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ARTICLE

Transcending Boundaries: The Role of Literature in Challenging Social Norms and Redefining Perspectives on Migration and Cultural Marginality Through the Works of Halaby, Lahiri, and Hamid

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the transformative power of literature in challenging prevailing social norms and reshaping perspectives on migration, alterity, and cultural marginalization. Focusing on the novels *Once in a Promised Land* by Layla Halaby, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, the analysis examines the representation of the individual Other, challenging stereotypes, and highlighting the characters' personal and political traumas. The concept of nowhereness, which stands for the emotional and psychological state of migrants moving in unfamiliar cities, is explored, highlighting the paradoxical experience of simultaneous death and rebirth. The characters in these novels are in a deep state of emptiness, serving as "citizens in waiting and deportees in waiting." Their experiences in the liminal space of waiting are closely intertwined, creating a shared temporal landscape that enriches the exploration of the complexity of migrants. In this regard, the authors challenge the conventional tactics of silencing voices and concealing images to transform the harrowing ordeals of the Other into a powerful means of social introspection. The authors engage with Western hegemony and imperialism, seeking to

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inspire understanding and admiration for subaltern cultures that are marginalized by the Western world.

KEYWORDS
Once in a Promised Land, *The Namesake*, *Exit West,* Nowhereness, statelessness

I am an Arab,
alienated from American …
—Shereen, *On Becoming Arab*

Introduction

In the selected literary works, namely *Once in a Promised Land*, *The Namesake,* and *Exit West* by Layla Halaby, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Mohsin Hamid, the portrayal of the individual Other departs from the stereotypical archetype of the terrorist and instead depicts them as an innocent victim caught in the clutches of a vast imperialist system and subjected to irrational prejudice based on race and origin. As David Williams notes, "in our time, the most common victims of political violence are non-combatants" (Williams, 2007). This observation underscores the prevalent theme of personal and political trauma experienced by the characters in the narratives. As a result, our study aims to unravel the evolving foundations of alterity by explaining how these stories shed light on a shift in perspective. Specifically, they illuminate the experiences of the cultural Other and present counter-narratives that challenge and diverge from prevailing approaches to storytelling. Through a nuanced examination of both the personal and political dimensions, these narratives serve as compelling lenses through which to cope with the complexities of the now, and in turn contribute to a better understanding of the intricate dynamics at play within the overarching narrative fabric.

The concept of nowhereness in the aforementioned novels can be understood as the emotional and psychological state of migrants moving in the unfamiliar cities in different parts of the world. This is depicted in the novels where the characters experience a sense of transition and sudden uprooting that comes with a traumatic migration, highlighting the paradoxical experience of dying and being born at the same time, reflecting the paradoxical language that refugees use to describe their own experiences (Haas, 2017, p. 82).

The characters in the novels discussed here are in a profound state of emptiness, transforming themselves into "citizens in waiting and deportees in waiting," embodying a temporality of waiting that is characterized by specific configurations of power (Haas, 2017, pp. 75, 77). This notion serves as a reflection of the emotional and psychological dislocation inherent in the migration experience. In their exploration of the temporal dimensions of migration, the novels go beyond mere narrative structures and connect individual experiences in complex ways. This connection creates a profound sense of unity through simultaneity and illustrates how the characters' collective journey in the liminal space of waiting becomes a shared, albeit emotionally charged, temporal landscape. This representation explores the nuanced intricacies of the characters'

psychological and emotional states, offering a richer and more resonant exploration of the complex context of migrant experiences.

We can argue, then, that these novels defend the cause of those who have endured and continue to endure the consequences of irrational hostility towards those perceived as different. By reversing the conventional tactics of the dominant ideological state apparatuses to suppress voices and conceal images that reinforce their ideological agenda, authors such as Halaby, Lahiri, and Hamid effectively transform the harrowing agony of the Other into a powerful tool in the struggle for consciousness. In this regard, Sinno (2017) emphasizes the pivotal role that authors play in transforming English from a language associated with colonization into a means of promoting constructive dialogs through their literary works (p. 134). This highlights the crucial role that literary creations play in not only challenging but also reshaping social norms. Authors are called upon to go beyond merely crafting narratives; they must give their works the power to act as arenas where cultures collide and meet, serving as a crucible for understanding and growth. The literary works presented here have the task of guiding the inhabitants of the global community away from the polarizing "us versus them" mentality that is prevalent in today's political discourse. Instead, these works should serve as catalysts for collective change towards unity and empathy. In essence, literature should be used alongside art as an effective tool for national healing, helping the nation reconcile with the profound tragedies of its past and fostering a shared journey towards a more compassionate and inclusive future.

