As if by Magical Realism: A Refugee Crisis in Fiction

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Abstract

Mohsin Hamid is, along with Salman Rushdie, one of the most powerful 'postcolonial voices' in British literature to employ elements of magical realism in order to fictionally recreate a hectic contemporary history which seems to be moving faster than ever. People desperately flee from violent civil wars, seeking refuge, and politics of inclusion flourishes in Europe in response. Against this background, drawing inspiration from various violent events, like the Syrian Civil War, the fall of Mosul and the Yemeni Civil War, as well as from his personal migrant experience, Hamid publishes his fourth novel, Exit West, *equally personal and political as his other novels, most notably,* The Reluctant Fundamentalist, *dedicated to the events of 9/11. The paper aims to analyse* Exit West *from the perspective of this relation between the personal and the political, tracing the role of magical realism in opening the doors towards the painfully realistic construction of otherness.*

Keywords: *Mohsin Hamid, refugees, otherness, politics, migration*

Introduction

Mention should be made from the beginning that the title of the present paper has been slightly amended since the submission of the proposal. The initial subtitle ('The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Fiction') rather hastily addressed a precisely determined event or phenomenon – the crisis which began in 2011-2012 and made itself felt in Europe through the pressure of more than one million refugees and migrants in 2015.

The assumption, that the novel henceforth discussed fictionally represents this historical moment that polarized the European Union and, most probably, had an impact on the Brexit vote, is not necessarily invalidated by subsequent research. However, nor is it fully validated. Other historical events can also represent credible sources of inspiration for

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it, the battle of Mosul (Iraq) and the Yemenite Civil War coming immediately to mind. Whatever the truth, the aim of this paper is to discuss fiction, and not historical *realities* of the twenty-first century. However, as defined in the 1970s, in full bloom of the postmodern reassessment of the so-called grand metanarratives, the historical work is narrative discourse as much as any other body of texts that are heard, reported, informed by ideology and that impose a reading and an interpretative strategy (White, 1973).

In a previous research on the narratives of 9/11, I strived to make a point on the fictionalism of history, on its deceitful, totalizing and manipulative nature, which is actually a contestation of the phrase *historical reality*. Literature, in its turn, can also be history by other means, but it is deceiving by definition. Therefore, starting from these two premises, that history is fictionalized/ fictionalizing, while fiction may touch upon historicity, one reaches back to the overused concept of Lyotard - that of the "incredulity towards metanarratives" (1984).

What is more, the literary piece under the lens here, a novel shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2017, entitled *Exit West* and written by Mohsin Hamid, has little to do with realism or historical fiction, as currently understood by literary criticism. One should not even attempt to frame it in any category of *grand recits*, if not for other reasons, at least in order to avoid a virtual rebuttal from its very 'alive' author, who has constantly made use of his authority, explaining 'what the author wanted to say' in numerous public speeches and interviews. And since he has not mentioned the Syrian crisis once and has repeatedly claimed that his novel may be representative for any present or future migrant crisis of such amplitude, it might be better to reconsider the title, dropping the modifier 'Syrian', thus imprinting a more general and less totalizing tone to it.

Having said, in so many words, that the assumption that Hamid was put on the track of writing about refugees by the incidence of this particular piece of news in the international media at the time he was working on his fourth novel might have been slightly misled, one had better stick to the proverbial pinch of salt when it comes to his statements and explanations, because of his much discussed appetence for unreliability, which, as the following section will try to demonstrate, characterizes all his novels.

