins (159), with helicopters overhead, the military making "announcements to peacefully vacate the area," and with shooting (160).

It can easily be imagined that this development in the plot could lead to an ending where "purity" (at least for the time being) has been successfully restored. But in the ending Hamid gives us, "the electricity and water came on again" and "negotiations ensued" (165), leading to the emergence of "a ring of new cities" able to accommodate migrants, "the London Halo, one of innumerable human halos and satellites and constellations springing up in the country and in the world" (167). In some places, this mix of cultures even generates "a great creative flowering" (216), in music, in food. Such a "remodelling of the Earth itself" (177) may, similarly, seem utopian (if not naïve) to many readers.

It is up to us to decide which near-future scenario seems more desirable and/or likely in reality. But the novel is not a postmodernist game: the readers are not given parallel outcomes and a choice of their preference. There is only one ending in Hamid's fiction: a happy ending – for the migrants, some of "those who are most obviously impure among us," and for their allies. Hamid proposes that this choice is also available in reality, and encourages us to imagine it, as the first step to its realisation. While the supporters of "purity" are – and have long been – busy imagining, loudly inspiring, and increasingly effectively organising, Hamid urges their opponents, the defenders of "impurity," to do the same.

Hamid is not just optimistic, he is optimistic about optimism. He chooses optimism and promotes it as a political strategy, as an antidote to pessimism, apathy, and inaction. "[A] stance of optimism is not useless," he says (Hamid 2015, xiii):

> Hope is an active state. To hope you have to do stuff. You have to put your finger on the scale. It's important for people to imagine futures that do involve huge amounts of change and yet where our grandchildren can be all right. Writing this novel for me almost became a form of activism. (in Wilkinson 2017)

"The future is too important to be left to professional politicians," Hamid insists (2017b):

> And it is too important to be left to technologists either. Other imaginations from other human perspectives must stake competing claims. Radical, politically engaged fiction is required. This fiction need not focus on dystopias or utopias, though some of it probably will. Rather it needs to peer […] into where we might desirably go, as individuals, families, societies, cultures, nations, earthlings, organisms. This does not require setting fiction in the future. But it does require a radical political engagement with the future.

FROM MAGICAL REALISM TO REALIST "MAGIC"

It has been the aim if this paper to demonstrate that in *Exit West* Hamid offers a nuanced response to the 2015 migrant crisis, open to readings from at least several perspectives. Through its vision of a "reversed colonisation" of the West

(Gheorghiu 2018, 89), the novel can be read from the vantage point of postcolonial studies. The novel's elements of the unspeakable signalled through Hamid's use of the ellipsis invite interpretations informed by trauma theory (Piątek 2014, 33).

Both fields can be applied to an analysis of Hamid's use of magical realism as a technique by now much researched because very widely used on all continents (Hart 2003, 115) to express social protest, and to challenge hegemonic (e.g. Western, androcentric) epistemology and accounts of reality of those privileged to represent it (Ahmad, and Afsar 2014; Ahmad, Afsar, and Masood 2015; Sherratt-Bado 2018). This paper argues that Hamid, on the one hand, continues the magical realist tradition, but, on the other hand, relies on the technique only to a limited degree in comparison to such classical examples of the magical realist genre as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Ahmad, and Afsar 2014), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (Upstone 2007), or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (Łobodziec 2012). The result is that most of the novel's politically subversive potential is not carried by the single element of magical realism (teleportation), but rather by Hamid's formally realist vision of a resolution to the migrant crisis, which can be seen as fantastical and even "magical" because it is optimistic, and thus, for many readers, unrealistic. Nonetheless, Hamid calls for optimism and hope – as a political strategy and a form of activism – in defence of "impurity" and in the face of globally growing nationalism, and the dominant discourse of fear and division.

For this reason, one more, broader approach, encompassing the goals of both postcolonial and trauma theory, can be applied to interpreting Hamid's latest book, namely "socioliterature." Proposed by Kate Rose, the editor of the 2020 collection *Displaced: Literature of Indigeneity, Migration, and Trauma*, the category draws from feminism and ecocriticism, and "calls forth the full political and healing potentials of literature" (2). It also "designates literary analysis anchored in social criticism and transformation" (1), and highlights the role of the literary scholar and "literary analysis's largely untapped potential to serve society" (2).

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