Through their literary work, the authors confront and reject Western hegemony and imperialism. Their aim is to inspire genuine understanding and admiration for subaltern cultures, those communities that are continually marginalized by the Western world, a marginalization that continues today.

To better understand some of the theories used in this study, we briefly review the key concepts and the most important critics.

René Girard's theory of mimetic desire is closely interwoven with identity and migration. Girard assumes that desire is fundamentally imitative, meaning that people desire things because others desire them (Palaver, 2013). This concept also extends to the formation of group identities, where imitative desire influences identity and creates conflict, as imitation fosters rivalry. Girard emphasizes that imitating other people's desires can lead to conflict and rivalry, especially if the individuals end up desiring the same things and potentially becoming rivals in the process (Andrade, n.d.).

Furthermore, Girard's theory links mimetic desire to the broader context of migration. The tragic phenomenon of migration is viewed through the lens of mimeticism, suggesting that there is a mimetic dynamic behind migration, where desires and aspirations are mimicked within groups, affecting their movements and interactions. This perspective sheds light on how mimetic processes influence not only individual desires but also collective behaviors, such as migration patterns.

Bauman's theory underscores the significance of perceived identity in intercultural encounters, where individuals' self-perception is influenced by how they believe others view them (Amit & Dolberg, 2023). This concept is crucial in understanding the dynamics of migration, as immigrants' sense of belonging and identification with their

host society are shaped by external perceptions (Amit & Dolberg, 2023). The process of migration often involves a negotiation between maintaining one's cultural heritage and adapting to new cultural norms, reflecting the fluidity and complexity of identity formation in a globalized world.

Fredrik Barth, a prominent figure in anthropology, has contributed significantly to the understanding of ethnic identity and migration. Barth's work focuses on the persistence of ethnic groups and the boundaries that define them, challenging the notion that cultural diversity is maintained by geographical and social isolation alone (Freedman, 1970). He highlights how ethnic boundaries persist despite interactions and mobility across them, and emphasizes the social processes of exclusion and inclusion that maintain discrete categories within ethnic groups (Freedman, 1970).

Barth's research illuminates the complicated dynamics of ethnic identity formation and maintenance, showing how stable social relationships are maintained across ethnic boundaries even though participation and membership changes over time. His work emphasizes the importance of understanding cultural variation as discontinuous, with different cultural groups sharing commonalities while maintaining interconnected differences that set them apart.

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, outlined in his seminal work *Orientalism* firstly published in 1978, is concerned with the Western construction of knowledge and perceptions about the East, particularly Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Said (1994) argues that Orientalism is not just an academic field, but a system of knowledge production deeply intertwined with imperialism and power dynamics, in which Western representations of the East are often distorted, romanticized, or essentialized in order to justify colonial domination (Lewis, 2004, p. 120).

Said's analysis shows how Orientalist discourse perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces Western superiority by creating a binary opposition between the East and the West and portraying the East as inferior and exotic. He criticizes how Orientalism has been used to justify colonial rule and continues to influence foreign policy today by perpetuating stereotypes and justifying interventions in Southwest Asia and North Africa.

Navigating Nowhereness in *The Namesake*

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* explores the fascinating narratives of the diasporic journey. Spanning across Kolkata, Boston, and New York, the book deals with the intricacies of navigating between two contrasting cultures characterized by different religious, social, and ideological differences. The narrative depicts the challenges faced by first and second generation Indians who have settled in America. The novel skillfully portrays the tensions arising from the dual struggle between preserving Indian cultural roots and absorbing American influences, as well as the conflict between preserving family traditions and individual freedom. Furthermore, it is worth noting that immigrants have no image of themselves in the post-global West due to "contact with English values" and the absence of Native culture (Upstone, 2009, p. 154). The poignant realization of being an outsider despite being born in one's adopted country is artfully highlighted in the novel. Lahiri's *The Namesake* begins with Ashima

fondly remembering her homeland while in the advanced stages of pregnancy and hospitalized for delivery. In this context,

> nothing feels normal to Ashima, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land. It was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved. (Lahiri, 2010, pp. 5–6)

When the Ganguli couple move to the USA and settle in Cambridge and Massachusetts, they are confronted with a new culture and have to come to terms with it. What Lahiri undertakes here "is an attempt to disrupt the narratives forged to define the dominant culture, to hybridize the discourse, and to reconfigure the concept of all cultural identities as fluid and heterogeneous" (Williams, 1999). Ashoke, an engineer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, adapts to American life more quickly than his wife Ahima, who resists the American elements and longs for her family in Kolkata. After the birth of their son, the Gangulis realize the urgency of naming the child and decide on Gogol, after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, to whom Ashoke owes his life.

