



West Exists in *Exit West*: Portrayal of Orientalism and the Concept of Other in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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ABSTRACT

Mohsin Hamid (1971), a renowned Pakistani novelist, is one of the emerging talents in the field of fiction writing. He has authored the famous Pen/ Hemingway award nominated novel *Moth Smoke* (2000) and another remarkable metafictional novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), along with some other works of worth reading. The current study aims at exploring the postcolonial concept 'Othering' in Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017). The paper explores how 'Othering' is inseparable for the postcolonial people and how they suffer physically, culturally, and psychologically for just being others, orients, or Asians. It also examines that how these people in authority 'West' use 'Othering' as a tool to fulfill their own vested interests by degrading the other people on various grounds like race, culture, ethnicity, geography, and so on. The theoretical framework for this research paper is based on 'Orientalism' and the concept of 'Other' coined by Edward Said 'Orientalism' which has a lot of aspects encapsulated in it that help compare and show the contrasting elements between the oppressor, 'West' and the oppressed 'East'. It also explores how the West uses the self-legitimated authority to exploit the other people whom they differentiate from them using the terms 'Us' and 'Them'.

1. Introduction

Mohsin Hamid was born in a Kashmiri descent Punjabi family in Lahore Pakistan on 23 July, 1971. He is a well-known fiction writer who has written the famous novels *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and *Exit West* (2017). *Exit West* is a novel that shows the story of a young unmarried couple who keeps moving from one place to another in search of security and peace, going through numerous circumstances and facing unprecedented ups and downs of life, yet their quest remains unquenched even after having these harsh experiences; the novel ends showing them moving to another place. The couple, namely Said and Nadia, are from an anonymous country supposedly an Asian country as the Urdu lingual names indicate their Asiatic background where the militants are approaching and ceasing their belongings ruthlessly killing the natives.

The current study is based on the theoretical framework of Edward Said's orientalism which has been used to explore othering in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West*. Said, in *Orientalism* (1978) uses 'Occident' for West meaning the 'known' people, and the 'Orient' for the Easten or unknown people. He argues that the West in general did not know the East, so the Western scholars tried to present the East or the Eastern people inferior culturally, socially, psychologically, and so on. And in doing so, they

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created a mindset among the Europeans that East is an exotic place of mysterious people who are primitive, savage and uncivilized and need be civilized.

Hamid has been highly vocal in pointing out various postcolonial issues in his literary works. *Exit West* deals with the concept of "Orientalism", which came as a phenomenon when Edward Saeed published his book *Orientalism* (1978). Othering deals with the idea that on various grounds people are othered or discriminated by the people in power. Othering is, therefore, a postcolonial term and a technique used by the West to identify not only the East but also the West itself using the very term as a binary opposition. The term othering has lots of aspects encapsulated in it which help compare, rather show the contrasting elements between the 'Occident' and 'Orient', and that very contrast gives birth to the binary oppositional terms 'Us' and 'Them' resulting the West to be superior and the East to be inferiority complexed allowing the West to use a self-legitimated authority for the imposition of the self-approved supreme civilization to the savages of the East in the name of so called 'White Man's Burden'. The recent works on the novel cited for this research do not show sufficient material in terms of the all-important aspect of postcolonial studies when it comes to dealing with the selected novel. Othering, therefore, needs to be explored so that the upcoming researcher could have a look on the novel via this dimension as well. So, there is a huge gap demanding itself to be filled in terms of the postcolonial concept of othering.

2. Literature Review

There are lots of articles and research works published on this novel. Only a few most relevant works have been cited in this paper to lay the foundation of this research work.

