UCP Journal of Languages & Literature
Vol. 3, Issue 2 (July - December 2025)
Journal website: http://ojs.ucp.edu.pk/index.php/ucpjll

Migration and Terrorism in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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Abstract

This article critically analyzes Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) from the perspective of terrorism as the primary catalyst for contemporary crises, including forced migration, identity fragmentation, and refugee displacement. In the post-9/11 literary landscape, terrorism and migration have emerged as interconnected phenomena demanding scholarly attention, particularly within postcolonial studies. Through close textual analysis of Hamid's novel, this study examines how terrorism engenders various forms of displacement, physical, psychological, economic, and environmental. The research draws upon the Deleuzian concept of rhizomatic identities expanded by Soren Frank in his book *Migration and Literature* (2008) to study the primary text. This article argues that Hamid's portrayal of protagonists Saeed and Nadia provides a site for analysis that deals with the multifaceted nature of forced migration in the age of global terrorism, revealing how terror fundamentally transforms human identity, belonging, and survival strategies in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Terrorism, Migration, Postcolonial Literature, Identity, Displacement.

Introduction

> "Prospective immigrants, please note
> Either you will go through this door
> Or you will not go through
> [...]
> there is always the risk
> [...]
> Things look at you doubly" (Rich, 1993).

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Available online: 05-01-2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24312/ucp-jll.03.02.686

We inhabit what Soren Frank (2008) terms an "age of terrorism," characterized by constant mobility, cultural variation, hybridization, assimilation, and migration. This era witnesses the dissolution of global boundaries beyond mere political rhetoric, where everything from individuals to architecture exists in perpetual motion (Hamid, 2017). The emergence of terrorism has catalyzed a form of neocosmopolitanism, giving rise to what Frank Trommler (2004) describes as a transculturalism that produces "different formulations of modernity" in which many participate globally.

This study analyzes the "postmodern world of uncertainty" (Chambers, 2008), examining the fluctuation of borders, constantly shifting identities, and migration as direct consequences of terrorism through Mohsin Hamid's (2017) novel *Exit West*. Hamid transforms the intimate experiences of his protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, into what *The New York Times* (2017) calls the "convulsive changes overtaking the world." While the novel incorporates elements of magical realism through its fantastical doors, it remains grounded in realist settings, allegorically exploring global dilemmas such as civil conflict, cultural estrangement, and the collapse of national borders. Narnia like doors in the novel are a metaphor for Said's insight that "borders and barriers which once enclosed become prisons," reminding readers that the modern refugee condition is not only political but also existential. The novel suggests that migration is a universal experience— "we are all migrants through time" (Hamid, 2017)—and in doing so reframes terrorism not as a localized threat but as a global force that unsettles love, kinship, and identity as much as it unsettles geography.

The broader significance of this research lies in its exploration of how twenty-first-century literature responds to the twin pressures of terrorism and forced migration. Unlike political or international relations discourse, which often operates within rigid binaries of East versus West, literary texts internalize these conflicts and refract them through the lives of ordinary characters navigating extraordinary upheavals. In *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia's migration under the circumstances of war and terrorism is not only spatial but relational, as they drift toward and away from each other in parallel with their physical displacements. The instability of their relationship mirrors the instability of modern identities in an age of deterritorialization, suggesting that nothing—from citizenship to intimacy—remains immune to the disruptions of terror. In this respect, Hamid's work exemplifies what Margaret Scanlan (2001) identifies as literature's unique capacity to situate terrorism "within an interlocking grid of time, causality, and history".

Placing *Exit West* within a wider genealogy of terrorism literature reveals how Hamid continues a tradition stretching from Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1871) and Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) to contemporary postcolonial fiction. According to Scanlan (2001) and Haruo Shirane (2002), terrorism literature has always been fraught because attempts to contextualize or analyze violence risk being read as justifications of it. Yet this very tension underscores literature's power: it humanizes the abstract violence of terrorism by locating it in the affective lives of individuals. Hamid follows this trajectory, yet with a distinctively global and transcultural lens, showing how the post-9/11 condition collapses the local and the global, the private and the political. His novel captures what Foucault (2003) describes as the way modern war—here refracted through terrorism—cuts across society as a permanent battlefront, placing everyone, willingly or unwillingly, on one side or another.