However, Gogol, who is unaware of the meaning of the name, has difficulty identifying with Americans or Indians. Despite a circle of Bengali immigrant friends, the Ganguli family cannot consider "Pemberton Road their home" (Lahiri, 2010, p. 108). Gogol and Sonia, who were born and educated in America, wish to be accepted as Americans but feel alienated from both their parents and their American friends, who view them as outsiders. Lahiri's narrative emphasizes the centrality of "home" as a transnational space. In this sense, according to Bhabha,

> in the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible that does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is a shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world. (Bhabha, 1992, p. 141)

In *The Namesake*, Ashima's sense of unhomeliness, that is her ability to cope with the world of her home and ultimately be at home in the world, creates a tension between domestic space, her transnational identity and her ability to cope with different cultures.

Furthermore, displacement leads to the emergence of the concepts of double consciousness and homelessness, which are key features of postcolonial diasporic identity. Lois Tyson aptly analyzes this notion and states,

> double consciousness often produced an unstable sense of self, which was heightened by the forced migration colonialism frequently caused. Being "unhomed" is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee. (Tyson, 2006)

Consequently, diasporic identity is multi-layered and constantly evolving. Lahiri's narrative craft emphasizes the transformative power of literature as a means to illuminate the intricate interplay between individual anguish and collective suffering, traversing the realms of memory, history, and identity. This endeavor underscores that literature is not limited to a solitary pursuit; it is a profoundly political act, a form of cultural resistance that challenges orchestrated ideological efforts (Said, 2000, p. 183).

Lahiri's first generation characters, Ashoke and Ashima, are deeply connected to Bengali culture. Ashima, a typical Bengali woman, does not address her husband by his name and pays careful attention to Bengali ceremonies for her children Gogol and Sonia to inculcate Indian values. To familiarize their children with Bengali culture, the family often attends Bengali social events. This exemplifies how Ashima maintains her Indian cultural roots while living in a modernized American society. In this regard, Angenot believes that culture

> legitimates and publicizes certain views, tastes, opinions, and themes. It represses others into the chimerical, the extravagant … in the social discourse you find in coexistence all the soft forms of social domination of classes, sexes, privileges, and statutory powers. (Angenot, 2004)

The novel depicts a cultural conflict, as Gogol's parents try to raise their children in Indian traditions, while the children are more inclined towards American culture. Although the visit to Kolkata brings joy to the parents, Gogol and Sonia feel no connection to India or their relatives. In contrast to their parents' preferences, the siblings show a greater affinity for Christmas than for Durga Puja and find Bengali cultural lessons uninteresting. While their parents refer to India as "desh" (country), Gogol perceives it differently, seeing it as Americans do, simply as India (Lahiri, 2010, p. 118). As is typical of American children, Gogol eventually moves away from home, not out of disdain for his parents, but because their conversations do not pique his interest.

Throughout the narrative, Gogol feels a deep discomfort with his first name, prompting him to embark on a journey of cultural mobility and rename himself Nikhil. This act signifies a conscious move away from his Bengali heritage as he seeks an identity that better aligns with his goals. In his article analyzing ethnic discrimination in Myanmar, David Thang Moe states:

> Living in such a discriminatory situation, what should ethnic minorities do? I must suggest that there are at least two directions in which ethnic group individuals should proceed—defending their ethnic identity and decolonizing Burmanization. One is defensive, and the other is prophetic. (Moe, 2019, p. 80)

Gogol consistently distances himself from his cultural roots, which is evident in his romantic entanglements with white girls like Maxine and his admiration for her family, while at the same time he is ashamed of his own parents for not conforming to American cultural norms. Gogol's rebellious nature, reflected in his name change, also manifests itself in acts of defiance, including a brief affair with a white girl named Ruth.

Although he later enters into a more permanent relationship with Maxine, a privileged white girl, Gogol undergoes a transformative realization when he becomes "conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is betrayed of his own" (Lahiri, 2010, p. 141). This narrative underscores Gogol's ongoing cultural mobility, characterized by his attempts to cope with and reconcile conflicting aspects of his identity within the complex framework of cultural and personal intersections.