2.1. Othering/ Other and Otherness Defined by Assorted Scholars

Orientalism as a postcolonial theory has been much in among the scholars especially the concept of othering is a base for the scholars of postcolonial literature. Others tell us who we are or how to look at us with the angle given by others, and this makes you feel superior or inferior as Staszak (2008) defines that Otherness is a mental process by which a superior group in terms of power manipulates the group inferior to them. It's a type of discrimination either imaginative or based on reality to identify both the parties. Unless 'the others' are identified 'the self' remains undiscovered. Otherness is not something like a biological difference between a girl or a boy; rather, it is an ideological reality through which the other gender is differentiated either for exploitation or give importance. Staszak (2008) further illustrates that in the formation of otherness or othering there is an application of a principle that creates a couple of hierarchical groups known as 'us and them'. Being the binary opposite of 'Us', 'Them' is required to be identified so that us could be identified as well. In other words, unless the other is created the self is not identified as both are interdependent.

Olalde and Velho (2016) argue that it is not justice with the theory of othering to confine it as a tool, formula, or parameter to scale a self-image which is usually positive to make another image of the other that is for sure negative. The article claims that the term othering has really a vast scope if the researchers do justice with the term and go to its multidimensional aspects. The paper further says that it seems stereotypical to stick to a single point in terms of the theory which is so vast in its nature (p. 31).

Papadima (2018) states that others have a strong influence on us rather it's the sense of othering that shapes our identity as she says that the novel *Exit West* is an illustration of how the views of other people shape and influence our identity. In other words, our identity is dependent on the people who not only shape but also influence us through their observations.

Bengtsson (2008) found that the demonic other is a metaphoric expression towards the East and the colonizers are naming the east where the colonized people are found is a hellish place where one can find people with satanic characteristics as it is obvious that Satan is there in the hell (p. 4). The statement becomes validated as the Britishers and the other European nations who got hold of the colonized countries were trying to make these areas worth living places that's why they were keen to change those hellish places into heaven with the beauty of their civilization and enlightenment.

2.2. Interdependency of Othering and Identity

Various studies have been done on the interdependency of Othering and identity too. Hauso (2020) is of the view that the occident and the orient being others for each other look at each other suspiciously and the writer says that the same thing has been presented by Hamid in his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* where the protagonist, Changez and the Unnamed American remain suspicious towards each other. East and West both are like the banks of a river both are interconnected for their identification but never meet anywhere because both are others in their existence. Jensen (2011) argues that othering is related to multiple social consequences racial, sexual, class differences, and even symbolically the discriminations can be observed and these differenced provide base for the formation of identity by degrading the subjugated people on way or the other.

Mushtaq (2010) says that the others are ill-treated by the oppressors for their being uncivil, savage, naïve. It is considered the duty of the civilized people to civilize the uncivilized on that's exactly what the justification given by the European to exploit the eastern land, culture, and civilization to impose their own thoughts to these exotic people. Pattnaik (2019) is of the view that the desire of acceptance and the attempt to be included are both indications towards a sense of othering, though, we may not know it consciously yet there is something that intrigues you and that's the sense of being othered or alienated. The researcher gives example of Changez in the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where the protagonist feels himself being othered after 9/11.

Hamid's illustration of how migrants confront the barriers both physical and psychological to set and internalize by the system of colonialism in various categories which are old fashioned and outdated but still useful and strong. It differentiates and separates them and other people around them who consider that their superior societal status is threaten by these people (Karam, 2020).

Carter (2020) says that when a story teller having less imaginary power to narrate his story identifies himself by articulating with the help of dehumanization and disempowerment of the others he is in fact the story teller is afraid of not being clear on his own plot of the story, and such is the case with the refuge crisis which is dependent on the mood of its storyteller.

3. Theoretical Framework & Methodology

'Orientalism' is a multifaceted umbrella term which has lots of things in it. It's basically a conception of comparing West and east for their contrasting characteristics which in fact have been the construction of the western writers yet in this frame of orientalism we are supposed to for a while have a willing suspension of disbelief and accept that the occident or West is rational, material, democratic, civilized, masculine, scientific, active, dynamic, center, self, and so on but the orient or the east contrary to the west is irrational, spiritual, despotic, savage, feminine, exotic, mysterious, traditional, passive, unchanging, margin, and other etc.