Thus, this study positions *Exit West* not simply as a migrant narrative but as part of a larger literary and theoretical discourse that interrogates terrorism as one of the defining forces of modernity. By dramatizing how migration, instability, and fear shape everyday lives, Hamid's novel not only allegorizes the global humanitarian crisis but also redefines literature's role in bearing witness to it. The relationship between terrorism and literature has evolved significantly since what Scanlan (2001) identifies as the emergence of terrorism literature in the nineteenth century. From Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1871) through contemporary works by Salman Rushdie, Don DeLillo, and J. M. Coetzee, literary representations of terrorism have consistently sought to contextualize rather than merely condemn. As Shirane (2002) argues, "It is not enough to condemn and fight terrorism: we must understand its causes". The post-9/11 literary landscape has witnessed an unprecedented focus on terrorism's impact on human mobility and identity.

Migration studies have traditionally examined movement through economic, political, and social lenses. However, Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller (2013) in their *The Age of Migration*, note that contemporary forced migration increasingly results from what they term "complex emergencies" involving multiple interconnected factors, with terrorism playing an increasingly central role. Rushdie (2002) argues that "the distinguishing feature of our time is mass migration, mass displacement, globalized finances and industries". This observation finds theoretical support in Frank's Deleuzian (2008) concept of "rhizomatic identity," which suggests that migrant identities function "as a network of multiple

knots and threads that interconnect and proliferate through air; not as a tree but as moss or grass".

Drawing upon the above-mentioned theoretical perspective this study examines the representation of displacement in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. The analysis also draws its insights from Hannah Arendt's essay "We Refugees" (1943), where she highlights how conditions of war and terrorism transform "prospective citizens" into "enemy aliens". In *Exit West*, this paradox is dramatized through the precarious lives of Saeed and Nadia, who, despite their ordinariness, are suddenly marked as strangers and potential threats once violence disrupts their homeland. Alongside Arendt, Edward Said's reflections on exile in *Reflections on Exile* (2001) prove central to understanding the novel's concern with borders and thresholds. Said observes that "borders and barriers which once enclose become prisons", and Hamid subverts this idea through the magical doors that collapse national boundaries while simultaneously exposing the fragility of human belonging in a world of walls and camps. Frank's *Migration and Literature* (2008) further situates the novel within a broader cultural logic of modernity, where migration is not an exception but a defining condition of contemporary existence. Seen together, these frameworks allow us to understand *Exit West* as more than a refugee narrative; it becomes a meditation on citizenship, mobility, and the haunting persistence of exclusion in the twenty-first century. Drawing upon postcolonial literary criticism this reading involves the analysis of the novel's narrative strategies and symbolic structures, with particular attention to its representation of terrorism and migration; the application of theoretical insights from migration and terrorism studies; contextual placement of the text within post-9/11 literary discourse; and comparative reflection with other postcolonial writings that grapple with displacement, exile, and belonging.

Terrorism as Catalyst for Forced Migration

Hamid's *Exit West* presents terrorism not merely as context but as the primary engine driving contemporary forced migration. The novel's unnamed city, deliberately kept ambiguous, universalizes the experience of terror-induced displacement, suggesting that such violence can erupt anywhere. As the narrator observes, the news was "full of war and migrants and nativists. And it was full of fracturing too, of regions pulling away from hinterlands... it seemed that as everyone was coming together, everyone was also moving apart" (Hamid, 2017). The metaphor of a city under siege reflects the reality of many modern nations, where terrorism

destabilizes urban and rural landscapes alike, uprooting populations who once experienced a sense of permanence.

The transformation of Saeed and Nadia's city from a space of belonging to one of terror illustrates what Foucault (2003) describes as a "battlefront [which] runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently". Terrorism alters the city at every level—from funerals and workplaces to streets and neighborhoods—making ordinary life impossible. The couple's migration through magical doors captures the sudden and disorienting rupture that characterizes forced displacement, allegorizing the contemporary refugee crisis. As Hamid suggests, nothing, not even love, remains immune to the havoc of terrorism. Saeed and Nadia migrate not only across borders but also within their relationship, reflecting how terror unsettles private as well as public life.