As Gogol gradually realizes the importance of his family and cultural roots, he embarks on a cultural journey by marrying Moushumi, a Bengali girl who adheres to Indian traditions and rituals. Moushumi, who is initially constrained by her parents' strict Bengali upbringing, however, embraces freedom in her twenties and leads a liberated lifestyle characterized by encounters with men in various situations. This eventually leads to a divorce between Moushumi and Gogol, where they admit to each other that they do not see marriage as a commitment, contrary to the expectations of Ashoke and Ashima's generation. Meanwhile, Sonia prepares to marry an American man named Ben. The widowed Ashima, opting for a rootless existence, sells her American home and divides her time between the United States, where her children live, and Kolkata, where other family members reside. This nomadic lifestyle reflects her claim to both countries, but the question of which home she is truly responsible for remains unanswered. At the end of the novel, Gogol takes his name and confronts his family history. He reads a collection of Nikolai Gogol's stories, a birthday present from his father, and begins to see his family's history as a series of accidents, from his father's train crash to his unhappy marriage. In this vein, Joel Pfister (2000) notes that "the affirmative capacity of culture is to generate incentives, energies, and ideas that promote progressive social change" (p. 610). Active participation unlocks the inherent positive potential in cultural customs, beliefs and expressions. This active engagement not only unleashes the transformative power of these cultural elements, but also encourages the creation of incentives, energy and innovative ideas. Such dynamic participation creates a driving force that drives positive and progressive social change.

The novel ends with Gogol experiencing a new sense of liberation, which paves the way for him to realize his individual goals. However, he is unable to fully adapt to American culture or seamlessly connect to his Native American roots. Consequently, *The Namesake* is a poignant portrayal of a post-colonial diasporic narrative that offers an insight into the ongoing dilemmas faced by South Asian diasporas in the First World. The clash of different cultural forces within diasporic communities results in individuals being trapped like psychological refugees in the liminal space between two homelands to which they are not fully attached. This narrative is a poignant testament to the constant struggle and cultural fluidity that diasporic individuals experience as they struggle to find their identity in a complex and diverse global landscape. *The Namesake* therefore not only tells a personal story, but also becomes a mirror reflecting the broader societal challenges and nuances associated with the diasporic experience.

In Lahiri's *The Namesake*, the concept of unhomeliness manifests itself as the diaspora copes with the challenges of living in one place and emotionally belonging in another, illustrating the sense of exile, breakdown of communication, lack of belonging, societal complexities, and complicated social status of Indian immigrants

and American-born Confused Desis (ABCDs) in the United States. The novel explores themes of the immigrant experience, identity, displacement, intergenerational relationships and conflict, and raises the crucial question: Which homeland does the diaspora really belong to, culturally and geographically? The narrative underscores the characters' sense of non-belonging as the Ganguli children struggle with the realization that they belong neither to America nor to India.

Gogol, unable to erase his past, acknowledges his name and his parents' home, recognizing the importance of both his Indian heritage and his current residence in America. However, his responsibility for the past and the present becomes a source of confusion and leaves him in a state of uncertainty. Similarly, after Ashoke's death, Ashima dreams of the American dream for her children, though she clings to Indian morals and culture at home. She sells her house in the US but chooses to divide her time equally between India and the US. This decision reflects her status as an Indian diaspora who feels no responsibility for either her Indian or American home and lives without a home of her own—an inhabitant of nowhere. In this context, Bhat (2021) views diaspora as a contested cultural and political terrain where individual and collective memories collide, recompose and reconfigure. Furthermore, Bhat also emphasizes the sense of unbelonging that migrants and diasporic communities experience, highlighting the nebulous state of not being able to locate oneself, as well as the heightened sense of disjunction and discontinuity (Bhat, 2021).

The inhabitants of the now, the diasporas, are essentially in a constant state of transit, neither fully integrated nor fully detached. They inhabit a tragic space of Now and consciousness. The more conscious they become, the deeper the feelings of tension, stress and tragedy become, mirroring Lahiri's representative characters, Gogol and Ashima in *The Namesake*. The tension between assimilation in the free American world and the need for ethnic identity pushes the diasporas further into the space of nowhereness, which means constant encounter, confrontation and tension in their search for a sense of belonging.

