Borders and Community Examined Through the Lens of Immigrant Narratives

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Introduction

Open any paper, or turn on any news channel, and you are likely to encounter at least one story pertaining to immigration. Whether it is the exodus of people from Syria in the wake of their ongoing civil war, or something more abstracted like the migrant caravan in South and Central America, immigration is, and will continue to be, a pertinent topic in the world.

The effect of print culture on those seeking refuge can be severe. Popular media outlets will often run stories sensationalizing immigrant violence, or in the worst cases, run stories stoking fears of erasure of the native population's culture. As a result of all these articles, these groups of people, who are often times at their most vulnerable, will be further ostracized in their new homes. Western media outlets, from reputable sources like *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*, to more sensational outlets like *The Sun* or *The Daily Mail*, usually cover immigration in a particular way: framing it in a larger political narrative. While this can be useful, it often times obscure the human aspect which lies at the center of every immigrant story.

While a myriad of sensationalized nativist propaganda has been published, not all media posits an anti-immigration stance. In recent years, we have seen a number of novelists born out of these immigrant communities who write from the immigrant perspective. Beyond simply offering a sympathetic narrative, these novels can put those readers who exist outside of these communities, at least for the duration of the novel, in the place of someone who exists within the immigrant community. In this sense, the immigrant narrative offers a sort of counterpoint to the aforementioned xenophobic rhetoric found in some media.

This project examines two such novels: *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, and *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie. Both of these novels were published within the last few years, and both are

written by authors originally from Pakistan. Though the two novels both offer an immigrant narrative, they end up covering different parts of the immigrant experience. *Exit West*, through its use of magical realism and a certain vagueness in its settings, offers a macroscopic view of how immigrants are (or are not) accepted within a community. *Home Fire*, on the other hand, is a modern retelling of the ancient Greek tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles. Through transposing this ancient story on the backdrop of the war on terror, it demonstrates the importance of finding acceptance in one's community, and what could possibly happen if one does not. Through the various characters in the novel, we find numerous ways in which someone may deal with this otherness which has been assigned to them.

Part I: Exit West

Ambiguous Silences

When reading the first few chapters of *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, the reader is immediately struck by the total normalcy of the story. It presents itself as a tale of a modern love between a woman named Nadia and a man named Saeed, two young adults from completely different upbringings who happen to live in the same middle-eastern city. In these chapters, we are regaled with the details of their initial meeting, their first dates, and the time which they would spend with one another.

An aspect of Hamid's writing that comes into focus when looking at the ambiguity in *Exit West* is Nadia and Saeed's country of origin. When compared to every other locale in the novel, the country of origin is described in romantic detail; we are given lush descriptions of the city life, from the cafes to the college and its denizens. Hamid goes to great lengths in order to make the world which the couple inhabits seem lived in. Despite this fact, one major thing is missing from the country in question: in a novel where real life locations are name dropped on a regular basis, this country is never named. The city is given a distinctive form through Hamid's extensive description, but it is simultaneously abstracted.

One possible reason for this seeming contradiction of clarity and ambiguity both in the characters of the story as well as the setting of the city of origin is the fact that further engages the reader with Nadia and Saeed's stories; The story can be placed in the context of multiple situations and still make sense. Regardless of the scenario they find themselves in, the focal point of the story remains on these two people. I believe that this writing technique forces us as readers to put ourselves in the shoes of these two protagonists. Given the ambiguity of the city of origin,

one could read the city as a city in Pakistan: the country in which Hamid resides, one which has had to contend with instances of displacement due to internal conflicts. On the other hand, one could easily read the city of origin as a city like Damascus, which would place it in the context of the war in Syria, a conflict which was concurrent to the writing of this novel (and is still going on as of the writing of this paper). By not committing to any locale in particular, the ambiguity invites the reader to read the story through whichever lens they see fit, broadening the scope of the story without necessarily having to sacrifice anything in order to do so; through description, the country remains lived in, positively realistic, while obscured just enough to make it even more relatable.

This selective murkiness mixed with a sharp focus on certain details goes further into the novel, beyond the scope of the place of origin. Over the course of the story, the reader meets only two characters who are given names: Nadia and Saeed. Every other character the reader come across is given only a background at best, even with characters that could be considered important to the story, like Saeed's parents; even though these characters play a significant role in the story, their scope is limited to how it affects the protagonists of the story. They are abstracted much in the same way that the city is. The same can be said for the majority of the writing in the novel. With only two named characters, everything else has a sort of distanced feel to it. The characters around Nadia and Saeed are both real and interchangeable at the same time.

Tonal Shift: the Loss of Normalcy

The sense of normalcy in the first half of the novel becomes an important lens to take into account when taking in the narrative as a whole. The relatively benign story of a budding

relationship the reader is greeted with in the first half of the novel does not last, and slowly that feeling of normalcy begins to turn into something more sinister as things fall further and further into chaos. Islamic militants begin to expand their territory neighborhood by neighborhood, very reminiscent of our real world ISIS and the way they take over territory in the process of building their supposed caliphate. Needless to say, fighting begins to erode the protagonists lives; a life that was exceedingly normal becomes fractured. Just as the city is literally fractured by way of becoming a patchwork of government and militant claimed neighborhoods, the lives of our protagonists figuratively become fractured in that their previously normal lives get jostled and torn asunder.

Given the loss of normalcy and safety, the reader comes to the point in the novel where Nadia and Saeed realize that the life they had been living up to this point is no longer feasible. After the unceremonious death of Saeed's mother, a victim of crossfire, life in the occupied city seems untenable, survival itself seems a monumental task. Almost as a way to contend with this change of tone, the story takes a turn to the fantastical.

As a sort of last ditch effort, the couple begins to pay credence to a particular rumor that has been permeating the air. As the militants continue to dissect the city piece by piece, slowly claiming the entirety of the city one glimmer of hope stands for the populace: seemingly at random, it is said that any given door in a person's home or place of business can be replaced with an ominous, opaque black rectangle; a portal that is said to lead to another place entirely. The destination or well-being of the people who enter the portals are completely unknown once they make the trip through; the only thing that can be said for sure is that wherever they end up, they do not come back. With their backs to the proverbial flame, Nadia and Saeed force

themselves to take a leap of faith, reluctantly leave Saeed's father behind, and seek passage through one of these doors.

It says a lot of Nadia and Saeed's current living situation that they are willing to gamble their lives on these portals. The fighting between the militants and nationalist forces becomes more than a simple backdrop for the couple's story when Saeed's mother is struck and killed by a stray bullet during a firefight:

> A stray heavy-caliber round passing through the windshield of her family's car and taking with it a quarter of Saeed's mother's head, not while she was driving, for she had not driven in months, but while she was checking inside for an earing which she had thought she had misplaced. (Hamid, 74)

The conflict, and by proxy, death, becomes real in the lives of Nadia and Saeed. This is the point where they realize that they must act while they still can, otherwise they may become a casualty just like Saeed's mother, even if it means leaving the place that they consider home. While it may not always be as violent, this is a point that any migrant must reach before they make the passage, a point where the possible positive outcomes of the passage, no matter how small the odds are that they make it there in the end, has to outweigh the consequences of staying behind.