Exit West also addresses the broader causes and consequences of migration, showing how they are shaped not only by terrorism but also by governmental control, social expectations, and the migrant's own agency. Hamid constructs migration as a global identity, borrowing Deleuze's concept, Frank (2008) calls it a "rhizomatic identity," crossing nations and cultures while resisting fixed categorization. In the post-9/11 context, terrorism has emerged as a dominant factor shaping migration, yet Hamid focuses less on its origins than on the existential crises it provokes. Terrorism forces individuals into decisions that blur the line between survival and desire, where displacement is both a necessity and a possibility.

This interplay between fear and choice becomes evident after the death of Saeed's mother, killed by a "heavy-calibre round" fired by a militant. Nadia's move into Saeed's apartment after the funeral is not merely a gesture of care; it reveals her own vulnerability and the pervasive insecurity of their environment: "she came to their (Saeed's) apartment for the first time, on the day of the funeral, stayed with them that night . . . and did not spend another night in her own apartment again" (Hamid, 2017). Even before leaving their city, Nadia embodies intra-state migration, negotiating independence in a collapsing society. Her rejection of religious orthodoxy— "her constant questioning and growing irreverence in matters of faith" (Hamid, 2017)—makes her displacement also an escape from cultural restrictions, aligning with Zizek's (2016) argument that family structures and gender norms are core markers of Muslim communities.

Hamid thus positions migration as both a promise and a threat produced by globalization. Martin Heidegger's claim in *Letter on Humanism* that "homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world" (1977) resonates with this narrative of uprootedness. Salman Rushdie similarly remarks that "the distinguishing feature of our time is, mass migration, mass displacement, globalized finances and industries" (2002). *Exit West* dramatizes this global urgency, capturing multiple forms of migration—conflict-induced displacement, development-induced migration, and disaster-driven flight—while focusing particularly on terror-induced migration as the most pressing dimension of contemporary displacement.

By weaving intimate tragedies like the death of Saeed's mother into the vast machinery of global migration, Hamid shows the phenomenon of terrorism as a major catalyst that dislodges both individuals and entire communities. In doing so, he situates migration not as an isolated crisis but as an urgent, recurring condition of modern existence.

The Dissolution of Identity: From Citizens to Migrants

The novel demonstrates how terrorism fundamentally disrupts what Chalmers A. Johnson (1982) calls the "sine qua non of a society"—the mutual expectations that allow members to orient their behavior toward each other. When militants take control of Saeed and Nadia's city, these structures collapse, transforming citizens into what Arendt (1943) termed "enemy aliens" in their own homeland. What was once familiar becomes threatening, and the inhabitants begin to see one another not as neighbors but as potential risks.

Hamid portrays this transformation through subtle yet haunting details: "They were attending a funeral. Funerals were smaller and more rushed affairs in those days, because of the fighting" (Hamid, 2017). Such disruptions of fundamental social rituals underscore the broader erosion of belonging. Said (2001) reminds us that "borders and barriers which once enclosed become prisons, and in *Exit West*, even spaces of intimacy—like homes, neighborhoods, and family gatherings—become sites of surveillance, violence, and alienation. The novel thus dramatizes the psychological shift from being citizens with rights to displaced migrants defined only by vulnerability, echoing Arendt's insight into the precarious status of the stateless.

Hamid's rendition of Saeed and Nadia as migrants redefines the clash of civilizations, the invention of new worlds, hybrid identities, and

globalization. They are wandering individuals searching for identity and dignity, confronting endless anxiety, ravaging despair, deluded optimism, and jolting absurdity— "fight(ing) like madmen for private existences with individual destinies" (Arendt, 1943). Terrorism appears as a momentary disruption of life in a violent way, yet Hamid also explores human mobility as both an intrinsic desire of being human and a promise of broader global change. Hamid, through his characters, embodies the desire of migration, which both Franks take as the development of moss-like roots.

