



Negotiating Longing and Belonging: Diasporic Identity Formation in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the emotional and psychological dimensions of migration in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* through the theoretical lenses of diaspora and postcolonial studies, with particular emphasis on the interconnected concepts of longing and belonging. While existing scholarship on the novel primarily focuses on migration, globalization, hybridity, liminality, and border politics, relatively limited attention has been devoted to the affective dimensions of diasporic identity formation. Addressing this gap, the study investigates how longing for home and the search for belonging shape the experiences of the novel's protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, as they navigate displacement and cultural transition. Hamid employs magical realism, particularly through the symbolism of mysterious doors, to represent migration as an abrupt and disorienting phenomenon that intensifies feelings of alienation, uncertainty, and identity fragmentation. Using close textual analysis, this study explores representations of home, memory, identity, longing, and belonging within a diasporic framework. The findings demonstrate that diasporic identity emerges through a continuous negotiation between cultural heritage and the challenges of adaptation in transnational spaces. Furthermore, the study argues that *Exit West* reconceptualizes belonging as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed attachment to a single geographical location.

1. Introduction

Global migration has become one of the defining characteristics of the twenty-first century. Armed conflicts, political instability, economic inequality, and environmental crises have contributed to unprecedented levels of human displacement across the globe. As migration increasingly shapes contemporary societies, scholars have turned to literature as an important medium for understanding the cultural, emotional, and psychological consequences of displacement. Literary texts offer insights into migrant experiences that often remain inaccessible through statistical or policy-oriented approaches, allowing readers to engage with the human dimensions of migration and exile.

Within this context, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (Hamid, 2017) provides a compelling exploration of migration, displacement, and identity. The novel follows the journeys of Saeed and Nadia, two young individuals forced to flee their homeland due to political violence and social instability. Through a network of mysterious doors that transport people instantaneously across international borders, Hamid employs magical realism to challenge conventional understandings of migration and geographical boundaries. Rather than emphasizing physical movement alone, the novel foregrounds the emotional and psychological transformations that accompany displacement.

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The experiences of Saeed and Nadia reflect central concerns of diaspora studies, including questions of identity, belonging, exile, hybridity, and cultural negotiation. Theoretical contributions by Edward Said (2000), Homi K. Bhabha (1994), Stuart Hall (1990), and Avtar Brah (1996) provide important frameworks for understanding how displaced individuals negotiate multiple cultural affiliations while attempting to preserve connections with their past. These theorists emphasize that diasporic identities are not fixed or essentialized; instead, they are continuously reshaped through encounters with new social, cultural, and political environments.

A growing body of scholarship has examined *Exit West* (Hamid, 2017) through various theoretical lenses. Previous studies have explored themes such as globalization, border politics, liminality, hybridity, and transnational mobility. Javaid et al. (2021), for instance, analyzes the novel through Brah's concept of diaspora space, highlighting the fluidity of identities within transnational environments. Similarly, Parveen and Hussain (2024) investigate the tensions between cultural preservation and assimilation in the formation of diasporic identities. While these studies offer valuable insights into the spatial and sociopolitical dimensions of migration, they devote comparatively less attention to the emotional experiences of longing and belonging that shape migrant subjectivities.

This gap is particularly significant because migration is not merely a geographical movement from one place to another. It is also an emotional process involving loss, memory, nostalgia, attachment, alienation, and adaptation. In *Exit West*, longing for home and the search for belonging function as crucial forces shaping the identities of Saeed and Nadia. Their experiences reveal how migrants negotiate the tensions between cultural continuity and transformation while attempting to establish meaningful connections in unfamiliar environments.

Accordingly, this study examines how the themes of longing and belonging contribute to diasporic identity formation in *Exit West*. Through a close textual analysis informed by diaspora and postcolonial theories, the study seeks to demonstrate that Hamid portrays identity as a dynamic process emerging from continuous negotiation between memory, displacement, and cultural adaptation. By foregrounding the affective dimensions of migration, this research contributes to ongoing discussions of diaspora, identity, and contemporary migrant literature.

1.1. Research Objectives

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the representation of longing and belonging in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*.
- To analyze the emotional and psychological dimensions of diasporic experience through the characters of Saeed and Nadia.
- To investigate the role of magical realism in representing displacement, cultural transition, and identity formation.
- To explore the processes through which diasporic identities are negotiated and reconstructed within transnational spaces.

1.2. Significance of Study

This study contributes to contemporary scholarship on diaspora and migration by foregrounding the emotional dimensions of displacement, particularly the interconnected themes of longing and belonging. While many analyses of *Exit West* focus on political, spatial, and cultural aspects of migration, relatively few studies examine how emotional experiences influence identity formation among diasporic subjects. By addressing this gap, the research expands current understandings of migration beyond physical relocation and cultural adaptation to include the psychological realities of loss, nostalgia, attachment, and belonging.

