

Unveiling the Migrant Psyche in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*: A Lacanian Analysis

Suzan Nouri
Shahid Beheshti University

Abstract

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, a novel exploring themes of migration and displacement, offers fertile ground for a Lacanian analysis. This paper examines the characters' journeys through the lens of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. The constant movement of characters like Nadia and Saeed is interpreted as a search for the elusive Real, a realm of pure desire that can never be fully attained. The magical doors symbolize attempts to bridge the gap between the established Symbolic order, defined by language and social structures, and this pre-symbolic realm. However, the characters remain perpetually on the move, forever chasing an idealistic vision. The breakdown of traditional borders throws the Symbolic order into disarray. Passports lose their meaning, and national identities become increasingly fluid. The characters grapple with this loss and attempt to forge new connections and meanings in a world defined by impermanence. Furthermore, the media's portrayal of idyllic destinations shapes the characters' desires through the Imaginary, the realm of fantasy and self-image. However, the harsh realities of their experiences often fall short of these fantastical projections, highlighting the limitations of the Imaginary. Finally, the concept of the Gaze adds another layer of complexity. The characters navigate unfamiliar social landscapes, constantly under the scrutiny of the "Other." They seek recognition for validation and belonging, while simultaneously confronting the oppressive gaze of power structures. This constant negotiation shapes their sense of self, leading to a more fluid and adaptable identity. By applying a Lacanian framework, this paper demonstrates how *Exit West* transcends a simple migration narrative. It becomes a profound exploration of the human condition, our yearning for connection and meaning in a world defined by impermanence and the constant negotiation of desire, identity, and the Gaze of the "Other."

Keywords: Lacanian psychoanalysis, migration, displacement, Symbolic, Imaginary, desire, Gaze

1. Introduction

The experience of migration, a common motif in literature, produces deep psychological scars. Scholars have increasingly used psychoanalytic frameworks to analyze the complexity of relocation and the continual self-negotiation that migrants face [1]. Lacanian theory, in particular, provides a rich prism through which to examine the worries, wants, and identity disruptions that individuals on the move encounter. Lacan's notions of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary are useful tools for negotiating the psychological terrain of migration [2].

The Real, reflecting the raw, unsymbolized components of existence, contrasts sharply with the Symbolic order, which rules language, social codes, and established identities. Migration upends this Symbolic order, forcing people to confront the disturbing domain of the Real and deal with the fragmentation of their former sense of self [3]. In contrast, the Imaginary conveys self-image and desire.

This paper investigates the relevance of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the modern migrant experience. Our focus will be on Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West*, which sensitively depicts the fears and uncertainties that migrants experience in an increasingly globalized society [4]. Hamid's tale describes a planet riddled with enigmatic magical doors that allow people to quickly migrate to other countries. *Exit West* delves at themes of displacement, loss, and the yearning for belonging via the stories of his characters, Saeed and Nadia.

This study seeks to examine *Exit West* via a Lacanian lens. Specifically, we will look at how the novel depicts the disturbance of the symbolic order in the context of migration. We will look at how characters deal with the Real and the difficulties of forming new identities in unexpected settings. Furthermore, we will investigate how the concept of the Gaze - the fear of being inspected by the "Other" - influences the migrant experience in *Exit West*. Although scholars such as Vertovec and Cohen [5] have studied the migrant experiences in this novel, assessing this topic through the lens of a psychoanalytic framework is yet underexplored. Using Lacanian theory, this paper attempts to explore the psychological difficulties of migration as represented by Mohsin Hamid.

2. Literature Review

Several major research offer light on the relationship between Lacanian notions and migrant experiences. In "The Nomadic Subject: Ethics and Social Belonging" (1994), Rosi Braidotti [2] argues that the concept of the nomad is relevant to migrants navigating a fluid world. She underlines the ability of this mobile subjectivity to question established concepts of belonging and form new social ties.