It is a non-empirical study, and textual analysis is applied as a research method. The novel is textually analyzed with the help of Shur's (1998) close reading method to understand how the characters in the novel have been dealt with based on the aforesaid occidental and oriental characteristics. The implication of the theoretical framework helps the researcher to examine the character and understand them through the lens of Postcolonialism.

4. Discussion

Orientalism is a phenomenon that prevails formerly colonized people wherever they are in the world. These Asian people feel a sense of insecurity of being neglected suppressed, out caste or othered. The novel *Exit West* is an exhibition of the very orientalist mind set in which the only two named characters of the novel Saeed and Nadia find themselves encircled with. Basically, the story of the novel revolves around these two main characters whose country is being overtaken by the militants and these two tries to move to a safer place for their life. The country which they belong to seems to be Pakistan as the sociopolitical background if the novel suggests and it was once expressed by the author himself in an interview as well as the lines from Karam (2020), show:

In an interview, Hamid states that he 'model[ed]' the city on his own birthplace: wrote it thinking of Lahore, modelling it after the city of Lahore, where I live. And I just couldn't bring myself to fictionally . . . cause to befall to Lahore the terrible events that happen to Saeed and Nadia's city. [. . .] But partly, I also wanted to open it up – to have people from other places imagine this as their city, so [as] to widen the entry point into the novel, for different types of . . . readers from different places. (Frostrup & Hamid, 2017)

4.1. Binary Opposition

Though, in general, the term "Othering" is meant to differentiate between oneself and the people around for recognition and it is felt when we meet any stranger for the first time, and it is the sense of alienation or otherness that we hesitate to talk to the stranger unless we are familiar to him or her. The same sense of otherness is found in the very second line of the first chapter of the novel when the writer introduces the characters to us as, "a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her for many days" (Hamid, 2017, p. 9). The same notion of differentiation can also be seen between Nadia and Saeed based on otherness even having the same sociocultural and ethno-religious background when Nadia asks Saeed whether he offers prayers or not he replies, "I think it's personal. Each of us has his own way. Or . . . her own way. Nobody's perfect" (p. 10). The concept of othering is so overwhelming that unless we use the terms "us and them", "our and their", "we and they" our daily activities even our own identity remains at stake as the lines from the novel say "for Saeed this meant trying to show a client that his firm truly understood their business, could really get under their skin and see things from their point of view" (p. 10).

When it comes to dealing with the postcolonial concept orientalism the 'Occident' got attracted by the strangeness of the orient just like the line depicts as how Nadia was attracted towards the strangeness of Saeed when they were getting acquainted, "He struck her as a strange sort of man. A strange and attractive sort of man" (Hamid, 2017, p. 20). But for the Occident the strangeness was attractive in terms of seeing, reading, or observing but never to adopt the culture and tradition of the orient just like the same happened to Saeed and Nadia when they chose a Chinese restaurant for their meal as they were attracted by the exotic outlook of the restaurant but "Neither Nadia nor Saeed chose a soft drink, preferring tea and water, and when their food arrived neither used chopsticks, both being, at least while under observation, more confident of their skills with a fork instead. This is what the case with the Orient the west romanticized the exotic otherness of the east but never adopted the ways considering them inferior to them or their cultural values. Staszak (2008) agrees with the study in underlining the hierarchical position among the people based on binary opposition.