A migrant through the world, a migrant through fictional forms

Born in Pakistan, having lived in the U.S. where he also completed his studies at Princeton University, under the guidance of Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison, whom he acknowledges as influential for his career as a novelist, and then at Harvard School of Law, Mohsin Hamid moved to London in 2001 and became a British citizen in 2006. It is here that he started gaining world recognition as one of the most important young novelists of the 21st century. However, one should not consider him merely a British author; that would be akin to an imperialistic cultural appropriation that today's cultural politics deems unacceptable, and that would disregard his multiculturalism as both a person and a writer of fiction. In 2009, he seemed to close the circle by moving back to Pakistan with his family, but not even he can tell that his migrant experience ended there. Owing to his American and British cultural and educational 'adstrata', neither could Hamid be simply labelled as a `Pakistani novelist'. Describing himself as a 'mongrel' who has travelled the world since early childhood, having called 'home' three capitals situated at immense distance one from the other, namely Lahore, New York and London, Hamid has a 'record' quite similar to that of another 'British' novelist that modern criticism labels a 'postcolonial voice', namely Salman Rushdie. Nonetheless, probably less interested in a postcolonial revenge on the English language such as Rushdie's `chutnification' (see *Midnight's Children*), Hamid never misses an opportunity to assert his hybridity, which, to him, ends up outlining a literary credo, which he shares in the Introduction to his *Freudian-in-reverse*-titled collection of essays on life, art and politics, *Discontent and Its Civilisations:*

> Mongrel. Miscegenator. Half-breed. Outcast. […] Our words for hybridity are so often epithets. They shouldn't be. Hybridity needs not be the problem. It could be the solution. Hybrids do more than embody mixtures between groups. Hybrids reveal the boundaries between groups to be false. And this is vital, for creativity comes from intermingling, from rejecting the lifelessness of purity (Hamid, 2014: xvii).

If Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* comes to someone's mind at this point, one is not wrong. "For every text, a context" says the latter (1992: 92). Hamid's context is marked by turmoil: "I have lived in Pakistan during its recent and most intense period of terrorist activity and drone strikes, in

London during the years on either side of the 2005 public transport bombings, and in New York in the era that came to an end with the attacks on the World Trade Center of 2001" (Hamid 2014: xv). Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that his texts are political and, given his much brandished hybridity – which he derogatorily calls mongrelness to make a point -, that they are equally personal, with a strong autobiographical vein. Not only is the personal political for second-wave feminism, here is how the personal turns political for any aware citizen of the twenty-first century global village.

Hypothetically, if one took upon oneself the endeavour of critically assessing Hamid's complete works in the form of a monograph, one would be in a predicament in what acquiring certain uniformity is concerned, should one fail to bring this nullified antonymy between the private and the public to the fore. It is one of the threads that run through all his four novels published up to date: *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and *Exit West* (2017). A brief description of each novel might be helpful in demonstrating that Mohsin Hamid's novels are hybrid works themselves, owing to their preference for a chronotope that reads *'Pakistan, present day'*, to the multiplicity of textual forms of western inspiration, and to the use of English worthy of a Princeton graduate with a major in literature uninterested in linguistic `cross-pollination'. This supports Peter Morey's assessment of Hamid's fiction as "deterritorialising, that is, beyond the totalising categories of East and West" (2011: 138) and, therefore, representative for contemporary *Weltliteratur*.

Moth Smoke (2000), Hamid's highly acclaimed debut, which he started as part of a creative writing assignment given by Toni Morrison during his university years, is set against the backdrop of late 1990s, when nuclear tests were run in Pakistan. It employs a multitude of narrative techniques – a framing narrative of historical inspiration, alluding to the fratricide conflict between India and Pakistan, multiple focalization, embedded interviews, long soliloquies and digressions, etc. – to tell an allegorical story of the downfall of an 'everyman', in the context of "a world taken over by gun-running, drug-trafficking, large-scale industrialism, commercial entrepreneurship, tourism, new money, nightclubs, boutiques, politicians and civil servants noted for greed and corruption, and the constant threat of an explosion—of population, of

crime, of the nuclear bomb, some kind of terrible explosion" (Desai, *The New York Review of Books*, 2000). Compared by Jhumpa Lahiri to Fitzgerald (in *The Great Gatsby*), Hamid succeeds in providing his readership with a very *American* novel about the social and political state of Pakistan:

> Like Fitzgerald, Hamid writes about the slippery ties between the extremely wealthy and those who hover, and generally stumble, in money's glare. Hamid also sets the action over a single, degenerate summer, when passions run high and moral lassitude prevails. And like Fitzgerald, Hamid probes the vulgarity and violence that lurk beneath a surface of affluence and ease (Lahiri in *The New York Times*, 2000).