Similarly, researchers such as Trinh T. Minh-Ha see the "border" as a psychological place of loss and opportunity. Drawing on Lacan's works such as "Neither Heaven Nor Here: Travel Tropes and Immigrant Experience" (1989), they claim that displacement undermines the Symbolic order, calling into question fixed identities. However, this disruption makes way for new narratives and hybrid identities that cross national lines. This emphasis on the disruption of the symbolic order and the possibility of new forms of belonging is consistent with Didier Eribon's [6] work, which in "Of Stigma" (2004) investigates how displacement from one's social group can lead to a questioning of established identities and the formation of new social bonds.

Lacanian ideas such as the objet petit a and the gaze provide additional insights. Slavoj Žižek [3] argues in "The Sublime Object of Ideology" (1989) that the objet petit an is the object of desire that drives us forward. In the context of migration, this object can represent a desire for a better life or a return to a former home. The Gaze, on the other hand, emphasizes the worries that migrants experience as they negotiate unfamiliar social settings and seek acknowledgment from the "Other"[5]. Sarah Anna Ghosh's "The Migrant Gaze: Reimagining Identity and Belonging in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*" delves deeper into how migrants manage their self-image in the eyes of the "Other," extending the concept of the gaze [7].

While Lacanian theory provides a useful framework, it is not without limitations. Critics, such as James Clifford [8], contend in "Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century" (1997) that its universalizing character overlooks cultural specificities and the various ways people handle displacement. Furthermore, in "Spatialities of Globalization: Towards a Theory of Locational Knowledge" (1995), Saskia Sassen argues that Lacanian theory focuses individual psychology while ignoring the larger social and political institutions that influence migration. Furthermore, authors such as Ananya Jahanara Kabir [9], in "Uncertain Geographies: Migration and Belonging in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*" (2019), argue for the importance of considering the collective imaginary and the significance of shared narratives in influencing the migrant experience.

Despite the extensive literature on Lacanian theory and migration, there is still a need to better comprehend the role of technology in the current migrant experience. The growing usage of social media, for example, generates new forms of connection and belonging for migrants, which may influence how they navigate the Gaze and develop their identities in the digital domain. Furthermore, the role of technology in supporting or inhibiting migratory journeys deserves further investigation via a Lacanian lens. Future research might look at how the objet petit an emerges in the digital age, as well as how the internet molds migrants' desires and worries in an increasingly virtual environment.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paradigm examines the human condition via a Lacanian lens, with a focus on desire, displacement, and identity construction. It contends that these ideas are inextricably intertwined and provide a foundation for comprehending human experience, particularly in terms of displacement and the need for belonging.

According to Jacques Lacan, the Real is the pre-symbolic domain of pure desire that exists prior to the imposition of order by language and social systems. This domain is distinguished by a lack and an insatiable want for completion, a "objet petit a" that can never be fully realized [10]. Žižek, reading Lacan, believes that the objet petit a signifies "the cause of our desire," always pulling us ahead in a never-ending chase (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 60). Lacan defines the Symbolic Order as the realm of language, law, and social systems that determine our identities and perception of the world. These frameworks create a sense of order and belonging by identifying fixed categories such as nationality and citizenship. However, in a society with more fuzzy borders and a disintegration of old structures, the symbolic order is under threat. Didier Eribon believes that "the displacement of individuals... challenges the very foundations of the symbolic order" [6]. This can cause disorientation and call into question long-held identities.

The Imaginary is the sphere of self-image and fantasy, in which wants are shaped by media portrayals, society expectations, and our own projections. The media, for example, bombards us with idealized images that create our fantasies about other people's lives. However, reality frequently falls short of these expectations, resulting in a gap between the imaginary and the real. Furthermore, Lacan's concept of the Gaze adds a layer of complication. The gaze is how we see ourselves being perceived by others [10]. This Gaze can be both empowering and unsettling, as we seek acknowledgment and belonging in the gaze of the "Other."