4.2. The Threat of Otherness and a Sense of Insecurity

The threat of Otherness or the sense of being different is prevalent in the novel as Nadia and Saeed are trying to move to another country through those magical or mysterious door. It is evident in the novel, "But she was haunted by worries too, revolving around dependence, worries that in going abroad and leaving their country she and Saeed and Saeed's father might be at the mercy of strangers, subsistent on handouts, caged in pens like vermin" (Hamid, 2017, p. 58). Nadia feels a strange fear if being othered by people in the countries in and out. She thinks that if they leave their own country, they will be dependent on the strangers and the father of Saeed will be left behind at the mercy of the strangers. Olalde & Velho (2016) appreciate the vastness of the concept of othering which covers the argument of this study in terms of characters' fear in *Exit West* to move to another country through magical doors.

Sense of othering gives a sense of insecurity. It is evident in the novel when Nadia and Saeed are leaving Saeed's father to flee through one of the doors, the writer says:

She felt she was abandoning the old man, and even if he did have his siblings and his cousins, and might now go live with them or have them come live with him, they could not protect him as Saeed and Nadia could, and so by making the promise he demanded she make she was in a sense killing him, but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind (p. 60).

It shows that Nadia and Saeed's perception are same in their sense of insecurity during migration through which they kill their relation and make themselves other. Sense of othering gives you a sense of insecurity as we always feel every stranger as a sign of danger for ourselves. The occident especially the western writers like Joseph Conrad, E.M. Foster and others have presented the colonize countries namely Asia as the region of barbarians through their writings so the westerners were afraid of the easterners entitling them as terrorists for no reason. They were in fact afraid of the otherness as the Nadia and Saeed are afraid of the unknown agent, "They knew there was a possibility the agent had sold them out to the militants, and so they knew there was a possibility this was the final afternoon of their lives" (p. 62).

4.3. Otherness and Identity

When you start feeling otherness even the small things come under our observation and those trivial things do matter as happened the couple on their reaching to an unknown beach. Hamid says, "Its signs were written in English but also in other European tongues" (p. 64). It reveals that Saeed and Nadia felt themselves as others because the locality where they appeared was full of foreign people. In other words, they both were found it easy to be there because in their otherness they found a kind of nativism. They all could identify themselves as foreigners to be united against the others as the lines say, "In this group, everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was. Nadia and Saeed quickly located a cluster of fellow country women and - men and learned that they were on the Greek island of Mykonos" (p. 64). These people who are considered by the others by the people in power normally try to control them through violent forces as the people who have migrated to the new land are treated as if they are terrorists, savages or cannibals so they are normally kept under control by the government. The lines from the novel portrays that how these other people were afraid and feeling insecure, "The residents of the house were terrified, most had seen firsthand what the police and soldiers could do, and in their terror, they spoke more to one another than they otherwise might, strangers speaking to strangers" (p. 77).

But when these others get chance to encroach, they never hesitate in occupying the houses and even the territory as a revenge of the brutality face in the hands of the police and other law enforcing agencies. As the lines from the novel again indicates, "newspapers referring to the area as the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation" (pp. 78-79). These settlers who have come from various oriental countries are treated as if they are not even human beings though they are the immigrant who have already suffered at the hands of the occident and taking refuge fleeing away from their native towns and countries to these slums of the occident.

After living for sometimes in the house which Nadia and Saeed occupy appears to be a bit familiar to them. But outside the house otherness prevails because nothing found welcoming to them. Nadia felt the otherness quite sharply because she couldn't help the roughness of those people and the chaotic situation was something strange in nature as she thought:

Outside the house much was random and chaotic, but inside, perhaps, a degree of order could be built. Maybe even a community. There were rough people in the house, but there were rough people everywhere, and in life roughness had to be managed. Nadia thought it madness to expect anything else (p. 80).

For Saeed also the situation was not different he also has the same feeling of otherness deeply rooted in him when he found the place, the people and the language spoken by them all different than that of his own language people and place. He found that place and people exotic, mysterious, and suspicious as he couldn't relate himself to any of them as the writer says, "He was suspicious, especially of the other men around, of whom there were many, and he found it stressful to be packed in so tightly with people who spoke in tongues he did not understand" (p. 80).