The Real Consequences of Passage

Looking at the idea of seeking passage to another country by any means necessary as a sort of magical act makes sense. Much like in the novel, people who make the trek from their place of origin embroiled with conflict, whether it be a place like South Sudan or Syria, to a place of refuge like London or Toronto, they do so without fully knowing the outcome; all they

know is that it has to be better than the alternative. While some end up like Nadia and Saeed, successfully making it to a place of refuge, that is an outcome that cannot be guaranteed. A particularly tragic case that speaks to the perils of passage comes in the form of the real-life story of Alan Kurdi.

Kurdi was a three-year-old child from the city of Kobani in northern Syria. Given the Syrian civil-war, a conflict which as of this writing is still ongoing, it is self evident as to why the Kurdis found it necessary to seek passage out of Syria by any means necessary, hoping to ultimately make it to Canada, where they had family waiting. One leg of the trip involved traversing the strait between Turkey and Greece via a rubber dinghy designed to hold eight people; sixteen people were on it for this particular trip. It lasted five minutes in the water, and Alan Kurdi gained worldwide attention for the worst reason possible, when Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir photographed Kurdi’s lifeless body washed up on a Turkish shore (see fig.1).

Fig. 1: Alan Kurdi washed ashore in Turkey (Photo Credit: Nilufer Demir)

Alan Kurdi's story serves as a very real example of the possibilities that lie on the other side of the black doors in *Exit West*. For every Malala Yusafzai or Mo Farah there is an Alan Kurdi. None of the refugees who go through the doors know if they will be greeted with salvation or death, and yet they still choose to carry through with the passage despite this danger. Given this, it should be evident that whatever drives them from their place of origin, it must be something that is able to reckon with the possibility of death. When one looks at the passage through this lens, it gives the reader a sense of what these refugees may be thinking, and why they may be willing to take this risk; whatever it is, it is better than going on living in a war-zone. That being said, even those who make it through are not out of the proverbial woods;

there are still far more variables to contend with even if they are greeted with the best of possible outcomes: refuge on foreign soil.

Nationalism, violence and Communitarianism

Nadia and Saeed overcome the odds, and on their passage through the black door end up on the Greek island of Mykonos. Though they have made it to what feasibly seems like the best of possible outcomes, what they are greeted with is far from salvation. The two take up residence in a local refugee camp filled with many others who had traveled through the black doors, the range of languages and ethnicities running the gamut. They sleep on the ground, residents of a temporary tent city. While braving the elements in a tent may seem difficult enough, it is better than the life they came from. That being said, there is still one more thing to contend with upon arrival in Mykonos: the nativist subsection of the Mykonosians. After the couple spends the late afternoon attempting, futilely, to fish a meal out of the Mediterranean, dusk begins to fall on the island of Mykonos. As the sun begins to set, the scene takes a turn to the menacing:

> It was dark when they saw four men in the distance, approaching along the beach. Nadia said they should go, and Saeed agreed, and the couple walked away, quickly, but the men seemed to follow, and Saeed and Nadia increased their pace, increased it as much as they could manage, even though Nadia slipped and cut her arm on the rocks. The men were gaining on them, and Saeed and Nadia began to wonder aloud what of their things they could leave behind, to lighten the load, or as an offering that might sate their pursuers (Hamid, 116).

This is their first encounter with the natives of Mykonos, a meeting with a marauding gang of men seemingly looking for a fight, given their complete disinterest in the couple's material goods. This, unfortunately, is not uncommon for refugees in foreign countries. Wherever there is a surge of refugees, news of nativist gangs harassing migrants, similar to the ones found in this section of *Exit West,* becomes a not-so uncommon story.

This narrative extends beyond that of civilian gangs and into the police and military once the couple find themselves in London, where the black doors lead those seeking refuge into the unoccupied homes of the local bourgeoisie in the neighborhoods of Kensington and Chelsea. These parts of London are eventually turned into something of a ghetto, with defined policed borders and clear internal divisions based off ethnicity. The government employs siege like tactics and shuts off the water and electricity which flow into these neighborhoods, in the hopes of bleeding the refugees out like animals. This line of action reaches a crescendo, with the military raiding certain inhabited buildings, with little regard for the lives of those living there. Fires rage through these buildings, and with no water to put out the flames, people perish. It makes one think: these people have made it to London, their situation has not changed all that much. Though their physical location has changed, the new life they seek is deferred.

London is representative of a lot of things in *Exit West*. While it is not the first named place they arrive in (That would be Mykonos), it can be thought of as the first primary destination. The couple are in a house instead of a tent, and make a real effort to make a life for themselves in the ghettos of London. While they try to make London a home, it never quite becomes a home in earnest. It is at this point that Saeed and Nadia begin to drift apart. This is largely due to their conflicting definitions of what home and belonging means. Saeed seeks to

surround himself with people from the same country of origin and creed. He finds comfort in the familiarity. This falls in line with the “Mosaic” model of multiculturalism, where different groups of immigrants become divided along ethnic lines in a given city. This can be most easily seen in early 20th century New York City. The mosaic model of multiculturalism lead to the creation of districts like Chinatown, Hell’s Kitchen, and Little Italy; Saeeds piece of London is a similar cloistered off section of the ghetto.

Nadia has a very different idea of home and belonging. Throughout the novel, she is representative of a type of multiculturalism more in line with the “Melting Pot” theory, where cultural exchange trumps the idea of ethnically sectioned neighborhoods. Nadia embodies the idea of pluralism.

Sociologist Will Kymicka explores the pitfalls of the “ethnic mosaic” model championed by Saeed in his work *Multicultural Citizenship* through the lens of Canadian immigration: “while ‘ethnic mosaic’ carries the connotation of respect for the integrity of immigrant cultures, in practice it simply meant that the immigrants to Canada had a choice of two dominant cultures to assimilate to” (Kymlicka 14). The melting pot theory, which incorporates social exchange can lessen the strain between disparate cultures because they gain something common in the exchange; this can be anything from food to art. Nadia and Saeed have echanged nationalist belonging for belonging to ethnically marked communities variously integrated with or held apart from the national communities that they have travelled to via the magic portals they entered into.

Exit West and its Doors

Back home, before Nadia and Saeed made the passage, people had sworn on the existence of these magic doors, as preposterous as they might have sounded. After the militants wrested control of their neighborhood, our protagonists of the story decided that if they were to stay any longer, the militants would eventually find a reason to kill them (or, as is the case with Saeed's mother, will unfortunately become a casualty of the crossfire), and decided to risk their well being by seeking passage through one of these doors.