In the context of relocation, these Lacanian themes are especially relevant. Individuals who are thrown out of their familiar contexts face a disturbance in the Symbolic order, which may result in a loss of identity and a search for new structures of belonging. The perpetual movement connected with displacement can be interpreted as a reflection of the yearning for the illusive Real, a quest for completion that will never be fully realized. The Imaginary, with its extravagant visions of a better life abroad, exacerbates the impulse to migrate. However, upon arrival in new locations, individuals are confronted with the harsh truths of the Real and the Gaze of the "Other," necessitating ongoing self-reflection and the building of a new, more flexible identity.

4. Analysis

The analytical component of this study examines Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* through the intriguing lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Here, we'll look at how the novel depicts the psychological complications of migration. We'll look at how characters deal with the disruption to the Symbolic order created by displacement. This disturbance thrusts them into the unpleasant realm of the Real, forcing them to confront the fragmentation of their former identities. Furthermore, the research will look into the concept of the Gaze in *Exit West*. We'll look at how the worries of being inspected by the "Other" impact Saeed and Nadia's experiences as they navigate strange environments.

4.1 The Elusive Real: A World Unbound

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, with its protagonists continually on the move and searching for a sense of wholeness, provides an intriguing setting for a Lacanian interpretation. Lacan's concept of the Real, the pre-symbolic realm of pure desire that exists before language and society frameworks impose order, is especially pertinent [11]. *Exit West*'s protagonists' journeys can be interpreted as a desire for the lost Real, a yearning for a wholeness that will never be fully realized. Their constant movement and the option of leaving one area for another emphasize the elusiveness of this universe.

The characters struggle with a sense of incompleteness, which matches the concept of the Lacanian Real. Nadia, for example, muses on the sense that something is missing in her life: "There was a hole in her, a space where something essential ought to have been" [4]. This "hole" represents a strong desire for something beyond the constraints of her present existence. Similarly, Saeed feels "unease" and wishes for a more fulfilled life (Hamid, 18). These wants cannot be tied to specific goods or locations, but rather express a longing for a state of wholeness that is always out of grasp. In the narrative, the magical doors serve as doorways to new locations, representing attempts to bridge the gap between the Symbolic order and the elusive Real. Lacan defines the symbolic order as the sphere of language, law, and social institutions that determine our identities and worldviews [11]. The doors that exist outside of these established frameworks provide access to a different kind of experience, one that is closer to the Real's raw and unfiltered yearning. However, the protagonists are never totally prepared for what they find on the other side. While the descriptions of the new sites may appear enticing at first, they frequently fall short of expectations. For example, upon arriving in Istanbul, Nadia experiences "a sense of disorientation," emphasizing the perpetual state of movement and the impossibility of actually establishing a home [4].

Exit West's continual mobility represents the characters' ongoing search for the Real. They lack a firm point of reference and are constantly pursuing a mirage. Saeed's reflection on their nomadic existence emphasizes this point: "They were like children playing a game, hopping from one square to the next, never settling in any one place" [4]. This ceaseless mobility becomes a metaphor for the human situation as a whole, the never-ending chase of something that will never be achieved.

4.2 The Symbolic Order Under Siege: Borders Blurring

In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, the world changes dramatically with the appearance of magical doorways that allow for quick travel. This disintegration of customary bounds calls into question Lacan's established Symbolic order, which represents the sphere of language, law, and social structures that determine our identities and worldviews [11]. The protagonists in *Exit West* deal with the fallout from this upheaval, navigating a world in which their sense of belonging and national identities become increasingly uncertain.