Silk Threads of Belonging in *Once in a Promised Land*

In her novel *Once in a Promised Land*, Halaby skillfully weaves a narrative that explores the complicated lives of characters like Jassim and Salwa. The totality of their experiences reveals the pervasive influence of neoliberal policies and market forces that compel the characters to make choices shaped by market preferences and economic incentives. The choices they make in response to these forces affect the various dimensions of their existence. Jassim and Salwa's diasporic situation becomes a lens through which we observe the complex interplay between individual agency and the broader socio-economic landscape. As they cope with the multiple challenges of their new lives in America, a land of opportunity, the stark contrast with their country of origin, Jordan, becomes emblematic of the broader diasporic experience, in which individuals must negotiate the ever-changing dynamics of cultural identity, economic pressures, and the promises and pitfalls of their adopted country. In this regard, "non-belonging plays out on many levels, and it seems that

the question of where one belongs and where 'home' lies is a never-ending process" (Valassopoulos, 2014).

Consequently, Halaby structures her narrative around the theme of "the dichotomy between tradition and modernity," depicting a dynamic clash between a Jordan rooted in tradition and an America that embodies modernity (Grewal, 2005, p. 75). To convey the story of these diasporic individuals, the author draws on mythology and folklore to create innovative spaces of discourse in which to discuss the effects of unjust racial profiling and cultural stereotyping, while simultaneously challenging the dominant binary narrative of "us versus them." As the line "What Jassim didn't know, and what Salwa hadn't fully realized, yet was that in breathing her first breath on American soil, she had been cursed" (Halaby, 2007, p. 49), the novel's use of language and structure, with its "before and after" sections, references the rhetoric of American fairy tales and Arabic folklore, reflecting the dynamic interplay of cultures and identities.

Halaby has chosen to structure her story with a "before" and an "after" section. The introductory paragraphs of these sections are reminiscent of the traditional beginnings of Arabic fairy tales, which begin with the sentence "Kan ya ma kan fi Kadeem az-zaman" [They say there was or there was not in older times] (Halaby, 2007, p. vii). In this first section, the story unfolds of a man who is passionate about the science of water and a woman with a penchant for Arabic numerals who wears silk pajamas. These characters live in the American provincial town of Tucson, Arizona, and illustrate the interplay of cultures and identities in this environment (Halaby, 2007, p. vii).

The story of Salwa and Jassim serves as a cautionary tale that highlights the dangers of stigmatizing people from a different cultural background. In line with Fadda-Conrey's perspective, Salwa and Jassim's Arab-American identities, characterized by racial and gender dimensions, are inevitably labeled as permanent outsiders in a diasporic country—standing on the edge of cultural intersections and societal mergers (Fadda-Conrey, 2011, pp. 542–543). As Arabs and Muslims, they struggle with what Edward Said described as "the web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism [and] dehumanizing ideology" (Said, 1994, p. 27). Their identities as "others" remain subject to constant scrutiny and reinterpretation in contrast to the dominant "us" (Said, 1994, p. 332). While the young wife is aware of Arab stereotypes early on in the story, as her reference to Jassim's particular characteristics and accent that could lead to deportation shows, the husband somewhat naively resists racial and religious intolerance until the end of the story (Halaby, 2007, p. 58). Individuals living in the diaspora can essentially be described as inhabitants of nowhere, embodying a perpetual state of transit in which complete integration and total disengagement are not possible. Their existence is characterized by a duality that occupies a tragic space in which the now merges with a heightened consciousness. This state of liminality embodies a deep sense of neither here nor there, a perpetual journey where the boundaries of cultural integration blur and diasporic identity becomes a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. As they cope with this complicated space, the fluid nature of cultural identity becomes strikingly clear, especially in the case of individuals like Jassim. In an interview with Zócalo, Randa Jarrar explains of her novel *A Map of Home*, "I had to create my own Arab-American character. There weren't any I could relate to,

not only in fiction, but obviously in popular culture" (Randa Jarrar on A Map of Home, 2009). It seems clear, then, that Halaby is following a similar train of thought.

After an unintentional fatal car accident, Jassim becomes the focus of an FBI investigation, a dramatic turn of events that puts him in the glare of suspicion. Although he adheres to social norms and conforms politically, his identity as a man, Arab and Muslim in post-September 11, 2001 America casts a long shadow of doubt over him. This unfortunate situation is a reminder that cultural identity is fluid in a society full of prejudice and preconceptions. As Valassopoulos points out, "Jassim's thoughts are that it is no longer enough to speak the language, pay your taxes, and play the game, but that now is also the time to reevaluate what it might mean to be an Arab in the US, and in turn, to be Arab and perhaps even American" (Valassopoulos, 2014). Jassim's experience is an example of the difficult reality faced by people in the diaspora, where their identity is shaped not only by their personal choices but also by the external lens through which society views them, perpetuating a cycle of constant otherness and struggle for authentic self-expression.