It was not merely a feeling of suspicion and mystery of them, they were being treated like the outcasts or the untouchables in the locality where they had arrived. As the lines portrays that one day when the couple comes back to their place where they were residing, there was a mob of people and, "The mob looked to Nadia like a strange and violent tribe, intent on their destruction, some armed with iron bars or knives, and she and Saeed turned and ran, but could not escape" (p. 81). This shows that how these other people are maltreated like savages and they are compelled to suffer because they are others.

As it has been a historical fact that these other people are forcefully controlled by the government with the help of the law enforcement agencies fully allowing them for atrocity and brutality as the passive others cannot do anything to resist the superior, active and powerful forces of the colonizers or the controlling class as the lines show that how Nadia, Saeed and the rest of the people living there were threaten to be controlled by the government, "it was reported that the army was being deployed, and the police as well, and those who had once served in the army and the police, and volunteers who had received a weeklong course of training" (p. 82).

Hamid shows it to be a common phenomenon to have such maltreatments to the people who are othered. As the lines validate, "they knew that in other desirable cities in other desirable countries similar scenes must be unfolding, scenes of nativist backlash, and so even though they discussed leaving London, they stayed" (p. 83). It has always been a fact that the colonizers have tried to suppress the exotic people wherever they are found whether they are in their own native lands or in any European countries in the form of immigrants or refugees because it is not possible for these Europeans to treat these easterners as equal human beings.

The colonized people don't have any place that could be termed as safe havens for them because to suffer is doomed. The people are hunted for suppression wherever they flee to escape the haunted memories of colonization as the lines say, "It were [sic] Nadia and Saeed, who had run from war already, and did not know where next to run, and so were waiting, waiting, like so many others" (p. 83). As most of the time wars are conferred upon these people by the colonizers to fulfill their own vested interests as in the recent past Iraq and Afghan wars are proofs of such well-planned wars for natural resources. Once when you cannot relate yourself to any place it's your otherness that compels you to think differently and even the trivial thing makes you realize that you are other and you don't belong here. The same thing happens to Nadia and Saeed in the city of London when they felt, "In their own fled city, when the electricity had gone, it had gone for all. But in London there were parts as bright as ever, brighter than anyplace Saeed or Nadia had seen before" (p. 87).

The colonizers have had the notion that these others have all the bad qualities that could be found on earth, they are mistrusted for no reason. Whenever any bad incidents occur the blames straightly goes to these colonized. In their opinion they are supposed to be criminal by nature and this is how the occident differentiate themselves from these orients. The following lines depicts that how the colonizers blamed the colonized without any proof, "fights would sometimes break out, and there were murders and rapes and assaults as well. Some in dark London blamed these incidents on nativist provocateurs. Others blamed other migrants, and began to move" (p. 87). When someone who is marginalized based on his being just what the rest of the people are not remains fearful of getting harmed. He feels insecure and alienated. He feels lonely being in a crowd and remains psychologically perplexed as we can see the same thing in the case of Saeed who feels:

Here in this house, he was the only man from his country, and those sizing him up were from another country, and there were far more of them, and he was alone. This touched upon something basic, something tribal, and evoked tension and a sort of suppressed fear (p. 89).

Such sense of loneliness leads the person to look for people from his part of the world for comfort. He wants to come out of the psychological trauma of loneliness and when finds some place of comfort he generates a sense of belonging for the comfort he gets from there. Saeed finds some people from his country in London and feels as if he is back to his homeland. The sense of

othering is for a while vanished for him. Hamid says: "he prayed he felt praying was different here, somehow, in the garden of this house, with these men. It made him feel part of something, not just something spiritual" (p. 90). This shows that the easterners are spiritual and different from the material west where Saeed is unable to relate himself to anything. When he feels much released, he wants Nadia to feel the same by moving with him to that place because he found something there that attracted him something like 'Ourness'. When Nadia argues that why they should move to that place Saeed seems to be convincing he as if they are going back to their own country:

"Why would we want to move?" she said.