The scene that had followed played out like a rebirth. Saeed and Nadia had booked passage through the doors (incidentally, from people who look exactly like militants), and were ushered through the portal despite cold feet. Though they were seemingly just walking through a doorway, the experience was far from that simple:

> It was said in those days that the passage was like dying and being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and as gasping struggle as she fought to exit it, and she felt cold and bruised and damp as she lay on the floor of the room at the other side, trembling and too spent at first to stand, and she thought, while she strained to fill her lungs, that this dampness must be her own sweat (Hamid, 104).

There is a clear disconnect between the action Nadia takes (walking through a doorway) and the effect it has on her person. She awakens on the opposite end of the portal, appearing haggard from the passage through the door; as though, in an instant, she lived a harrowing two weeks of her life, without actually going through the motions in her physical body. Though she was instantly transported from one location to another thanks to the mysterious portal, she shows

signs of struggle, signs that she had just undertaken an arduous task and came out on the other side depleted.

Given that this novel was released in late 2017, we can all but be sure that it was written parallel to the Syrian civil war, along with the mass exodus of refugees which followed in its wake (along with the mass hysteria peddled in the media that coincided with said exodus). Though the country in which the first half of the novel takes place is never explicitly stated, we can imagine that the writer might have used the settings of Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan during these unstable times as something of an inspiration for his story about Nadia and Saeed. The doors which lead to other places for refugees can be seen in a sense as a stand in for the process of human trafficking which refugees must go through in order to escape the war zone that was their home, whether by land or sea. There is something in the text that concretely supports this: Nadia and Saeed's destination upon exiting the portal, the Greek island of Mykonos.

According to the United Nations refugee agency, between the months of January and June of 2015, around 68,000 refugees arrived in Greece by sea, the majority arriving on one of the many outer islands. That figure is nearly half of the 137,000 refugees recorded coming to the entirety of Europe by sea in that same timespan, meaning, that if you were a refugee who paid for passage via sea to Europe, there was a coin flips chance that you would end up in Greece. Given that Nadia and Saeed were seeking refuge from an unnamed wartorn country in the middle east, we can assume that the doors are a stand in for the much more harrowing process of seeking asylum via being smuggled into a country, but that still does not exactly answer the question as to why Hamid would abstract such a seemingly important part of a refugees story behind the facade of magic realism.

In search of an answer, we can turn to literary theory. Pierre Macherey has a pair of theories which he defines as silences and absences. For looking at *Exit West*, and the doors previously explained in particular, we can focus on the idea of a silence: Macherey defines a silence as an omission from a text that gives us insight into the ideological context in which a literary work is written. To be a silence instead of an absence, the author must have knowledge in relation to the omission, meaning that something was, consciously or unconsciously, omitted from the work. The omission itself becomes a literary device used by the author. Hamids omission of Nadia and Saeed's physical passage from their home to the country of refuge, whether it be Greece, England, or the United States, is a clear example of a silence, given that Hamid must have been more than aware of the humanitarian crisis that coincided with the writing of this novel. Given the tone of the novel, as well as several choices Hamid made in writing it, we can deduce that this was a conscious decision on his part

Hamid himself backs up these claims, and points to them as his reasoning behind the trope of the doors. He ultimately wrote them in order to further humanize Nadia and Saeed, to make the focus the more humanizing and relatable aspects of their lives. In a PBS News Hour interview he says that "So much is so focused of how somebody crosses the border... we think the people who have done that are different from us... when you take that away, you are left with people who are just like us." The de-emphasis on Saeed and Nadia's physical passage from the Middle East to Europe instead emphasizes everything else about their character. Instead of reading about the process of traversing the Mediterranean in a small boat (like many people have in real life) which may act to only push us further away from the experiences of Nadia and Saeed, we focus on the most human aspects of Saeed and Nadia, like their relationship with one

another and the communities they find themselves a part of. The reader focuses less on the dynamic of a group of people crossing into a country, and more on the way they perceive and are perceived once they find themselves at their destination. It goes back to the first lines of this section: the reader is struck by the normalcy of it all. These people are no different from you. The refugees escaping what could accurately be described as hell on earth, are absolutely no different from you. They have just traversed a border into a different world.

The No Borders Movement as it pertains to *Exit West*

According to some prominent political philosophers, an irreconcilable dilemma lies at the center of all political resistance: in resisting whichever system it is that one wishes to overturn, one inadvertently is reinforcing and legitimizing the system further by operating within it, and seeking to change it. As stated by Hannah Arendt "We demand rights from the state, when it is the state that denies us rights in the first place." The "right to rights" as it is known is an idea that can only be executed upon and upheld by the very structures that deny it, or, succinctly summed up by Natasha King: "how do we talk about migration in ways that do not reproduce the same socio-political processes that create the very inequalities we seek to oppose?" (King 16) This dilemma lies at the core of what is known as the no borders movement.

no borders posits the utopian idea of a society in which the freedom of movement, the ability to travel freely and settle wherever it is one feels they can thrive best, is an inalienable human right. Proponents who hold this belief view the idea of "illegal peoples" as a man made problem which exists solely to attach a legal status to those people whose presence in a state is seen as problematic in one way or another. In a way, the very idea of migration presupposes

borders, and as such can be circumvented by a different way of thinking, such as the stateless world seen as the ideal of the no borders movement.

This posits the question: what is a border in the context of the no borders movement? The most straightforward answer to this question would be to take out a map and point to the lines which separate the different countries; they are simply the boundaries which divide different sovereign nations from one another. While this definition may be "correct" in the sense that a dictionary definition for any given concept is correct, the lived ramifications of borders go beyond the realm of a benign line of demarcation. An example given in *no borders* by Natasha King which complicates this definition is the fact that British customs officers operate in the ports of France, and that Australian refugee camps are located within the completely different state of Papua New Guinea (King 15). If borders are just the lines, then how do their influence spread into neighboring territories, those which the borders should be separating them from in the first place?

What this means is that a border is an extremely complex thing, thanks in large part to our hyper-globalized world. It is something even more immaterial than an abstract line. A more helpful way to think about the definition of borders is in the way in which one experiences the state apparatus. In this definition, borders are entirely experiential, and as such, the perception of a border will vary based on how it affects each person. A person who was a part of the migrant caravan, a large group of people seeking asylum in the United States via its southern border with Mexico, will view the border in a much different way than say, a business person relocating from Canada to the United States for economic reasons. In a sense, these people's experience border *is* what separates these people into different strata; their relation to the border defines the border.

The story of Nadia and Saeed is one of borders. Whether it is the borders of the militant controlled territory in their home city, or the borders which they cross in order to arrive in London or Mykonos, the two of them are constantly crossing these boundaries in search of a better life than what they had before. That being said, their story is not defined by these borders.