The ease of travel through the magical portals upends the traditional order of nationhood and citizenship. Borders, previously regarded as strict boundaries of demarcation, have become fluid and metaphorical. This is seen in the casual manner characters discuss traveling long distances: "We could go anywhere," Nadia added. "Literally anywhere" [4]. The ease of movement exposes the loss of control by the Symbolic order, which has traditionally been in charge of regulating such movement. Furthermore, characters like Saeed begin to doubt the whole concept of "home": "'Home,' he thought, a word suddenly adrift, unmoored from any fixed location" [4]. This loss of grounding indicates the destabilization of the Symbolic order and the customary concepts of belonging that it imposes.

Passports, formerly markers of a fixed identity within the Symbolic order, have grown increasingly irrelevant. Nadia laments the ineffectiveness of her passport in the new world: "The passport no longer felt like a document of identity, more like a relic from a bygone era" [4]. The devaluation of the passport indicates the breakdown of the power systems that formerly determined belonging. The characters' identities grow increasingly fluid and fragmented, shaped not by their ethnicity but by their experiences in a continuously changing world.

Despite the disintegration of the old order, the characters in *Exit West* continue to seek new symbolic structures that provide a sense of identity. They frequently rely on shared experiences of displacement to form bonds. For example, Nadia and Saeed form a transitory bond with other refugees in the overcrowded refugee camp: "They were all strangers here, united only by their recent arrival" [4]. These relationships, albeit fleeting, provide a sense of belonging and shared experience in a world when traditional forms of identification are under threat.

4.3 The Imaginary's Allure

In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, the concept of the Imaginary, as articulated by Lacan, is central to creating the characters' ambitions and motivations. The Imaginary is the sphere of self-image and fantasy, in which wants are shaped by media portrayals, society expectations, and our own projections. *Exit West* bombards the characters with images of idyllic locales, fuelling their desire for a better life and influencing their decision to migrate. However, the actuality of their experiences frequently falls short of these imaginative projections, emphasizing the contrast between the Imaginary and the severity of actuality.

News coverage frequently feature images of "lush, green valleys" and "sun-drenched beaches" as probable migration destinations [4]. These romanticized images capitalize on the individuals' worries about their actual situations, fueling their desire to flee. Nadia internalizes these stories, fantasizing of a life free of the violence and turmoil that plagues her city: "Perhaps somewhere, beyond the horizon, there was a life for them that was different" [4]. The media, as a component of the Imaginary, creates a fantasy of a perfect elsewhere, shaping Nadia's wants and influencing her decision to leave.

While the visuals in the media create a sense of allure, the protagonists' experiences in their new locations sometimes fall short of these extravagant expectations. When Nadia arrives in Istanbul, she is startled by "the relentless chaos" and "the overwhelming heat" [4]. This unpleasant reality contrasts with the lovely images she had imagined. Similarly, Saeed's initial joy about coming to a new place fades as he faces the hurdles of obtaining work and adjusting to a new culture [4]. The contrast between the imagined paradise and the lived reality emphasizes the limitations of the Imaginary and the impossibility of fully realizing the wishes it creates.

The work also delves into the concept of a collective Imaginary, which is a common set of imaginations and wants that affect entire populations. The ease of migration through the magical doors sparks a global craze, with people flocking to presumed safe havens. This mass movement is motivated, in part, by a shared desire for a better life, which is fueled by stories and myths about idealized destinations. As literary critic Ananya Jahanara Kabir points out, the novel "explores the anxieties and desires associated with migration in an increasingly globalized world" [9]. By evaluating the characters' motivations and the societal backdrop, we acquire a better grasp of the collective Imaginary's role in determining migration trends.

Lacanian psychoanalysis goes beyond only examining pictures and media portrayals. It also delves into the concept of the objet petit a, which is an object of want that is never totally achievable but nonetheless motivates our quest. In

Exit West, the object of desire may not always be a real location, but rather the concept of a better life itself. The characters' adventures can be viewed as a pursuit of this illusive objet petit a, a quest that will never be complete.