> I am a scientist … I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab. Yes, I have access to the city's water supply, but I have no desire to abuse it. The mere fact that I'm an Arab should not add suspicion to the matter … I have spent my entire life trying to find ways to make water safe and accessible for everyone. Just because I am an Arab, because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe that I am capable of doing evil. (Halaby, 2007, p. 232)

Jassim's words make it clear that he is cautious when it comes to fully embracing the anti-Arab and Islamophobic atmosphere that prevailed after the September 11, 2001 attacks. This caution reflects his reluctance to bow to the prejudices and biases that have become increasingly prevalent in American society since that pivotal moment in history. Jassim is understandably apprehensive about openly engaging in a climate that seems to unfairly target Arab and Muslim communities, causing him to question the evolution of his own identity and the place he and his culture occupy in this altered post-9/11 landscape.

> People, companies, the city, shouldn't be able to pull accounts on the basis of his being an Arab. Yes, finally he saw what had been sitting at the back of his consciousness for some time in a not-so-whispered voice: with or against. But was he not with? I understand American society, he wanted to scream. I speak your language. I pay taxes to your government. I play your game. I have a right to be here. How could this be happening? (Halaby, 2007, p. 234)

Salwa initially seems to embody the archetype of a migrant woman who moves "from confinement within a patriarchal culture to freedom within American liberal civic society" (Grewal, 2005, p. 63). However, this shift between cultures ultimately ends in complete confusion. Furthermore, Salwa, who is "of Palestinian origin but resides in Jordan", struggles with the inability to reconcile her cultural differences. This struggle

underscores the fact that place of birth settles under the skin and remains connected by imperceptible threads: “Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything” (Halaby, 2007, p. viii). Therefore, when a person leaves their place of birth to move to a new place, there is always an unsettling pull as these silk-like threads are taut. This illustrates the impact of cultural mobility on an individual’s sense of self and belonging, as well as enduring ties to cultural heritage.

The novel concludes on a pessimistic note, as the transnational connections that initially symbolized a shift from tradition to modernity ultimately lead to a tragic return to familiar conventions. In the final section, Halaby uses the concept of the “ghula”, a female figure who has a monstrous or magical reputation in the Arab world. This figure is known for enticing immigrants and their descendants to realize the American dream while abandoning their values, culture, language and religion. Halaby uses this character to tell a story about how Salwa’s rebellion against the gender boundaries imposed by the patriarchal system had detrimental consequences on her life (Fadda-Conrey, 2011, p. 543). Salwa faces violent consequences for disobeying the norms imposed on women in her original community.

In America, the protagonist becomes a symbol of the persistence of patterns of oppression in her homeland, as she belongs to a “diasporic subclass” that is both “super-dominated” and “super-exploited” by colonialism (Spivak, 1996, p. 249). Salwa’s culturally hybrid journey takes her to the hospital where she recovers from the wounds inflicted by her American lover. As the narrator conveys in the final lines of the book, the notion of “happily ever after” is a concept exclusive to American fairy tales (Halaby, 2007, p. 335). For Salwa, America is transformed into a shattered dream that represents disillusionment, for the America that lured her was not the America of her birth, but the exported America of Disneyland, hamburgers, Hollywood and the Marlboro Man (Halaby, 2007, p. 49).

Both Salwa and Jassim are unable to make the final leap into American life that promises a happy ending, “yet Halaby points out that post-9/11 Arab Americans have fallen a step behind other social outsiders and are branded not only as second-class citizens but also as a social threat” (Banita, 2010, p. 246). As the last lines of the story show, it is a paradox: “Wasn’t this an American fairy tale? It was and it wasn’t” (Halaby, 2007, p. 335). The narrative of Jassim and Salwa contradicts the contours of a fairy tale; the America in which they move does not reflect the idyllic images of a promised land. The struggle intensifies as the diaspora grapples with the tension between assimilating into the free spheres of American society and the inherent need to preserve their ethnic identity. This dichotomy pushes them further and further into the realm of nothingness, creating a constant interplay of encounters, confrontations and tensions in their relentless search for a deep sense of belonging.

Statelessness and Fragility of Identity in *Exit West*

Mohsin Hamid’s fourth novel, *Exit West*, is a significant early literary response to the growing number of displaced people in the 21st century and the resulting political and

humanitarian crises. It is an important early literary response to the growing number of displaced people in the 21st century and the resulting political and humanitarian crises. Although literary fiction cannot match the immediacy of journalism in addressing geopolitical events, the novel, published in February 2017, was released shortly after a significant rise in global displacement since the Second World War, reflecting the novel's themes. Hamid, who is already an internationally recognized author, played a central role in ensuring that the novel was widely noticed by critics and the public, especially as there were few literary works that dealt with the "European migrant crisis" in such a timely manner.

