

*"We are all migrants through time": Understanding  
Contemporary Refugee Question through Mohsin Hamid's  
Exit West*

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Abstract

Since the Second World War, there has been a tremendous rise in the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, it has reached its highest in the second decade of the 21st century. In *Exit West* (2017), Mohsin Hamid attempts to understand this global refugee and migrant situation. In this coming-of-age novel, Hamid presents snapshots of the lives of anonymous people in different locations around the globe "swollen by refugees". These fragments are juxtaposed with the complex narrative trajectory of the novel's only named characters, protagonists Nadia and Saeed, as they start their lives, fall in love, begin to cohabit, flee the city of their birth, and experience the migrant or refugee's precarious existence. This paper investigates *Exit West* as Hamid's response to the contemporary migration and refugee question. In doing so, this paper highlights Hamid's perception that "we are all migrants" and focus on the binary areas occupied by angry, scared white "nativists" on the one hand and the other burgeoning number of migrants. This paper will also examine how *Exit West* offers a necessary foil to decentre canonical notions of "purity" in the world.

**Key Words:** *Exit West*; Refugees; Borders; Mohsin Hamid; Purity

Introduction

Fiction instigates change. Fiction can say what might otherwise appear unsayable. In *Acts of Literature* (ed. Derek Attridge, London: Routledge, 1992), Jacques Derrida described Literature as a "strange