The study also contributes to the growing body of research on magical realism by demonstrating how Hamid employs fantastical elements to represent complex migrant experiences. Through its interdisciplinary engagement with literary studies, postcolonial theory, and diaspora studies, the research provides a nuanced perspective on contemporary migration narratives. Furthermore, the findings may be valuable for educators, researchers, and students interested in issues of migration, identity, multiculturalism, and transnational belonging.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory provides an essential framework for understanding the experiences of displacement, exile, and identity negotiation represented in *Exit West*. Edward Said's conceptualization of exile emphasizes the profound sense of separation and loss experienced by individuals who are forcibly removed from their homelands. According to Said, exile creates an enduring rupture between individuals and their places of origin, producing feelings of nostalgia, alienation, and emotional

dislocation. The experiences of Saeed and Nadia closely reflect this condition as they struggle to maintain connections with their homeland while adapting to unfamiliar cultural environments.

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the Third Space further illuminate the identity transformations depicted in the novel. Bhabha argues that cultural identities are produced through negotiation rather than fixed inheritance. The Third Space emerges as a site where individuals encounter multiple cultural influences and generate new forms of identity. In *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia occupy such spaces throughout their journeys, continuously renegotiating their relationships with home, culture, religion, and community.

Together, Said and Bhabha provide a framework for understanding migration as a process that simultaneously involves loss, transformation, and identity reconstruction. Their theoretical perspectives reveal how displacement produces both challenges and opportunities for the formation of new cultural affiliations.

2.2. Diaspora and Identity Theory

Diaspora theory offers a productive framework for examining the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in *Exit West*. Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is not a stable essence but an ongoing process shaped by history, memory, and social experience. From this perspective, identity is continually constructed and reconstructed through interactions between the past and the present.

The journeys of Saeed and Nadia illustrate Hall's conception of identity as a process of becoming rather than being. As they move across geographical and cultural boundaries, their identities evolve in response to new social realities. Saeed seeks continuity with his cultural and religious heritage, whereas Nadia demonstrates greater openness to transformation and hybridity. Their differing responses highlight the diverse ways individuals negotiate displacement and belonging.

Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space further enhances this analysis by emphasizing the intersections of culture, power, memory, and identity within migratory contexts. Diaspora space is not merely a geographical location but a social and cultural site where identities are constantly negotiated. The various settings of *Exit West*, including Mykonos, London, and San Francisco, function as diaspora spaces where the protagonists engage with diverse communities and redefine their senses of self and belonging.

2.3. Magical Realism as a Literary Lens

Magical realism serves as a crucial narrative strategy in *Exit West*. Through the mysterious doors that instantly transport migrants across international borders, Hamid collapses geographical distance and redirects attention from physical movement to emotional experience. The magical doors symbolize the abrupt disruptions that characterize contemporary migration while simultaneously challenging conventional understandings of borders and nationhood.

Rather than functioning merely as fantastical devices, the doors operate as metaphors for the uncertainty, disorientation, and fragmentation associated with displacement. They enable Hamid to explore the psychological realities of migration while maintaining a narrative that transcends specific national and historical contexts. Through magical realism, *Exit West* presents migration as a deeply human experience shaped by memory, loss, adaptation, and the continuous search for belonging.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Diasporic Themes in *Exit West*

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* has attracted significant scholarly attention because of its innovative representation of migration, displacement, and identity formation in an increasingly globalized world. Scholars have explored the novel from multiple theoretical perspectives, including diaspora studies, postcolonial theory, transnationalism, hybridity, and liminality. These studies collectively establish the novel as an important contribution to contemporary migration literature.

Javaid et al. (2021) examine *Exit West* through Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space," arguing that the magical doors symbolize fluid and contested spaces in which identities are continuously negotiated and reconstructed. Their analysis highlights the relationship between mobility and the transformation of cultural identity. Similarly, Parveen and Hussain (2024) investigate the tensions between cultural preservation and assimilation, emphasizing how migrants balance attachment to their native cultures with the demands of integration into host societies. Their findings demonstrate that diasporic identities emerge through ongoing processes of negotiation rather than through fixed cultural affiliations.

Other scholars have focused on the liminal nature of migration in the novel. Razzaq and Khalid (2024) argue that the transitional spaces inhabited by Saeed and Nadia serve as sites of identity transformation. Their study suggests that liminality enables migrants to redefine themselves beyond traditional social and national boundaries. Likewise, Zara and Tahseen (2023)

emphasize the linguistic and cultural negotiations that accompany migration, illustrating how identity is shaped through interactions with diverse communities and environments.

