Degree Project
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An Unconventional Being, A Hope “Instead of Nothing”

A Transcultural Feminist Approach to Mohsin Hamid’s Exit West

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**Introduction**

In 2015, more than 60 million migrants and refugees were forcibly displaced by conflict, violence, and human rights violations worldwide. According to the European Commission Forced Displacement and Development’s report (2016), this was the highest number of forced displacements since World War Two (2). The fascination with voicing the stories of forced migrants has been a source of inspiration for remarkable literary works that show how art has contributed to raising social awareness. *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid (2017) is a novel that has received critical acclaim, particularly because of its aesthetic engagement with the 2015 refugee crisis and migration. In “Refugees in Love and War,” the review published in *Time* magazine, Sarah Begley praised the novel in connection with the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis and for humanizing the refugee experience. Similarly, in “Exit West by Mohsin Hamid – Magical Vision of the Refugee Crisis,” Sukhdev Sandhu describes the novel as a “magical vision of the refugee crisis.”

Although international migration is not a new phenomenon, the uncommon number of migrants in 2015 led to a crisis in Europe and made the headlines. European Commission Press in “Refugee crisis: Commission reviews 2015 actions and sets 2016 priorities,” referred to the “unprecedented” number of asylum seekers in 2015 and mentioned that this situation “proved a major test for the Common European Asylum System and the Schengen area.” The extraordinary number of migrants and refugees who crossed into Europe in 2015 caused a challenging situation for countries that struggled to deal with the influx and created division in the EU over how best to manage resettling people. According to the UN Refugee Agency, in 2015, more than one million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe to request asylum. As claimed by the report, the increased number is mainly due to the
wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as terrorist activities in Pakistan and Nigeria, and human rights abuses in Eritrea. Even though these statistics do not change the situation of migration, they have made human displacement a noteworthy feature of cultural expression worldwide, of which Mohsen Hamid’s *Exit West* is an example. When Hamid was asked if he tried to write about human movement in a more conventional way, the author replied:

I wanted to explore the question of, what made you want to leave, and what happened when you arrived? ... The simple fact of being a human being is you migrate. Many of us move from one place to the other … even people who stay in the same place undergo a kind of migration through time. And in the novel, what I’m trying to explore is how everyone is a migrant. (Inskeep)

Hamid regards migration as the nature of human beings and emphasizes the importance of recognizing societal factors that impose forcible movement on migrants and highlights their struggle in the host culture.

The UN confirms that 48 percent of all migrants in 2015 were women and girls who left their countries to find opportunities and safety in another part of the world (UNGA 9). Many of these migrants encounter damaging experiences during their journey such as imprisonment and/or mental and physical violence. The UN report refers to “sexual and gender-based violence, family separation, psychosocial stress and trauma, health complications, physical harm and injury and risks of exploitation, as particular hardships that women and children undergo during their journey” (UNGA 9). Correspondingly, during the past decade there has been a proliferation of literary works that focus on migrants’ experiences to criticize the
socio-political circumstances and explore the cultural complications of forced displacement from a feminist perspective. *The Lightless Sky* by Gulwali Passarlay and Nadene Ghouri (2015), *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* by Atia Abawi (2018), and *Sea Prayer* by Khaled Hosseini (2018), are examples of works that depict the life of families and children who have been forced to migrate, and which portrays their real experiences and views. In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid depicts the story of Nadia and Saeed, who meet and fall in love in an unnamed city, plausibly in the Middle East, on the verge of war. Desperate to build a life together, the couple leaves their hometown through magical doors that appear all over their city and transport them to other countries. In this manner, Hamid’s novel embraces elements of magical realism to portray the impact of displacement in the lives of refugees and to examine gender identity in a moment of crisis. The novel holds a mirror up to the struggle of the main female character in her journey to the west.