Whether Hamid realizes it or not (and one must think he does), this narrative cleverly offers an almost perfect way of circumventing the "right to rights" dilemma through its use of uncontrollable portals that operate outside the realm of any state in the world. Since the various government bodies cannot control the way in which these "migrants" come over their borders (they can police the portals, as seen on Mykonos, but they can never stop more from appearing), the very concept of the border, and perhaps the state as we know it, falls apart entirely. Instead of being in a position of power over the migrants, they instead have to deal with the migrants on a level playing field since there is no border to control: the border fails to define the migrant. Through the different sections of *Exit West*, each geographic location they find themselves in in particular, we are given different visions of what a world without states or borders could look like, ranging from the most profane tribalistic outcome, to the most tranquil utopian community imaginable, and everything else in between.

A portion of the novel which gains new meaning when looked at through the lens of the no borders movement is the section in which Nadia and Saeed are living in the neighborhood in London. What is interesting here is that, despite the perceived disintegration of borders, given the mass exodus of people from various places around the world to this particular neighborhood in London, we are given two completely different endpoints following this disintegration. We have Saeed, who chooses to remain among "his people," or those who arrive from a similar

geographic location, and Nadia, who fails to see the importance in dividing themselves into groups of shared origin. Saeed's actions call into question the very idea of the no borders movement; here we are given a scenario which operates outside of the machinations of the state, and yet people still separate themselves into a type of hierarchy, a sort of "power in numbers" type of mentality. With Nadia, the idea of "home" itself is more ambiguous, and as such, she cannot ally herself with other people based simply on their shared place of origin. This section of the novel explores the idea that, even without borders, human beings would stratify and create borders themselves based on some perceived shared origin, even in the absence of the state. It mirrors the fatalistic idea that conflict and division are inevitable traits of human society, and that the idea of a world without borders is just a thought experiment; a pipe dream with no substance to it.

While this may be the case in the cordoned off portion of London the protagonists find themselves in, it was not always that way. When first stepping through the portal from Mykonos to London, they had found themselves in the confines of an upscale mansion, which was inexplicably vacant. Though they had their reservations about squatting, they ultimately claimed a room, as they had spent the previous few chapters of the novel living in the harsh conditions of a refugee camp. Over time, the house became inhabited by migrants from various places around the world, and through this something extraordinary happened: despite the differences in language, ethnicity and creed, the denizens of the mansion all lived as a cohesive unit. For the brief amount of time the couple called the mansion home, they found themselves in what seems to be the utopian ideal of the no borders movement. This house mirrors, in a lot of ways, the communal experiments in the early 19th century of the United States, like New Harmony,

Indiana. Towns like this were places where the entire community would collectively own the land where they lived and worked, and would attempt to make it through life as a single cohesive unit.

New Harmony in particular was the project of the idealistic industrialist Robert Owen. Built on the site of a previous community, Harmony, New Harmony was supposed to be a fully planned community, built on the idea of a better life for all through things like communal living and free education. It was a fully secular community founded on humanistic ideals. Owen was able to gather about one thousand settlers for his new community, but that was the easy part. Unfortunately, what ultimately happens in *Exit West* with London mirrors what happened to New Harmony; different groups and factions formed with conflicting interests, and the dream abruptly gave way to the division and infighting which we see in almost any community today. Within two years, from 1825 to 1827, the idea for a utopian society in New Harmony, Indiana was born and abandoned.

More examples of ways in which a world without borders would possibly look like can be found in the novel's frequent digressions from the main storyline and characters. We will occasionally be broken away from Nadia and Saeed in favor of a small self-contained anecdote about another instance of immigration, and how that one may be playing out in relation to the story of the main characters. One such story is of the Tamil family in Dubai. They arrive in the city, awestruck by its opulence. Presumably at a beach resort, given the presence of "mostly pale tourists on towels and loungers in a state of near-total undress" (Hamid, 92). The family is quickly whisked away by police. We are not given much information about this family, but we can assume that they went through a door in search of a better life, evidenced by the fact that the

entire family went along for the journey. Their story is marked by that of complete alienation; their mere presence in this city is a complete aberration.

This is contrasted by the story of the old man in Amsterdam. A door opens up in the common shed of the apartment complex where this man lives. Rather than treating it as an aberration, as the police do in Dubai, he does not pay it much mind. What follows is a relationship which never would have blossomed had these portals never opened. He meets a kindred spirit in the form of an old man from Brazil and the two hit it off, culminating in the start of a romantic relationship.

As such, the narrative between the two older men is very different from the one of the Tamil family. We see what Hall would call a "perfectly transparent communication." Both parties are operating from similar point of view, so there is no misunderstanding or distortion between the two parties. Though the two old men are from different parts of the world, they embrace the new global community they have been thrust into, and sort of encapsulate the final quarter of the novel and its idea of embracing plurality, as it is something that cannot be reversed. Hamid is taking the same concept with the doors and immigration but is encoding it through a very different lens, one that focuses less on the physicality of immigration (the escape from poverty, the search for a better life), and instead shows it to us through a lens of something purely emotional. This sudden erasure of borders, and instantaneous travel, allows these two individuals to find each other in a way that would not have been possible prior to the opening of the doors.

Exit West and its Intended Audience

Trough *Exit West*, the reader sees a story whose aim is to elicit sympathy for the plight of immigrants upon arriving at their destination. Those who would benefit most from reading such a story, however, are unlikely to encounter the novel for a number of reasons. The circles which read and review the book tend to be a closed circuit, without those who hold differing views knowing about, let alone entertaining, the novel. This discrepancy can be elaborated upon by examining it through the lens of Stuart Hall's model of communication.

Stuart Hall's model of communication presented in *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* was created with television in mind but can be applied to other forms of media. Hall's theory posits the presence of an encoder and a decoder, a more active model than the traditional sender-receiver model. In Hall's model, the audience decodes a given piece of media to extract what message they can out of it. It is at this point that decoding can result in a digression of interpretations from what would be the preferred interpretation set by the encoder. Hall calls these digressive interpretations "misunderstandings," though by that term, he does not mean that the decoder is "wrong." Rather, Hall argues decoding is actually an active act of "re-encoding" and depends on the kind of denotative ("literal interpretations") and connotative ("associative interpretations") associations the audience's meaning structure provides. This meaning structure is formed by the audience member's position in the society they live in (affected by things such as socioeconomic background, ethnicity, gender, etc.) To encapsulate the idea of "misunderstandings," Hall uses the example of a sweater. It can be literally

interpreted as a warm piece of clothing, while it could also be associated with the idea of winter approaching.