The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007), arguably Hamid's literary breakthrough, which brought him on the Man Booker Prize shortlist and in the spotlights of the literary world, selling over one million copies, being translated into 25 languages and transposed into a fairly appreciated film, does away with polyphony and unwinds as a dramatic monologue inspired by Camus's *The Fall*. Literally turning off America, in a postcolonial manner, by silencing an unnamed American narratee, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* may be read as the story of every law-abiding, American-dream pursuer of Muslim origins during the years of hysterical Islamophobia following the attacks on the World Trade Center.

Hamid's third novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) comes with yet another narrative form – a satirical mock-Bildungsroman sprawled along almost 80 years, which deals with "well… how to get filthy rich in rising Asia", as its author cares to 'elaborate' in all his lectures on his works. A constant in Hamid's fiction is the sparse use of names – for identity-related purposes in some cases, for refusing the characters a voice, in others. This time, the reader does not find out the name of the protagonist, who is addressed throughout the novel only as "you". Americanism is again at work: the entire novel is constructed as a self-book, in the vein of Dale Carnegie's famous *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and is, as novelist Keith Garebian remarks in his review, "an audacious challenge to the genre of realistic fiction because the narrator speaks in the fashion of a motivational speaker" (2013). Once again, choosing Asia as background, Hamid parodies the American way and critiques its cultural imperialism/neocolonialism in a very… American way.

Therefore, the first three novels by Mohsin Hamid are, formally, a polyphonic allegory, a dramatic monologue and, respectively, a motivational book - fictional forms as divergent as possible from the conventions of realism and genuine wanderings on the path of literary experimentation. And yet, they all are realistic representations of the world nowadays, of the social, economic and political effects of globalization. The fourth, *Exit West* (2017), is published at a time when the world has just witnessed massive relocations of people from Asian zones of conflict to Europe, dividing the European society and, what is more, the European states, into liberals willing to welcome and help the refugees and adepts of a new form of far-right extremism, who only want the 'invaders' of their cities gone. Once again, Hamid deals, in his fiction, with phenomena of utmost importance on the world stage, and once again he resorts to indirectness to do so: *Exit West* is poetic prose with elements of magical realism.

All the world's a refuge and all the men and women merely migrants

Although only nearly two decades have passed in the twenty-first century, history seems to be moving faster than it used to. The political events precipitate, technological advancement is difficult to keep up with, borders are erased or redrawn, refugees flood Europe and politics of inclusion flourishes, while America is building a wall to keep immigration at bay. France, and by extension, Europe "has to learn to live with terrorism," as French Prime-Minister, Manuel Valls, says (Euronews 2016). British media (and not only) is engaged in a race of framing migrants. The structure of the EU is redefined after Brexit. Much of these political phenomena is closely connected to the most recent wave of migration, with people's fleeing from war- and terror-ridden territories in a desperate attempt to save what is left of their lives, both physically and psychologically. This is, in a nutshell, a significant part of the history of the last decade, and this is also the historical background of Mohsin Hamid's latest novel, *Exit West*. But does this make *Exit West* a historical novel? Yes and no. In the classical sense of the term, it does not. The spatial and temporal coordinates are undetermined, heroes are missing, antagonistic forces are barely mentioned, and even the conflict that triggers the déroulement of the plot is somewhere in the background, the novel

foregrounding a love story of two unexceptional characters. The entire scaffolding of the novel "break(s) with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable" (Derrida 1977: 185 qtd. in Hutcheon 1989: 7).