Although these studies provide valuable insights into the spatial, cultural, and political dimensions of migration, comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the emotional experiences of longing and belonging. Existing research tends to prioritize structural frameworks such as hybridity, globalization, and diaspora space while overlooking the affective dimensions that shape migrants' lived experiences. This gap is particularly significant because emotions play a crucial role in how displaced individuals understand themselves and their relationship to both homeland and host society. Consequently, the present study seeks to contribute to existing scholarship by examining longing and belonging as central processes in diasporic identity formation.

3.2. Longing and Belonging in Diasporic Literature

Longing and belonging are among the most significant themes in diasporic literature because they reflect the emotional realities of displacement and migration. Longing often manifests as nostalgia for a lost homeland, while belonging represents the search for stability, acceptance, and identity within unfamiliar environments. Together, these concepts illuminate the emotional complexities of living between cultures.

Scholars of diaspora have emphasized that longing extends beyond a simple desire to return home. Rather, it involves a continuous emotional engagement with memories, cultural traditions, and personal histories. Migrants frequently construct idealized versions of their homelands, which function as sources of comfort and identity during periods of uncertainty. However, these imagined homes often remain inaccessible, creating a persistent sense of loss and incompleteness.

Belonging, by contrast, involves the effort to establish meaningful connections within new environments. Rather than representing a final destination, belonging functions as an ongoing process through which individuals negotiate relationships with people, places, and cultures. In diasporic contexts, belonging is often fragmented and multifaceted, requiring migrants to balance loyalty to their origins with adaptation to new social realities.

In *Exit West*, these themes are central to the experiences of Saeed and Nadia. While both characters experience displacement, they respond differently to the challenges of migration. Saeed remains emotionally attached to memories of home and cultural tradition, whereas Nadia demonstrates a greater willingness to embrace new environments and identities. Their contrasting responses reveal the diverse ways in which migrants negotiate longing and belonging within transnational spaces.

4. Methodology

This study employs qualitative research design based on close textual analysis. As a widely recognized method in literary studies, close reading enables an in-depth examination of narrative structure, symbolism, characterization, and thematic development. The method is particularly appropriate for investigating the emotional and psychological dimensions of diasporic experience because it facilitates detailed engagement with textual representations of identity, displacement, and belonging.

The primary text selected for analysis is Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017). The novel was chosen because of its distinctive treatment of migration through magical realism and its sustained engagement with themes central to diaspora studies. The analysis focuses on key episodes involving the experiences of Saeed and Nadia as they move through various geographical and cultural spaces.

The theoretical framework draws upon the works of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Avtar Brah. Said's concept of exile provides insight into the emotional consequences of displacement, while Bhabha's theories of hybridity and the Third Space illuminate processes of cultural negotiation and identity transformation. Hall's understanding of identity as a continuous process of becoming and Brah's concept of diaspora space offers additional perspectives on the formation of diasporic subjectivities.

Attention is given to textual representations of longing, belonging, memory, cultural attachment, and identity formation. The analysis also examines the symbolic significance of the magical doors, which function as metaphors for migration and displacement. Through this approach, the study seeks to uncover the emotional and psychological processes that shape diasporic identities within the novel.

5. Discussion

5.1. Longing as an Emotional Attachment to Home

The analysis reveals that longing functions as one of the most significant emotional forces shaping the experiences of Saeed and Nadia. Throughout the novel, both characters maintain psychological connections with their homeland despite their physical displacement. However, their expressions of longing differ considerably, reflecting contrasting approaches to migration and identity.

Saeed's attachment to home is strongly associated with family, religion, and cultural continuity. His prayers serve as symbolic acts through which he preserves connections to his past, particularly to his parents and the social traditions of his homeland. From Said's perspective, such attachment reflects the condition of exile, in which displaced individuals remain emotionally invested in a place that can no longer be fully recovered. Saeed's longing is therefore not merely nostalgic but constitutive of his evolving identity.

Nadia's relationship with home is more complex and ambivalent. Although she experiences nostalgia and loss, she is less committed to preserving traditional social structures. Her memories of home coexist with a desire for personal freedom and self-determination. Consequently, her longing is characterized by contradiction: she misses aspects of her homeland while simultaneously recognizing the limitations it imposed upon her. This tension demonstrates that longing in diasporic experience is not uniform but varies according to individual histories and social positions.