This brings us to what finally becomes of the London section of the novel, what could be seen as a sort of futurist ideal of the no borders movement. The nativist government comes to terms with the migrants. The newly arrived displaced people will provide the labor of building new, high density communities, using resources provided by the government, in exchange for the opportunity to live in the communities they are building. It is the type of egalitarian solution one would see in a science fiction novel, citizenship earned through one's own hard work, complete with the hypothetical super-structures that are meant to house the cities of the future. While this could be considered a better outcome than the division present in the tribalistic end discussed previously, Hamid is quick to point out that this is not as perfect of an ending as it may seem. Bigotry does not magically disappear overnight, and the nativist still abhor the presence of the migrants. Though the government enacts what could be seen as a win-win solution, the people still hold onto nationalistic and ethnic identities which ultimately serve to divide people. On top of this, there is a certain steril quality to the housing which the migrants are building: large concrete boxes meant only to keep the rain off of one's head, the kind one would read about in a dystopian cyberpunk novel. Nadia and Saeed, though in a relatively good position, see this situation as untenable, and book passage to their final destination, San Francisco.

In San Francisco, we see what one could say is the most realistic outcome of a mass migration that could be brought on by a catastrophe, climate or otherwise. They find themselves in the hills outside of San Francisco, living in a shack. It is by no means a pretty living situation, but it lacks the hostility present in their previous destinations. Despite the seemingly grave

housing situation, the two appear to be the closest to happiness since their departure from the city of origin. This is the one place in the novel where something coming close to a sense of normalcy re-enters their lives. They are surrounded by a community that tacitly welcomes them. To compound this, the reader is given a number of call-backs to better times in the city of origin in this portion of the novel, whether that be the joint that Nadia and Saeed share with each other, or the communities that they begin to integrate themselves into. Both Nadia and Saeed find a life that exists beyond the basest need of their own survival, and as a result, eachother.

Negative Views on Immigration in the UK and the US

London is one of the main locations in the novel. For years now, England has been dealing with their own rise in ethnic nationalism and xenophobia exemplified by prominence of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the "Brexit" referendum. While the place of migrants in society has always been an issue in the UK, the discourse surrounding migrants became particularly ugly in the months leading up to brexit.

An example of this can be seen in *The Daily Mail*, a populist, right wing newspaper which has been in print for close to century in Britain. The article attached with this guide is from May 25th, 2016, 28 days before the brexit referendum. This article titled "The Last Whites of the East End" is about a documentary cataloging the changing demographic of the East End of London, from what has traditionally been a "white working class" neighborhood to "the most multicultural place in the UK" (Curtis). The article highlights negative what they consider negative aspects of the immigrant population, reminiscing about how things "used to be." It ends with a line intending to scare people, with a local bus driver saying how he now "feels like an

outsider in the community." The entire article is trying to stoke fear in the British population, to equate multiculturalism with the end of "British culture" as they know it.

We can see similar examples coming out of publications in the United States, particularly since the election in 2016. One article written by Rich Lowry of *The National Review* entitled "The Truth about Separating Kids" tries to frame the policy of separating families at the border in a positive light. This article came out in July of 2018, around the same time that the news broke of the government's policy of separating children from their parents when illegal immigrant families are detained. Lowry claims that the removal of the policy "Not only... [would] make a mockery of our laws, it creates an incentive for people to keep bringing children with them" (Lowry). He suggests that families bring their children with them solely in order to be treated more humanely in the event that they are caught crossing the border; in other words, the children have no intrinsic value to the migrant but are only there to "fool" border patrol agents into treating them more humanely.

Given these two examples, we can say that the view of immigration from the dominant in western society (i.e., the government) is, at this point in history, very conservative. This point is especially highlighted when contrasted with the point of view found present in the passages of *Exit West*.

The Positive Reception of *Exit West*

Upon release in March of 2017, *Exit West* was met with near universal acclaim from literary critics. Publications like *The New York Times* praised the book for its progressive views on nativist trends and mass migration. One reviewer in particular, Jia Tolentino of *The New*

Yorker, calls the novel “Instantly canonical” and considers Hamid’s version of our world to be “so firm and unerring” and contends that the he presents an “understanding of our time and its most pressing questions” (Tolentino). Tolentino understands the book as Hamid had written it since both view the issue of mass migration from a far more progressive angle than a number of Western readers.

The few negative reviews that were published merely took issue with Hamid’s writing not being clear or descriptive enough, rather than the political topics broached by book. Isaac Chotiner of *Slate* complains that Hamid defines the two main characters “as thinly as possible.” despite being critical of his writing, Chotiner agrees with Hamid’s political sentiment, saying “at a time when migrants are seen as dangerous, faceless masses, Hamid’s book is a missed opportunity to provide migrant characters with some substance and distinguishing features” (Chotiner). The problem is not in the statement *Exit West* makes but rather Hamid’s stylistic choices. For some, the vagueness of the characters is one of the novel’s strong points as it allows the reader to put themselves in the place of Nadia and Saeed, internalizing their story.

The “dominant” reader in today’s society

Since few negative reviews of *Exit West* can be found in prominent media sources, one can find this negative reception in self-published reviews from services like Amazon, Goodreads, or amateur literary blogs in order to get a better understanding of how a wider audience is decoding the book. Given that these reviews are personal and often unedited, they can often give us a more “raw” take on the novel that we would not find in noteworthy publications. One such reviewer, an Amazon user named Cindy Adair, writes:

> How should immigrants and refugees be treated? What toll do survival and migration have on a person and their relationships? What part does religion play in a person's outlook on life? While these things are important to contemplate and discuss, it wasn't what I was expecting.

The acceptance of all migrants, regardless of how they arrive in the country, means the end of borders and nations as some readers would know them. These concepts are something that *Exit West* forces the reader to confront and while they might be recognized as "important to contemplate and discuss" in the abstract as Adair admits, they are certainly not topics many in the dominant want or "expected" to be forced to think about in the concrete.

These self-published negative reviews can also offer us a glimpse into how different literary subcultures may have received the novel. An instance of this can be seen in the review of *Exit West* offered by "embrodski" on the "Death is Bad" blog, a website catered towards fans of genre fiction. Embrodski says that *Exit West* is what happens when "a self-important LitFic author decides to use a touch of magic, or near-future speculation, in a novel, and all the EarthFic'ers gush about how imaginative and unique it is." (note: "EarthFic" is fiction based in reality, "LitFic" is literary fiction, contrasted by genre fiction, which in this blog is preferable.) Embrodski has a knee-jerk disdain for publications like *The New York TImes* which they regard as emblematic of "the literati elite." They compound this by saying that they should have been more careful in choosing the book based on the review: "Of course, that it is beloved of those people ["the literati elite"] should have been my first warning." The term "literati elite" is important to note because it is used to make sweeping statements about those with cultural capital, instead of the economic capital the word "elite" might normally indicate. This shows an

inherent anti-intellectualism to Embrodski's meaning structure, a trait not uncommon in a lot of right-wing populism. For example, we frequently see this type of hatred directed towards late night talk show hosts from people entrenched in conservative circles. Celebrities such as Stephen Colbert or John Oliver hold a lot of cultural capital and their talking points often denounce conservative ideologies. Their success is emblematic of the fact that political power and economic capital do not necessarily translate to cultural capital.