Therefore, Hamid's fictional work challenges "the (related) conventional forms of fiction and history through its acknowledgment of their inescapable textuality" (Hutcheon 1989: 11) and through the multiplicity of potential contexts. The 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, especially in the second half of the novel, when the space turns from indeterminate to precisely mapped, may justify the inclusion of *Exit West* in the fuzzy category of historiographic metafiction, even without an overt signalling of the *meta-* dimension. The only immutable context is announced by the title itself. It calls to mind a disco-pop hit of the last century, 'Go West', composed in the 1970s by Village People, but made famous in the early 1990s by Pet Shop Boys, whose title was inspired by a 19th-century call to the colonization of the (American) West. 'Go' has now become 'Exit' because of the border-crossing constraints (in the world of the real, because in the fictional world all borders are made to disappear, as if by magic.). One could no longer go wherever one wants to go – one needs to *escape* through Narnia-esque doors. This 'wherever' is always to the west – symptomatic in this respect is the observation made in the novel that the exits to west are guarded by heavily armed men and the passing is paid for with large sums of money, while the corresponding doors on the other side are freely accessible to everyone, but no one wants to pass through them, for fear that they might end up in an East tormented by civil wars, terrorism, famine, economic or environmental disasters. This is not to say that Hamid reconstructs the East/West dichotomy by representing the former as a dystopian hell on earth, and the latter as a utopian land of honey and milk, with a limbo placed somewhere on a Greek island. This would be unrealistic, and - although obliquely and non-compliantly with the tenets of realist fiction - Hamid's novel "stretches the boundaries of the real just enough to make a point about the state of immigrants and refugees in the contemporary world – but it's very much grounded in reality" (Michael Chabon's blurb in the Penguin edition of *Exit West*).

Among a few very short vignettes which carry the reader to Sydney, Tokyo, Vienna, Amsterdam and Marrakesh just to suggest "that the whole planet was on the move" (Hamid 2017, 167), too underdeveloped, however, to give the novel a polyphonic quality, a love story starts weaving "in a city swollen by refugees but mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war" (1). That "not yet" in the first sentence of the novel is, of course, proleptic, and Saeed and Nadia, the only characters that are given a name, will soon be surrounded by the atrocities of a violent civil war, in their unnamed city *where death has [his] dominion*[1]. The language employed in representing the world turned to chaos is disturbingly lyrical at times, and run-on sentences frequently render the characters' thoughts in free indirect discourse.

> But part of her still resisted the idea of moving in with him, with anyone for that matter, having at such great difficulty moved out in the first place, and become quite attached to her small flat, to the life, albeit lonely, that she had built there, and also finding the idea of living as a chaste half lover, half-sister to Saeed in close proximity to his parents rather bizarre, and she might have waited much longer had Saeed's mother not been killed, a stray heavy-calibre round passing through the windscreen of her family's car and taking with it a quarter of Saeed's mother's head, not while she was driving, for she had not driven in months, but while she was checking inside for an earring she thought she had misplaced, and Nadia, seeing the state Saeed and Saeed's father were in when Nadia came to their apartment for the first time, on the day of the funeral, stayed with them that night to offer what comfort and help she could and did not spend another night in her own apartment again (72).

All the while, the external narrator plays the objective, busily imparting telegraphic reports on military assaults, commencement of curfew, and suspension of any means of electronic communication, and thus convincingly constructing the image of a world in ruins.