5.2. Displacement and Identity Transformation

The migration of Saeed and Nadia exposes them to diverse cultural environments that fundamentally reshape their identities. Each movement through a magical door introduces new social realities, compelling the characters to renegotiate their understanding of self and community.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides a useful framework for interpreting these transformations. As the protagonists encounter different cultures, they develop hybrid identities that cannot be reduced to either homeland or host society. Their experiences reveal that identity is not fixed but continuously reconstructed through interaction with new cultural contexts.

The findings indicate that displacement functions simultaneously as a source of loss and opportunity. While migration disrupts established forms of belonging, it also enables new forms of self-expression and cultural engagement. The novel therefore challenges essentialist notions of identity by portraying subjectivity as fluid, dynamic, and relational.

5.3. The Quest for Belonging

Belonging emerges as a central concern throughout the novel. Both Saeed and Nadia seek meaningful connections within unfamiliar environments; however, they pursue belonging through different strategies.

Nadia actively engages with diverse communities and demonstrates a willingness to form relationships across cultural boundaries. Her openness to new experiences reflects a broader understanding of belonging as participation in evolving social networks rather than attachment to a single cultural identity. Through Nadia, Hamid suggests that belonging is achieved through adaptability and openness to difference.

In contrast, Saeed seeks belonging primarily through cultural continuity. He gravitates toward communities that share his religious and cultural background, finding comfort in familiar traditions and collective memories. His experiences illustrate how belonging can be rooted in efforts to preserve cultural identity amid displacement.

These contrasting trajectories demonstrate that belonging is neither fixed nor universal. Instead, it is negotiated differently according to individual experiences, values, and aspirations.

5.4. Magical Realism and the Representation of Migration

One of the novel's most distinctive features is its use of magical realism. The mysterious doors that transport migrants instantaneously across international borders function as powerful symbols of contemporary migration.

The doors eliminate the physical details of travel and redirect attention toward migrants' emotional experiences. By collapsing geographical distance, Hamid emphasizes psychological transformation rather than physical movement. The doors also symbolize the abruptness and uncertainty that characterize many migration experiences, highlighting the vulnerability and instability associated with displacement.

Furthermore, magical realism enables Hamid to universalize migration by detaching the narrative from specific political events. Although the novel alludes to contemporary refugee crises, its symbolic structure encourages readers to focus on broader human

experiences of loss, adaptation, and belonging. As a result, magical realism becomes an effective literary strategy for representing the emotional realities of migration.

6. Synthesis of Findings

The findings indicate that longing and belonging operate as interconnected forces in the construction of diasporic identity. Longing anchors migrants to memories, cultural traditions, and emotional attachments associated with home, while belonging motivates efforts to establish meaningful relationships within new environments. Together, these processes shape the identities of Saeed and Nadia as they navigate displacement and cultural transformation.

The study further demonstrates that magical realism enhances the representation of these experiences by illustrating migration as both physical movement and emotional transition. Through the symbolism of the doors, Hamid captures the uncertainty, fragmentation, and possibility that characterize contemporary migration. Ultimately, *Exit West* presents diasporic identity as a dynamic process continually negotiated between memory and adaptation, loss and renewal, home and mobility.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the themes of longing and belonging in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* through the theoretical frameworks of diaspora and postcolonial studies. The analysis demonstrates that migration in the novel is represented not merely as geographical relocation but as a profound emotional and psychological process that continually reshapes individual identity.

The findings reveal that longing functions as a persistent attachment to home, memory, and cultural heritage. Through the experiences of Saeed and Nadia, Hamid illustrates how displaced individuals maintain emotional connections to their origins even as they adapt to new environments. At the same time, belonging emerges as an evolving process of negotiation through which migrants seek acceptance, stability, and meaningful relationships in unfamiliar social contexts.

The study further shows that identity formation in *Exit West* is characterized by fluidity rather than permanence. The protagonists develop distinct responses to displacement, demonstrating that diasporic identities are shaped by personal experiences, cultural affiliations, and interactions with diverse communities. These transformations support Hall's argument that identity is a continuous process of becoming rather than a fixed state of being.

Moreover, Hamid's use of magical realism contributes significantly to the novel's representation of migration. The magical doors function as symbols of disruption, transition, and possibility, enabling the narrative to capture the emotional complexity of contemporary displacement. By directing attention toward migrants' psychological experiences, the novel offers a humanized perspective on migration that transcends political and geographical boundaries.

Ultimately, this study contributes to existing scholarship by foregrounding the affective dimensions of migration and demonstrating the central role of longing and belonging in diasporic identity formation. Future research may expand upon these findings by examining similar themes in other contemporary migrant narratives or by incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives from sociology, psychology, and migration studies. Through its exploration of loss, adaptation, memory, and belonging, *Exit West* remains a significant literary intervention in contemporary discussions of migration and diaspora.

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