Lack of Communication between Ideologies

The isolation of conservative and liberal spheres of the western world is the core problem in trying to use Hall's model when looking for misunderstandings in the reception of a book like *Exit West*. Take, for instance, this pivotal excerpt from towards the end of the novel:

> But a week passed. And then another. And then the natives and their forces stepped back from the brink... And so, irrespective of the reason, decency on this occasion won out, and bravery, for courage is demanded not to attack when afraid, and the electricity and water came on again, and negotiations ensued, and word spread, and among the cherry trees on Palace Gardens Terrace Saeed and Nadia and their neighbors celebrated, they celebrated long into the night. (Hamid 166)

These lines in the novel mark the moment when Hamid transitions into a hypothetical narrative; one where the nativists in London come to realize that mass migration will not end and decide to negotiate with the migrants in order for both parties to have a peaceful existence. From the position occupied by the majority of literary critics in prominent media publications, this could be considered a triumphant moment, while for those reading from a dominant position, this

hypothetical reality could represent something more menacing, a capitulation to the migrant group

<u>Part II: Home Fire</u>

Immigration and "Otherness"

While both *Exit West* and *Home Fire* are narratives pertaining to immigration, there is an aspect to their stories which separates them on a fundamental level: both Nadia and Saeed in *Exit West* begin their arc in the country of origin, while Pervaiz, Aneeka and Isma were all born and raised in London. As such, Isma and the twins are second generation immigrants, while Nadia and Saeed are first generation. This generational difference, and what it means for the definition of "home" to each of the individual characters, is pivotal in both narratives. One could argue, however, that this difference is more important to the second generation immigrants in *Home Fire.*

The second generation immigrants, those born to immigrant parents, could be thought to have a larger metaphorical hill to climb than their parents. As a first generation immigrant, one begins life in a given place, growing up around a given set of cultural customs. This could be thought of as their "first life" or their "first home." Upon leaving this place of origin and attempting to make a life for themselves in another part of the world, they are making for themselves a "second life" of sorts. In this sense, the first generation immigrant has two homes: the place of origin and the place of arrival. They can feasibly feel as though they belong in both places (and, if worse comes to worst, they have the option of returning to the country of origin).

As a second generation immigrant, the parent's place of origin is removed from this equation. While the child is tangentially connected to the place of origin through family, the

place of origin can never be considered "home" in the same way that the parents see it. The second generation was not brought up in the cultural customs of the parent's place of origin, and as such are removed from it. Home for the children, for better or worse, is found solely in the place of arrival. This can be considered problematic for the second generation immigrant, especially if they inhabit a place where nativist ideals are common, and one could be considered "not *x* enough" based solely on their physical appearance or practices. In this idea lies one of the main conflict of *Home Fire*: When one is considered foreign in their own home, what or where can they turn to? Possible answers to this question can be extrapolated from the different characters we meet in the novel.

On one end of the spectrum, we have Karamat Lone, a first generation immigrant from Pakistan. Karamat Lone represents the idea of personal erasure in the pursuit of societal acceptance. Though originally a Muslim, he vocally renounces the religion as well as his country of origin, marries a wealthy white woman, and lives in the upper-class neighborhood of Notting Hill. He does everything in his power to assimilate into the nativists ideal of what a "Londoner" should be. He is rewarded for this, as he becomes home secretary of the United Kingdom.

Karamat Lone can be seen as the antagonist of *Home Fire*. Referring to himself as "the Lone wolf," He shares the same cultural background as the Pasha family, but chose to take a completely different path upon his arrival. Instead of holding on to some semblance of his cultural identity, he distances himself as far away from it as he possibly can, while each of the Pasha siblings hold on to their identity in their own way.

Eamon is the son of Karamat Lone, and as one can expect, he inherits a bit of his father's worldview. When Isma asks Eamon about his father in the start of the novel, he replies that "You

know what fathers and sons are like... they're our guides into manhood, for starters." (Shamsie, 37). He strives to be better than his father, but still holds him in a certain esteem, referring to his detractors as "*those* Muslims." This dynamic changes later in the novel.

With Parvaiz in Raqqa, Aneeka sees Eamon as a means to getting her brother back to England, being that he is the son of the home secretary. Through falling in love with Aneeka, Eamon finds a new lens to view his father through. Occupying a similar space to Karamat Lone is the oldest of the three siblings, Isma. Though, rather than being driven by a machiavellian desire to increase ones standing in society, Isma instead embraces the "melting pot" model of multiculturalism out of a kind of pragmatism. Being the eldest, she is in charge of taking care of the younger twins after their mother dies. Her desire to blend in comes from a place of security; she does not wish to stand out; she has loftier things to worry about in taking care of her family.

Once the siblings come of age and Isma is no longer responsible for their well being, she continues along with what had been a long held dream of hers, continuing her studies in America. Though she is at what could be considered the pinnacle of society by the standards of some in American society, she is still met with being treated as something of an outsider. Even though she was born and raised in London, and is pursuing her PhD in the United States, she fears how she is perceived by her peers.

That being said, Isma refuses to assimilate completely. While Karamat Lone publicly denounces Islam and attempts to distance himself from his country of origin, Isma does not, even while completely understanding that she will be looked at differently by her fellow citizens for doing so. This is illustrated in the opening scene of the novel, where she is being detained for a

“random check” prior to her flight to the United States. She highlights her complete understanding of the situation in that she:

> made sure not to pack anything that would invite comment or questions - no Quran, no family photos, no books on her area of academic interest- but even so, the officer took hold of every item of Isma’s clothing and ran it between her thumb and fingers, not so much searching for hidden pockets as judging the quality of the material. (Shamsie, 3)

In order to make her life easier, she chooses to hide certain parts of her life, but even that is not enough. Being that Isma is a PhD candidate traveling to the United States to complete her studies, she knows exactly what is going on. When the guard says, in regards to Isma’s jacket “‘This isn’t yours,’” Isma’s inner monologue “was sure she didn’t mean *because it’s at least a size too large* but rather *it’s too nice for someone like you*” (Shamsie, 3). Isma represents something of a balancing act for the second generation immigrant, in that she understands the importance of, and will not renounce, her roots, but also understands the machinations of the state and her relative powerlessness before it. She can only live a respectable life and hope it is enough.

This brings us to the twins, Aneeka and Parvaiz. We see that Aneeka relies heavily on family and community in order to deal with the otherness associated with the life of a second generation immigrant. Being twins, Aneeka and Parvaiz were very close to one another growing up. Given Isma’s role as surrogate mother, the twins shared a bond different than that of the one they shared with their eldest sister. There had always been a level of transparency between the two, and they relied on one another.