Toying a little bit with the Western readers' expectations, Hamid makes this war history the 'her story' of a young professional Muslim woman who does not pray, smokes weed and takes hallucinogenic mushrooms, drives a motorcycle, lives alone and engages in sexual relationships outside wedlock, wearing a black robe and veil "so men don't fuck with [her]" (16), and the 'his-story' of a young professional Muslim man who does pray, lives with his parents, as he ought to, and rejects (if

only up to a certain point) the woman's sexual advances. Against the tragic background of a city at war, nothing is genuinely tragic in Nadia and Saeed's relationship, just as nothing is tragic in their ulterior separation caused by the estrangement accumulated during the years of their hopping from one place to another, or in their casual reencounter in an epilogue set half a century later. Of course, the trauma of seeing their relatives "blown […] to bits, literally to bits, the largest of which […] were a head and two-thirds of an arm" (29) is what triggers their departure/ quest for survival, at the expense of leaving the beloved behind, which is perceived as murderous: "when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (94). In Hamid's case, the migrant's trauma has actual autobiographical roots, as he declares: "I have been migrating my whole life, so, in a way, I suppose I was always going to write at some point a novel about migration. So the experience of migration and the emotional pain and confusion that comes from it, I think, do in a way come from me" (PBS News Hour 2018).

The innovation of resorting to magical realism in *Exit West* is justified by its author during the same Q&A session on PBS as having been inspired by the magic of technology. As mentioned above, the passageways to the West are black rectangles appearing in places where regular doors used to be, which transport migrants to various places on earth in a matter of seconds. Hamid starts from the obliteration of geographical distances – at the mental level, for now – by the use of the smartphone.

> So, right now, most of us have a little black rectangle in our pocket […]. And when we look at it, our consciousness goes far, far away from our bodies, like magically appearing somewhere else, looking at your phone, and suddenly you're reading about the moon or Mars or Antarctica" (PBS News Hour 2018).

He claims that he has thought of a technological advancement that would allow the body to move as fast as the mind. Plausible as this explanation may be, contemporary authors who too readily explain all their narrative choices had better be mistrusted. The more they speak, the less they say, and the more they may throw their readers on a wrong track. It may not be the case with Hamid, but this literary device of his resembles "the foreshortening of history so that the time scheme of the novel metaphorically contains the long process of colonization and its aftermath"

(Slemon 1988: 12). Of course, the colonization Slemon mentions in his seminal chapter 'Magic Realism as Post-colonial Discourse' is that which affected the areas from Asia and Africa under the rule of the European powers. Hamid's is a reversed colonization targeting the West, overpopulated with migrants from all over the world in a matter of days. In employing this oxymoronic strategy "that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy" (Slemon, 1988: 10), Hamid may conceal another attempt at 'writing back'[2] after the silencing of America in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Since Nadia has long lost the connection with her family because of her lifestyle, unusual for a Muslim woman, the only family she and Saeed leave behind is Saeed's father, who is unwilling to abandon the town where his wife rests. The passage is imagined as a violent death followed by immediate rebirth – "Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as 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" (Hamid 2017: 98). The exit point, where "everyone was foreign and so, in a sense, no one was" (100), is the Greek island Mykonos, "a great draw for tourists in the summer, and, it seemed, a great draw for migrants this winter" (101). Surely Hamid has made this choice inspired by the huge influx of Syrian refugees. At that time, *The Spectator* read:

> Since the beginning of the year, about 100,000 migrants have arrived via Turkey […] A Brussels bureaucrat by the name of Vincent Cochetel […] has criticised Greece for not doing enough. 'Wake up and do more,' said the bureaucrat […]. But how can an island of 35,000 inhabitants take in 40,000 refugees and provide for them? (2015 online).

Hamid's version of Mykonos is a transit area, where thousands of refugees live in tents, in a camp, outside the city, and trade for water, blankets and access to electricity, to charge their phones, while robbing others or guarding themselves against being robbed. The tableau created is a realistic literary representation of the hard times endured by refugees, calling to mind disturbing images of their wretched existence, broadcast by European televisions in the summer of 2015.