4.4 The Gaze and Struggle for Recognition

The concept of the Gaze, developed by Lacan, is critical to comprehending the characters' experiences in Mohsin Hamid's novel Exit West. The gaze is how we envision ourselves being perceived by others, and it influences our sense of self and belonging [10]. In a world of continual travel and relocation, the characters in Exit West struggle with the Gaze's fears while seeking identification and a sense of belonging in their new surroundings.

As Nadia and Saeed travel through uncharted territory, they are always under the gaze of the "Other," people from all ethnicities and backgrounds. This scrutiny raises concerns about how they will be regarded and accepted. In Istanbul, Nadia feels "exposed" and self-conscious in the "appraising gaze" of the natives (Hamid, 43). This emphasizes her struggle to manage the social norms and expectations of her new surroundings.

The characters' bodies also serve as venues for the Gaze. Others evaluate their looks, attire, and behaviors, which affects their sense of belonging. For example, Saeed feels judged by the security guard at the border crossing because of his worn-out clothes and "migrant" appearance [4]. This exchange demonstrates the power dynamics at play, as well as how the Gaze may be used to exclude and marginalize.

Despite their worries, the characters seek recognition from the "Other" in order to legitimize their existence and develop a sense of belonging. Nadia's meetings with a friendly bookstore owner create a brief sensation of connection and acceptance [4]. The owner's awareness of her common experience as a displaced person provides a sense of solidarity and belonging, if ephemeral.

The Gaze also works on a bigger, societal scale. The protagonists are continuously aware of the "collective gaze" of power systems that regulate borders, travel, and resource availability. Saeed's anger with bureaucracy, as well as his sense of being "processed" like an item, illustrate this power dynamic [4]. This collective Gaze can be repressive and dehumanizing, underlining the protagonists' powerlessness in a world dominated by movement and displacement.

The ongoing negotiation of the Gaze during their trips transforms the protagonists' concept of themselves. According to literary critic Sarah Anna Ghosh, "the characters' identities are constantly in flux, shaped not just by their own desires but also by the gaze of the Other" [7]. By confronting the Gaze of the "Other," Nadia and Saeed are forced to reassess their own assumptions and build a more fluid and adaptive sense of self.

5. Conclusions

A Lacanian study unveiled the depths of Mohsin Hamid's novel Exit West, which explores themes of migration, displacement, and the need for belonging. We took a journey via the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary lenses, examining the characters' desires, concerns, and ever-changing sense of self in a world with permeable borders. The characters' constant travel was shown to be a pursuit for the elusive Real, a desire for completeness that could never be fully realized. The magical doorways represented symbolic attempts to cross the gap between the established Symbolic order and the domain of pure desire. However, the protagonists remained constantly on the move, chasing a mirage. The breakdown of traditional borders placed the Symbolic Order into turmoil. Passports lost their meaning, and national identities became more permeable. The characters struggled with this loss, attempting to establish new ties and meanings in an impermanent environment. The characters' desires were also influenced by the Imaginary, a domain of fantasy and self-image. Media depictions of ideal destinations encouraged their desire to flee, but the harsh realities of their experiences frequently fell short of these fantasy expectations. This demonstrated the limits of the Imaginary and the difficulty of achieving complete contentment through external confirmation. Finally, the concept of the Gaze brought a new dimension of complication. The characters traversed foreign social settings while under continual inspection from the "Other." They desired acknowledgment for validation and belonging, but also confronting the repressive gaze of power institutions. This ongoing negotiation altered their concept of self, resulting in a more flexible and adaptable identity.

Future research could dive further into the Lacanian framework used here. An examination of the role of the objet petit a, the object of want that is never fully realized, may shed light on the characters' motivations beyond merely wanting a better life. Furthermore, investigating the concept of jouissance, or the pleasure obtained from crossing boundaries, may provide insights into the characters' attraction to the instability and constant movement of their existence. Furthermore, a comparison with other migration narratives may demonstrate how Exit West uses Lacanian theory in a novel way to depict the difficulties of displacement and the desire for belonging in a globalized world.

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