Once the twins come of age this dynamic changes. Without the children to take care of, Isma applies for a visa to study in the United States, and despite what she thought would happen, the visa is accepted. With this, the somewhat inseparable immediate family comes undone, as Isma's depature sets into motion the events that will eventually lead to the tragic ending of the novel. Both of the twins have their misgivings about Isma going to America. Aneeka, who ultimately wishes her sister luck, attends university, hoping to "find" herself in the process. Parvaiz, who does not want his sister to go, finds work at the local grocer.

Pervaiz shows concerns of being an outsider in his own home. Though they may have similar fears, he does not have the upper class trappings of his older sister to fall back on. As such, his journey takes him somewhere else. Through his grocer job, and childhood friends, he comes into contact with men who are seeking recruits for ISIS. While the three children all hold the government in contempt to a certain extent, none of them harbor ill-will or militaristic beliefs.

Through indoctrination and the selective unveiling of facts he had previously been unaware of, this changes for Parvaiz. This feeling of otherness, which had previously been only an amorphous cloud, something like a constant background noise, is brought directly into the foreground and becomes something to mobilize behind for Parvaiz. He perceives that his roots in England are rejecting him, and as such he looks elsewhere for that affirmation, namely his father, the Jihadi Adil Pasha, better known by his jihadi name, Abu Parvaiz. Pervaiz is drawn in by the idealized past presented to him by recruiters in London, telling him that his father was a great fighter without parallel, and that he should strive to emulate him. The recruiters give him what he sees as a concrete path, and answer to the question of his absentee father that had been haunting

him for some time now. With no real authority figure to turn to, he falls further into their ranks and eventually makes his way to Syria to take part in the jihadist's media branch. Parvaiz was looking for something more than the security that Isma sought, or the advancement that Karamat Lone was searching for; his is a roots seeking movement, he wanted a sense of belonging in a home that he had never chosen for himself.

Being that they are twins, Aneeka and Parvaiz' situation is somewhat identical, though how they go about attempting to remedy it is where they split. Aneeka can be thought to represent the "mosaic" model of multiculturalism, in that rather than erasing that which separates us culturally, we instead embrace it and hold it as a point of pride, leading to greater cultural exchange, and hopefully an understanding between otherwise disparate groups. Where Parvaiz looks to a past that never existed in the form of the idealized version of his father presented by the recruiters, while Aneeka looks forward and to the community which surrounds her.

It is this attachment to family that leads to the death of Aneeka. With Parvaiz joining ISIS and leaving the country, she does everything in her power to try and get him back. But, as mentioned, once Parvaiz wants to come back, it is already too late and he can no longer come back to England as he has been labeled an enemy of the state. It is here that Aneeka sees Eamon as an opportunity to get Parvaiz back by having him fall in love with her. While originally a utilitarian relationship, it blossoms into something real for the both of them. Once the media gets wind of this, however, and sensationalizes the fact that the sister of Parvaiz Pasha was dating the son of the home secretary, the media descends into a feeding frenzy with Aneeka at the center.

Aneeka's section of *Home Fire* is entirely told through the medium of press releases and news clippings. She is given demeaning names like "Knickers," and portrayed as something of a

femme fatale using Eamon to get her way. These news stories have titles such as “Ho-Jabi! Pervy Pasha’s twin sister engineered sex trysts with home secretary's son!” (Shamsie, 214). Her section of the novel is informed entirely by how the public and the state perceives her, and the backlash that she faces in her decision to fight for her jihadi brother. Her section gives the reader the perspective of the average British citizen reading these articles about Aneeka.

She eventually goes to Pakistan in order to be with her brother’s body, holding vigil over it in a white robe. In the final scene, she is reunited with Eamon, but he is overwhelmed by militants as they strap a bomb to him; they embrace awaiting the explosion. Aneeka, like her brother, is abandoned by the state and her family, and dies as a result. I believe that Aneeka’s story is best summed up through this section, in which Eamon addresses the media and by proxy his father:

> She has been abused for the crime of daring to love while covering her head, vilified for believing that she had the right to want a life with someone whose history is at odds with hers, denounced for wanting to bury her brother beside her mother, reviled for her completely legal protests against a decision by the home secretary that suggests personal animus. Is Britain really a nation that turns people into figures of hate because they love unconditionally? (Shamsie, 258)

Jihadi John

It is worth examining the way in which Parvaiz was recruited in greater detail, as it mirrors the way in which jihadist groups recruit in real life. For example, let us think about ISIS for a moment. The group seeks to establish a caliphate which is supposed to emulate a previous

golden age, one which society has since fallen from. They bring people together through their collective dissatisfaction with society at large through this narrative of an idealized past. Though this past may have never actually existed, it is a story which is controlled by those who tell it; all that matters is that the story is compelling enough to draw people in. It is this power imbalance between those who control the narrative and those who hold it to be true that allows groups like ISIS to proliferate and continue to exist. Though far less extreme, this dynamic can be seen in Europe and America with things like Brexit and "make America great again," in that both of these movements rely on returning to a theorized golden age, whether that be a pre-EU Britain or the more anomalous return to when America was "great" (which means a number of different things, depending on who you ask).

A number of stories similar to that of Parvaiz can be found in real life Britain; British nationals that defected from what they could consider their home country, and joined a terrorist organization. One of particular note is that of the British national dubbed "Jihadi John" by the press. Mohammed Emwazi, the real name of "Jihadi John" was born in Kuwait, and immigrated to England at the age of six. While he was bullied as a child in school, his teachers say that he rebounded upon reaching secondary school, and was all in all a responsible student. They couldn't imagine him growing up into such a person (Casciani).

According to those who knew Emwazi, they claim that his ideology shifted after a particular incident in 2011. Once on his way to Tanzania for a safari, he was detained upon arrival in the airport and denied entry into the country. Officials from the country claim that this is because he was being drunk and disorderly in the airport, but Emwazi himself saw it as an incident of prejudice and profiling based on his cultural background.

Emwazi rose to infamy in the west as the masked man addressing the camera in ISIS' videos of executions which would be spread through social media. With his distinct British accent, people immediately recognized him as someone especially heinous; he must have at least been raised in the United Kingdom in order to obtain an accent like that.

While his trajectory shares a number of similarities to that of Parvaiz' in *Home Fire*, there is one major difference, one that may make Emwazi's radicalization harder to comprehend: While Parvaiz is partially drawn into the extremist movement due to his lack of social mobility, due in part to his not attending university, Emwazi was a solidly upper-middle class individual. He was well educated, having graduated from University of Westminster in 2009. He had all the proper economic and social safety nets in place in order to keep him from getting into the position Parvaiz found himself in, and yet he was still radicalized.