Nadia, in the novel, before migration becomes the way of survival for both questions, Saeed: "Have you ever travelled abroad? He shook his head. 'I want to.' 'Me too'."

This exchange unravels the innate human desire to crisscross global borders "because earth is moving. And you feel like you're lying on a giant spinning ball in space" (Hamid, 2017). Salman Rushdie, in his book *Shame,* explains this intrinsic human desire for migration:

> "I have a theory that the resentment we Mohajirs engender has something to do with our conquest of the force of gravity. We have performed the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is to say, we have flown" (2010).

The urge to satisfy one's wanderlust is always present. But in order to save lives from the clashes of the ruling terror, migration becomes a necessary phenomenon. In the same novel, Hamid, while forming the story of the migration of his protagonist, pens the story of an unnamed accountant in Kentish Town, with all the stable resources required to exist sufficiently and an identity in a place free of militants or car bombings, nevertheless leaves for Namibia through a magical door discovered in his closet. There are no factors like terrorism, hunger, climate change, or economic slump compelling his migration. He is glad to do so, performing that "act which all men anciently dream of" (Rushdie, 2010).

Saeed's father dreams of the same for his son, as the omniscient narrator gives words to his thoughts: ". . . that he had made a mistake with his (Saeed's) career, that he should have done something else with his life, because then he might be able to send Saeed abroad" (Hamid, 2017).

Economic Disruption and Migration

Hamid vividly depicts the economic destruction through the closure of businesses and the collapse of employment structures: "Saeed's boss had tears in his eyes as he told his employees that he had to shutter his business, apologizing for letting them down, and promising that there would be jobs for them all when things improved, and the agency was able to reopen" (Hamid, 2017). This moment reflects how terrorism cripples not only infrastructure but also the bonds of responsibility between employer and worker, dissolving one of the fundamental supports of daily life. Economic disruption appears as a major force inducing migration in the novel.

This economic dismemberment creates what Ted Robert Gurr (2003) identifies as the material dimension of terrorism's impact, forcing migration not merely for physical safety but for economic survival. As Hamid shows, the destruction of businesses, schools, and institutions leaves citizens with no viable path toward stability, compelling them to risk everything in flight. The World Bank (2017) reports that 3.2% of the global population has crossed international borders, with economic instability induced by conflict serving as a primary driver. The recent brain drain in Pakistan in 2024 and 2025 is closely associated with economic instability and disruption, as thousands of young, skilled workers left the country in search of more stable economies. In *Exit West*, economic precarity functions alongside violence as a catalyst for migration, highlighting how terror destabilizes entire social fabrics—making departure not a choice, but the only means of survival.

Terrorism, then, is not confined to the political sphere but directly targets economic structures in order to intensify its disruptive effects. Gurr (2003) criticizes the tendency to analyze terrorism solely as a political phenomenon, arguing that it is equally tied to material gain and economic destabilization. Hamid's narrative echoes this, showing how the shuttering of businesses, looting of shops, and takeover of the city's stock exchange fracture the economic backbone of society. Once economic structures collapse, alienation and uncertainty deepen, accelerating displacement.

In *Exit West*, such economic repression is shown at both micro and macro levels. On the one hand, individuals like Saeed and Nadia lose their workplaces—Saeed's advertising agency, Nadia's office, the battery shop under her apartment—while restaurants and family ventures are looted or abandoned. On the other hand, entire institutions such as the stock exchange fall under militant control, reflecting how terrorism strategically targets the symbols of economic stability. Bruno Frey (2007) observes that terrorism disrupts not only political and social orders but also the

developmental trajectory of economies, forcing states to divert resources toward counterterrorism rather than growth.