"To be among our own kind," Saeed answered.

"What makes them our kind?"

"They're from our country."

"From the country we used to be from."

"Yes." Saeed tried not to sound annoyed.

"We've left that place."

"That doesn't mean we have no connection" (p. 91).

People are othered on the when they are less advanced in terms of science and technology considering them as primitive and ignorant people. The same thing is vividly shown in the novel when Saeed and Nadia see the advanced technology in terms of weapons and ammunitions as the lines say, "a reminder to the people of dark London of the technological superiority of their opponents, of the government and nativist forces" (p. 92). The colonizers have always claimed to be civilizing the colonized and in pretext of doing so they conquered the east and the Asiatic lands but when it comes to dealing the so-called uncivilized East, they left no stone unturned to be adversely what they claim themselves to be, civilized. In the novel when the natives planned to attack the area where Saeed and Nadia were residing the all seem to be portraying the image of a Country which is unable to resist the colonizers brutality but to remind them their own civility by tolerating whatever comes their way as the lines show, "All agreed that the most important thing was to manage the impetuosity of the youngsters, for armed resistance would likely lead to a slaughter, and nonviolence was surely their most potent response, shaming their attackers into civility" (p. 92).

It is a common observation the terrorists are killed rather than making them human beings again by rehabilitation of those innocent souls which have been detracted by money, religiosity, national fanaticism, or some other unknown causes. But counter terrorism itself is a kind of terrorism. Britishers are doing the same which the militants were doing in their country, killing people, and excavating the land. Nadia observes that the nativists were so furious that they were willing to kill all that was the most horribly astonishing thing for her as she found that only buildings and faces were changed but the basic reality of these people and the militants her own city was the same. The same notion was worrying Saeed also because they were the others and at the receiving end. He found that the others are value less and could be killed by any one for no reason at all as the lines say, "Saeed wondered aloud once again if the natives would really kill them, and Nadia said once again that the natives were so frightened that they could do anything" (p.97).

Hamid truly says, "They were ashamed, and that they did not yet know that shame" (p. 109). These people are ashamed of themselves being others but at the same time they are not because it is not them to blame for being others. They have been constructed others in the minds of the West by the Western scholars yet they were ashamed. It might be possible that they were ashamed of not having been born in the west otherwise there is no apparent reason of being ashamed.

5. Conclusion

Occident and orient are both created with the same status of human being but with the passage of time things evolve so does the thinking of human beings. Human beings have positive and negative traits in them and the environment nurtures these instincts: if they find a better environment, they tend to be good and vice versa. Having said that there are differences among people based on color, religion, society, geography and so on. These differences are in fact the colorful depiction of nature and they make the world so beautiful. But the beauty of the world turns into ugliness when these differences are misused to exploit the fellow human beings.

Othering is the process by which human beings are identified positively or negatively. If the othering is to beautify the world by highlighting the differences of people, culture, religious values, geographical boundaries etc., it is worth praising but when the same differences cause to bring pathos to humanity it is the dark side of othering presenting a hellish picture of the world.

The paper has explored the hellish picture of othering found in the novel *Exit West* where a young couple who had already been the victims of brutality, threat, insecurity, and restlessness because of the ever-approaching militants who were killing their dear ones ruthlessly, are doubly victimized by the sense of othering in the places wherever they reached running away from the agony. Being from a colonized country it seemed to them that there is not a single place for solace as the haunting memory of colonization and the sense of othering kept itself clung to this couple. Othering tortured them physically and mentally constantly as they were unable to relate themselves with any part of the world. It would not be wrong if it is said that Postcolonialism is a natural phenomenon we are either the colonizers or the colonized because Adam can be metaphorically entitled as a colonizer who came and conquered the un known world or was he felt the sense of othering here under the nostalgic notion for the heaven from where he had been banished.

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