With the help of a local volunteer whom Nadia befriends, the two protagonists reach the second door, which sends them to a city of London

that is not realistically represented as it is at present, but as it might be in the near future. It is here that Hamid critiques Western 'nativism', all the while maintaining a balanced, understanding tone:

> "I can understand it, she said. "Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived."
> "Millions arrived in our country," Saeed replied. "When there were wars nearby."
> "That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose." (Hamid 2017: 162)

Originally understood as promoting the interests of native inhabitants over those of immigrants, nativist policy has a long history. The term was coined around mid-19th century, in the U.S., the 'natives' being the descendants of the Thirteen Colonies, who feared the proliferation of Catholicism through the numerous Irish migrants coming to the States in the 1830s. At present, not only does nativism manifest in the U.S. – although Donald Trump assumes it as state policy – but also in Europe and, most poignantly, in the U.K., as a reaction against the migrants arrived from Central and Eastern Europe owing to their right to free circulation within the EU borders, or those from the former 'jewel(s) in the crown of the British Empire' from Asia and Africa and, lastly, against the quota of asylum seekers that the European Commission imposed on the EU countries. The Brexit vote and the recrudescence of far-right ideologies are real consequences whose effects Hamid chooses to augment, constructing a dystopian London occupied by migrants coming through the magical doors:

> All over London, houses and parks and disused lots were being peopled in this way, some said by a million migrants, some said by twice as that. It seemed the more empty a space in the city the more it attracted squatters, with unoccupied mansions in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea particularly hard-hit, their absentee owners often discovering the bad news too late to intervene, and similarly the great expenses of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, filling up with tents and rough shelters, such that it was now said that between Westminster and Hammersmith legal residents were a minority, and native-born ones vanishingly few, with local newspapers referring to the area as the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation (126).

This invasion is soon responded with a massive operation "to reclaim Britain for Britain" (132) and by the organisation of the nativist extremists with the tacit support of the authorities. "The social media chatter was of a coming night of shattered glass" (132) and, as is often the case, the social media is eventually proven right and/or it is the social media that triggers further developments. In *Exit West*, the development is the transformation of London in a war area: "around this zone were soldiers and armoured vehicles, and above it were drones and helicopters, and inside it were Nadia and Saeed, who had run from war already, and did not know where next to run" (135). Authorities cut off electricity in the occupied area, leaving the migrants in darkness, which occasions a poetic division between 'dark London' and 'light London', the latter, with its elegant restaurants and black cabs, and the former with fights, murders, rapes and assaults, blamed on nativist provocateurs or on other migrants. The hell on earth which the two characters escaped has relocated to London. But the conflict, although fuelled by the street and by the media with rumours of unconfirmed massacres, ends rather inexplicably, and the migrants are sent to work camps where they should build their own dwellings. For no apparent reason, however, Saeed and Nadia decide at some point "to give up their position on the housing list, and all they had built here" (189) and step for the third time through a magical door, this time heading to Marin, California, a small city near San Francisco. An evocation of a never-fulfilled American Dream or, perhaps, a re-enactment of the colonization of California, this final segment brings about the long-sought calm in the lives of the two, and, with it, their growing apart and eventual separation, as if their *love in this time of cholera*[3] had only had the purpose of keeping them together for mutual support.

Closing remarks

"We are all migrants through time," says the narrator of *Exit West* (209), that is to say that the world around us changes whether we move through space or not, and that we need to constantly adjust to change. In today's world, migration, a phenomenon as old as human civilisation, appears to lead to the redefinition of borders as we have known them since the formation of national states. It is probably in this key that Mohsin Hamid's latest opus should be read, after all – as a contribution, with the tools

writers of fiction have at their disposal, not to the identification of a solution to a world crisis, but to a new understanding and acceptance of the Other.

Notes

1. Allusion to Dylan Thomas's poem, *And Death Shall Have No Dominion* (1936).
2. Allusion to the book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths, Routledge, 1989.
3. Reference is made to Garcia Marquez's novel *Love in the Time of the Cholera*. In Spanish, not only is the term *cólera* denotative of the infectious disease, but it also signifies rage, wrath.

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