Hamid also suggests that economic disruption feeds into the psychology of uncertainty and conspiracy, where conversations revolve around the "status of the fighting, and how to get out of the country" (2017). In a destabilized economy, even those who are not directly attacked face reduced opportunities, unpaid wages, and the impossibility of securing legal means of departure. Migrants thus turn to precarious, unauthorized routes—symbolized by Hamid's "magic doors"—that capture the desperation of those for whom survival outweighs legality. According to Jeffrey G. Williamson and Tim Hatton (2009), unemployment correlates directly with migration flows, and terrorism-induced instability magnifies this trend. Terrorists disrupt economies not only to create fear but also to assert control, to fund their own operations, and to erode public trust in the state's ability to provide security or prosperity. In such conditions, migration emerges as both symptom and response to the economic repression terrorism creates. Ultimately, Hamid's novel demonstrates that controlling migration requires more than border security—it requires addressing terrorism's assault on the economic structures that sustain life itself.

Alienation and Disorientation in the Age of Terror

Iain Chambers (2008) describes the migrant condition as living "between the worlds, between a lost past and non-integrated present". Hamid's protagonists embody this liminal state, torn between memories of their homeland and the uncertainty of their new environments. Their passage through magical doors represents both death and rebirth, a simultaneous ending and beginning that captures the profound psychological transformation of forced migration. This is what Rushdie (2002) calls "disorientation, loss of the East", where the migrant faces not only physical relocation but also cultural estrangement.

In *Exit West*, disorientation is not framed as temporary but as a defining condition of modern existence. The novel suggests that migration is universal, emphasizing that displacement is as much temporal as it is spatial. Even those who never cross a national border experience dislocation through the rapid transformations of terrorism, globalization, and technological change. For Saeed and Nadia, each crossing amplifies their sense of alienation, gradually eroding their shared intimacy as they drift apart. Hamid thus portrays alienation not only as a geographical

consequence of forced migration but as a psychic reality of living in an "age of terrorism," where identities remain unstable, relationships fragile, and belonging perpetually deferred.

Environmental Terrorism and Forced Displacement

An understudied aspect of terrorism's impact involves what J.F. Jarboe (2002) defines as eco-terrorism—the destruction of environmental structures that sustain human life. Hamid depicts this through graphic descriptions of improper burials and environmental degradation: "Some families had no choice but to bury their dead in a courtyard or a sheltered margin of a road... so impromptu burial grounds grew up" (Hamid, 2017). Such images reflect how terrorism accelerates environmental collapse, turning once-stable ecosystems into precarious zones of survival. Improper burials not only symbolize societal breakdown but also physically damage urban environments, producing methane and other greenhouse gases that compromise air quality (Spade, 2013).

Hamid's narrative resonates with that of Camillo Boano, Roger Zetter, and Tim Morris' (2008) "environmental change-conflict-migration nexus," which shows how ecological destruction compels populations to seek refuge elsewhere. In *Exit West*, the sight of corpses, demolished architecture, and ruined green belts forces Saeed and Nadia into a cycle of displacement where the ecological and the political merge. This recalls Arendt's (1943) observation that forced migration occurs when the elemental conditions of life collapse, reducing individuals to "enemy aliens" in their homeland. Thus, Hamid highlights how terrorism and eco-terrorism converge, producing displacement not only by violence against people but by violence against the environment that sustains them.

The Politics of Reception: Nativism and Violence

Hamid deals with the reception of migrants in supposedly safe destinations. The violence Saeed and Nadia encounter in London— "their street was under attack by a nativist mob... a violent tribe, intent on their destruction" (Hamid, 2017)—reflects contemporary anxieties about migration in Western societies. Their presence unsettles nationalist narratives, turning them from refugees into perceived threats.

The novel further critiques the legal and political structures that reinforce this hostility. Trump's 2017 Executive Order 13769, which suspended refugee admissions under the guise of counterterrorism, exemplifies the

institutionalization of fear. Hamid dramatizes this policy logic when he notes that "militants from Saeed and Nadia's country had crossed over to Vienna (2017), but shows that such exceptional cases cannot justify collective suspicion. This reflects Said's (2001) concern that borders, once protective, become prisons that confine migrants into categories of "security risks."

Hamid also emphasizes how this hostility produces psychological displacement. The couple's movement through magical doors does not secure belonging but repeatedly exposes them to Chambers' (2008) "postmodern world of uncertainty," where identities and communities are unstable. Thus, *Exit West* foregrounds the paradox that even in destinations of safety, migrants remain vulnerable to both institutional and mob violence that mirrors the terror they sought to escape.