The author Hamid wanted to distance himself from his characters and instead encourage readers to identify with them. This is a recurring theme in his work, which emphasizes the reader's role in creating meaning. The namelessness of Saeed and Nadia's city serves a dual purpose: it invites readers to fill in the blanks with their own city names, while suggesting that many cities in the Global South, including Hamid's own birthplace, may eventually resemble it. In his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid reveals, "I dreamed not of Erica, but of home" (Hamid, 2007, p. 105). The *Exit West* begins in a city that is not officially at war, as we read in the first lines: "In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her. For many days" (Hamid, 2017, p. 1). Furthermore, the novel deals with the idea that every human being, regardless of their physical movements, is a migrant through time. This concept of temporal migration suggests that our experiences and sense of belonging are constantly evolving and changing, even if we remain in the same physical space. In this respect, the novel presents a complex and multi-faceted exploration of the concept of home and how it is affected by movement, displacement and the redefinition of community and belonging.

The opening sentence of the novel paints a negative picture of refugees. The term "refugees" is used without descriptive words or individualization, marginalizing them in the prose. In fact, "refugees" are mentioned early on in the novel, but in a subordinate clause in which they are not the subject. As Nadia and Saeed's relationship deepens, they become increasingly aware of the growing influx of refugees into their city. In the second chapter, we are introduced to the first of several depictions of refugee camps in the novel.

> Refugees had occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents in the green belts between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the boundary walls of houses, sleeping rough on pavements and in the margins of streets. Some seemed to be trying to recreate the rhythms of a normal life, as though it were completely natural to be residing, a family of four, under a sheet of plastic propped up with branches and a few chipped bricks. Others stared out at the city with what looked like anger, or surprise, or supplication, or envy. Others didn't move at all: stunned, maybe, or resting. Possibly dying. Saeed and Nadia had to be careful when making turns not to run over an outstretched arm or leg. (Hamid, 2007, p. 23)

The text emphasizes the marginal status of the refugees by highlighting their presence between roads and near borders as well as their makeshift sleeping places on the side of roads. The phrase "as if it were natural" emphasizes the unnaturalness of their situation. These refugees not only occupy marginal spaces, but also live in extremely precarious conditions. Although Saeed and Nadia do not seem to be bothered by the refugees' presence per se, they are also unable to relate to them, and their reticence is presented as an obligation. This paradox is central to Hamid's novel: while addressing the lack of empathy for refugees in today's world, *Exit West* attempts to evoke the reader's empathy for two characters who themselves initially struggle to empathize with the refugees. This paradox forms the basis for the novel's exploration of changing perspectives on the refugee experience.

While the exact identity of Saeed and Nadia's home country is not disclosed, their citizenship is of paramount importance. Edward Said referred to refugees as "a creation of the twentieth-century state" (Said, 2013, p. 163). Furthermore, Giorgio Agamben argues that "in the nation-state system, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterize them as rights of the citizens of a state" (Agamben, 1995, p. 116), claiming that the concept of the refugee "radically calls into question the principles of the nation-state" (Agamben, 1995, p. 117). In *Exit West*, Hamid argues that the mass migration of refugees is not only a crisis for certain nations in individual cases, but for the nature of nationhood itself. In Saeed and Nadia's city, the refugees' lack of rights, security and individuality is inextricably linked to their statelessness:

> Home as a fixed entity is deconstructed and the migrant imagines new forms of belonging both to the country of origin and to the country of residence. The duality and ambivalence of national and diasporic imagination are explained through the interstitial spaces of cultural memory and remembrance of past life both in the homeland and in the hostland. (Shirazi, 2018)

Finally, Saeed and Nadia themselves lose their so-called "inalienable rights" when they leave their homeland and become "aliens." This transformation underlines the fragility and uncertainty associated with their new status and reflects the broader themes of citizenship and identity explored in the novel.

The depiction of the refugee camp on a Mediterranean island where Saeed and Nadia find themselves in Hamid's novel is vivid, with hundreds of tents, makeshift fires in oil drums and a multitude of non-white faces. One striking aspect of *Exit West*, however, is its deliberate avoidance of depicting the extremely dangerous and tragically deadly journeys undertaken by millions of displaced people in the second decade of the 21st century. The absence of such dangerous scenes is due to a unique element in the narrative: magical "doors" scattered around the world. It is not until the fourth chapter of the novel, when the conflict in their city comes to a head, that Nadia and Saeed first encounter the concept of these doors.