It goes without saying that Mohammed Emwazi did horrible things. Regardless of how he ended up being the face of ISIS in the west, he ultimately took part in the executions of a number of prisoners. That being said, knowing the story of Parvaiz Pasha allows one to give Emwazi's story more nuance than the official narrative allows. If not feeling sympathy for Emwazi, we can imagine that there was a gradual path to his radicalization, and a sort of void in his life which allowed him to be brought into the ranks of a radical organization. One can at least entertain the idea that he was not born with some inherent evil within him that allowed him to do these terrorist acts. It is more difficult to humanize those who have been radicalized than it is to simply demonize them, and *Home Fire* forces one to do this through its narrative.

Translation of *Antigone*

Almost every aspect of *Home Fire*'s structure has a parallel in the ancient Greek play *Antigone*, the third installment of the *Oedipus Rex* trilogy. Because of this, *Home Fire* is what literary theorists call a translation. Different from the way the word is used in common parlance, translation in this context focuses less on a direct linguistic translation, as would be expected, and focuses more on translating the ideas present in a work, and presenting them in a different time or cultural context.

According to Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*, a translation relies on what he calls the original work's "translatability." In explaining the idea of translatability, Benjamin says: "Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatibility." (Benjamin, 71.) If one were to relate Benjamin's idea of translatability to *Antigone* as it pertains to *Home Fire*, it would mean that *Antigone* contains within it something worth transposing over a modern setting. It is not about the simple rehashing of plot points: "The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original." Though abstracted, the spirit of *Antigone* is what lies at the center of *Home Fire*.

With this in mind, we can draw the parallels between the two works. The play follows the story of a family, the titular Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles and Polynices. Shamsie makes this comparison easy, keeping the same first letters for each of the characters (Aneeka, Isma,

Eteocles does not have a parallel, and Parvaiz respectively). Haemon, son of Creon and fiance to Antigone, is Eamon, the son of Karamat Lone in the *Home Fire*. Upon falling in love with Aneeka, he ultimately turns against his father and goes with her to Pakistan in order to bury Parvaiz, and dies for his actions. Creon, the elder statesman in *Antigone*, opposes the titular Antigone in her quest to get Polynices a proper burial. This is directly translated, as Creon is found as Karamat Lone in *Home Fire*, the character who opposes Aneeka in her quest to get her brother's body back to England for a proper burial.

The heart of the translation lies in this parallel, the death of Parvaiz and his being labeled an enemy of the state. Both Aneeka and Antigone are idealistic, for both family comes before the state, and they both ultimately die for this unwavering commitment to their ideals. Both Ismene and Isma side with the state, with Isma giving the police information on Parvaiz which partially lead to his inability to return to England, and in a sense, his eventual death. Similarly, Karamat Lone's unwavering dedication to the state and the security of his power leads to the death of Aneeka, just as Creon refuses to spare Antigone. As one can see, the spirit of *Antigone* is very much alive in *Home Fire*: The idea of one's commitment to family versus one's commitment to the state is a conflict which is very much alive in the 21st century, and this is what allows the translation of *Antigone.*

Conclusion

Immigrants, regardless of where they come from, face an uphill battle when it comes to being accepted within the communities in which they arrive in. *Exit West*'s ambiguity serves a purpose. By not naming the city, and by focusing on the mundane details of daily life living in

the city of origin, we are able to better identify with the community which Nadia and Saeed are forced to flee from. Through its omission of the immigrants passage, the part of the story which would separate the reader from them the most, we are again put closer to the characters Nadia and Saeed. Through the miniature narratives dotting the novel, we are given glimpses into a world where people drop their barriers and preconceived notions, to love their fellow human for exactly what they are.

Home Fire shows in grave detail the effects of xenophobia. Through Parvaiz' story, we see a person in search of community and belonging. Unable to find it through conventional means, he ends up falling into the ranks of one of the most heinous organizations on the planet. Through this, we see faith and cultural identity weaponized, and people getting hurt in the process. Through Aneeka, we see the dangers of a sensationalized, xenophobic media, and the effects that could be felt by those who fall on the wrong side of a media circus. And through Karamat Lone, we see the failure of assimilation.

The place of exchange in our current world

Throughout, this paper has shed light on the idea of a deep rift in political discourse, two sides with little serious communication whatsoever. To insert a bit of personal thought into this, the question still remains whether, even if this rift were not the case, if an exchange of ideas on both sides of the political divide would make any difference in the caustic environment we find ourselves in. It is my belief that there is a majority of people who are too entrenched in their own systems to make that exchange a reality. It is easier and probably closer to the truth to look at people who justify the happenings of the past few months (Kavanaugh, the mail bombs, the

shooting at the Pittsburgh synagogue, etc.) and simply claim that they are on the wrong side of history. Nothing meaningful can be gained from interaction when either side is simply invested in the other's failure.

Hall's theory is optimistic in that it exists in a world where regardless of the difference in opinion, both the encoder and decoder are informed from a meaning structure based in sincerity. A large number of people in our country today have their meaning structure formed by blatantly fraudulent news, or in the worst cases, sadism. The two sides of the political discourse are based on two fundamentally and factually different structures that cannot coexist with each other in their current state.

With the real effects of climate change already being felt in parts of the world, the issue of mass migration will only become a more prominent one on the international stage when swaths of the world begin to become literally uninhabitable. It is at this point that we will reach the hypothetical situation posed by *Exit West*; mass migration will become something that cannot be ignored and will have to be dealt with one way or another. A more conservative approach would be to strengthen one's borders and deny access to migrants, which would lead to innumerable deaths. The more humanistic outcome would be like what we see in *Exit West.*

Hope for the Future

Art can have a humanizing effect. Literature has the power to expose people to different points of view, given the internality most books offer. We are given a view of a character's thoughts that could be vastly different from our own. For a book like *Exit West*, that means that

western reader could put themselves into the position of Nadia or Saeed and, for a moment, gain a sliver of understanding as to what it might be like to be a refugee. Distributed on a large enough scale this could affect a range of people who may not read it due to their political stance.

In a way, *Exit West* was made for this discussion. In omitting the migration from the place of conflict to the place of arrival, what some may see as the defining feature of a refugee, the reader is instead made to focus on what happens once a person reaches the place of refuge. It is this focus on interactions between nativists and migrants that forces the reader to contemplate the responsibility we may have to one another as fellow humans. *Exit West* is, in the end, hopeful. It envisions a world where, when push comes to shove, compassion will win out. Many of the attached passages embody this but it could be best exemplified by this excerpt:

> The apocalypse appeared to have arrived, and yet it was not apocalyptic... While the changes were jarring they were not the end, and life went on, and people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with, and plausible desirable futures began to emerge, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now, and the result was something not unlike relief. (217)

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