Rhizomatic Identity and Multiple Belonging

Despite the trauma of displacement, Hamid's characters develop what Frank, borrowing from Deleuze (2008), calls "rhizomatic identity"—a form of multiple belonging that resists simple categorization. Rather than experiencing complete rootlessness, they cultivate what Rushdie (2000) describes as "a kind of multiple rooting". Saeed and Nadia's journey embodies this process: while they lose the stability of their homeland, they simultaneously gain partial affiliations with multiple places, communities, and cultures encountered through the doors.

Technology plays a pivotal role in sustaining this identity. Smartphones allow Nadia to remain connected to global networks, reflecting how migrants inhabit what Zygmunt Bauman (2004) terms "liquid modernity," where ties are tenuous yet transnational. However, Hamid avoids romanticizing such connections. As the novel notes, "the end of the world can be cozy at times" (Hamid, 2017), suggesting that digital intimacy cannot replace the embodied community lost to migration. In this way, Hamid reconfigures exile not solely as loss but also as a form of hybrid belonging.

Implications and Contemporary Relevance

The novel's relevance extends beyond literary analysis to contemporary policy debates. UNHCR (2015) reports that forced displacement has reached historic highs, with 59.5 million people displaced globally. Hamid's narrative transforms these statistics into lived experience,

showing how ordinary individuals endure the extraordinary circumstances of terrorism, war, and flight. By humanizing migration, *Exit West* contests the abstract and securitized language of international relations that too often obscures refugee suffering.

The novel also reflects the post-9/11 climate where terrorism and migration are discursively entangled. According to Manni Crone, Maja Felicia Falkentoft, and Teemu Tammikko (2017), the conflation of refugees with security threats intensified after the November 2015 Paris attacks, leading to restrictive policies across Europe. Hamid illustrates this tension by presenting migrants as subjects caught between survival and suspicion, embodying what Scanlan (2001) describes as literature's power to locate "terrorist subjects within an interlocking grid of time, causality, and history". Ultimately, *Exit West* demonstrates that the migrant condition is not peripheral but central to the twenty-first century. Throughout the novel, Hamid's narrator reminds us that migration is not an exception but the defining experience of global modernity. By situating migration within the overlapping contexts of terrorism, environmental disruption, and political reception, the novel forces us to reconsider contemporary debates on security, belonging, and human rights.

Conclusion

Exit West situates terrorism within the wider humanitarian crisis of global migration, transforming it from an abstract political problem into a lived experience. By focusing on the lives of Saeed and Nadia, ordinary individuals caught in extraordinary upheavals, Hamid dramatizes how terrorism produces forced migration and reshapes identities across cultural and political boundaries. In doing so, the novel resists reductive narratives of a "clash of civilizations" and allegorizes how fear, violence, and deterritorialization shape a global condition of insecurity. Through its blend of realism and magical doors, *Exit West* reimagines terrorism's impact not only on nations but also on love, intimacy, and belonging, demonstrating how literature can register the humanitarian crisis with a depth and complexity often absent from political discourse.

This study has shown that terrorism in contemporary literature functions not as a backdrop but as a complex force reshaping human experience at individual and collective levels. Hamid's use of magical realism—the doors that transport migrants instantly across borders—paradoxically heightens the realism of his portrayal by capturing the disorienting speed and totality of displacement in the age of terror. The novel's contribution

to postcolonial literature lies in its refusal to separate terrorism from its aftermath of migration. Rather than treating these as discrete phenomena, Hamid shows them as interwoven aspects of contemporary global experience. The experience that asserts migration as the dominant condition and result of political doings of the past and present, which has universalized displacement while maintaining attention to the specific vulnerabilities of those forced to flee.

In the present times of accelerated global migration, literature like *Exit West* serves a crucial function in humanizing statistics and policy debates. By presenting terrorism and migration through the lens of individual experience while remaining attentive to structural forces, Hamid's novel contributes to what Said (2001) called the "intellectual mission" of postcolonial literature: to bear witness to displacement while imagining possibilities for belonging in an age of perpetual movement.

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