> Rumours had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country. Some people claimed to know people who knew people who had been through such doors. A normal door, they said, could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all. (Hamid, 2007, pp. 69–70)

In *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, the magical doors serve as a central and metaphorical element that has a deep meaning throughout the narrative. These doors act as conduits that allow for instantaneous movement between different locations, overcoming physical barriers and boundaries. By allowing characters to move seamlessly between locations, the doors symbolize the fluidity and interconnectedness of global migration patterns. These doors serve as a literary device to explore the psychological and cultural effects of migration on the individual and to illustrate the complexity of home, belonging and identity in a diasporic context. The magical doors not only enable physical movement, but also contribute to the characters' sense of being in nowhereness. In this process, they can be seen as "dematerialized" from their citizenship and "recomposed" as stateless individuals, giving up their supposedly "sacred and inalienable rights" (Agamben, 1995, p. 115).

It is worth noting that *Exit West* invites us to think about a world in which people have access to unregulated networks that enable fast travel over long distances. The novel encourages us to think about how these networks are already being used to transfer capital, images, information and misinformation, and how they can either promote liberation or exacerbate inequalities. Crucially, the novel aims to inspire empathy in its readers for the protagonists from the refugee movement. At the same time, it reminds readers who have no direct contact with displaced people that their perceptions of refugees are filtered through these existing networks. In fact, these networks may not be conducive to recognizing the humanity of others. An example of this is Nadia's experience of viewing an online photo that she believes to be of herself. At this point in the novel, we probably identify strongly with her, but as she looks at this picture, she feels alienated from herself.

Furthermore, *Exit West* argues that people are not only temporal migrants, but also relational migrants. Nadia and Saeed are portrayed as people who move together but also move apart (Chambers, 2019, p. 238). Chambers (2019) raises legitimate questions about Hamid's stance towards the notion that everyone is a migrant, as this can oversimplify the complexity of the refugee experience, especially when voiced by an affluent cosmopolitan author. Nonetheless, Hamid's inclination towards the idea of universal migrancy is evident. He claims that "all of us, whether we travel far afield or not, are all migrants through time" (Hamid, 2014, p. xvii). Hamid even goes so far as to claim that we are all refugees, as in the final chapter of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, where it states, "we are all refugees from our childhoods" (Hamid, 2013, p. 219). While some might argue that this assertion comes from the novel's narrator rather than the author himself, Hamid has expressed a very similar sentiment in interviews, emphasizing that "if we can acknowledge the universality of the migration experience and the universality of the refugee experience—that those of us who have never moved

are also migrants and refugees—then the space for empathy opens up" (Chandler, 2017). In essence, Hamid's narrative suggests that individuals who are in a constant state of transit, like the inhabitants of nowhere and diaspora, neither fully integrate nor fully disengage. They inhabit a tragic space of nowhere-ness and consciousness.

Conclusion

The emphasis on the humanity of all refugees is an important perspective that we must maintain. It underscores our shared responsibility to protect and assist those who have been forcibly uprooted due to circumstances beyond their control, such as war, persecution or natural disasters. However, it is crucial to distinguish between refugees and the population in general. Not everyone can be classified as a refugee. Although we all feel a sense of "loss" in relation to the past, this feeling is fundamentally different from the traumatic experience of being displaced by the horrors of conflict, persecution or environmental disaster.

Significantly, the novels offer a more nuanced and thought-provoking perspective by suggesting that we are all, in a sense, "migrants through time." This concept highlights the fragility of our circumstances and reminds us that any of us, regardless of our background or current situation, could find ourselves in the position of a refugee. It causes us to empathize with the displaced and appreciate the shared vulnerability that runs through the human experience.

By challenging the conventional methods of suppressing voices and concealing images typically employed by ideological state apparatuses to convey ideological messages, writers like Halaby, Lahiri, and Hamid have the potential to transform the harrowing experiences of immigrants into a powerful tool for the pursuit of citizenship. In this context, literature proves to be a means of debunking any romanticization of radicalism and serves as a vehicle for disseminating an unequivocal critique of brutality and ruthlessness and promoting mutual understanding between nations. Through their literary contributions, writers play a crucial role in rejecting Western dominance and imperialism and advocating respect for the cultures of the subaltern—those who are constantly marginalized by the Western world, both past and present.

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