The aspects of women’s forced migration are made more complex when refugee women move from a conservative Muslim country to a more secular Western one. Similarly, Mohsin Hamid’s novel portrays the challenges of gender identity of Muslim migrants living in non-Muslim countries. The novel reveals how characters choose alternative gender discourses to cope with their surroundings. While traveling to a different part of the world, Nadia and Saeed encounter various societal expectations regarding gender norms that make them adapt to the dominant gender behavior of the host country. In *Exit West*, the influence of culture and society on the main characters’ behavior is notable, and the performative essence of gender plays an important role in the main character’s development. Particularly, Nadia’s character creates alternative discourses to resist dominant gender rules both in her home country and in the host societies, and in some moments in the novel,
her behavior is closer to a masculine norm. Mahin Wahla and Saiqa Imtiaz Asif, in “Masculine Female and Feminine Male: A Study of Gender Slippage Amid Migration Spaces in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West,*” explore gender identity as variegated and performative in their study. The article analyzes the impact of religion, ethnicity, and cross-national gender distinctions in dominant gender discourses. According to Wahla and Asif, the main characters rely deeply on gender role shifts to form different behaviors against dominant gender norms. Wahla and Asif argue that throughout the novel, Hamid draws the reader’s attention to the concept of gender and identity by displaying endless shifts in gender values. It is argued in the article that: “enclosed migration spaces help the female protagonist (Nadia) in her performative tasks that are conventionally linked with masculinity” (Wahla & Asif 32).

In its portrayal of the lives of refugees, Hamid explores masculinity and femininity, indicating how forced migration, oppressive society, and religion shape an individual’s gender. By focusing on the psychological transition of the characters, Hamid tries to humanize the sense of displacement and loss that migrants undergo during their journey and states: “we are all migrants through time” (Hamid 209). In *Exit West,* Hamid narrates the hardships migrants encounter on their journey, and particularly addresses women’s struggle in the landscape of forced migration, thus encouraging an examination of the novel from a feminist critical perspective. As an example, Kuğu Tekin and Zeynep Rana Turgut, in “Reconstruction of Cliché Image of Oriental Woman in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West,*” sheds light into the struggle of an immigrant Muslim woman on her journey to survive in the West. The article relies on Kate Millet’s argument on the impact of temperament, role, and status in shaping patriarchal policies. In *Sexual Politics,* Millet (1970) argues that gender role
is a social factor that appoints domestic chores upon the female. Status is a political factor, which puts the male into a superior position in society, and temperament is psychological, and as Millet states: “Those awarded higher status tend to adopt roles of mastery, largely because they are first encouraged to develop temperaments of dominance” (Millet 26). Tekin and Turgut argue that in Exit West, Nadia’s behavior and personality contradict the stereotypical, patriarchal view of females, like being “weak” “incapable” and “passive” (Tekin & Turgut 64). The authors describe the mysterious journey of the main characters through magical doors and emphasize the change in the characters’ behavior in refugee camps.

According to Anna Ball (2021), in Forced Migration in the Feminist Imagination: Transcultural Movements, the exploration of forced migration has become an essential characteristic of cultural expression worldwide, particularly regarding female refugee experiences (Ball 20). An effective investigation of women’s refugee issues calls for an approach that emphasizes the importance of the interconnection and interrelationship between different cultures. The transcultural feminist perspective provides a profound insight into migrant women’s struggles and explores the geographical and sociopolitical aspects that affect forced migrants and their identities. The transcultural approach was developed by Mikhail Epstein (2009), in “Transculture: A Broad Way between Globalism and Multiculturalism.” This approach suggests that if individuals let go of the oppression of a particular cultural identity by the strength of transcultural experiences, then they may be liberated from the sense of inferiority that is forced on them by their native culture. The concept of transculture has been adopted by feminist scholars, for instance, María Lugones (2003), in Playfulness, “World”-Traveling and Loving Perception. The author describes the idea of travel as the process in which individuals change
into another person while living in an intersection or traveling in and out of the “worlds”, and contends that “worlds” shape people and their identities.

In addition to Epstein and Lugones’s works, the critical framework of this thesis emphasizes theories relating to transculture and forced migrant female identity. In this sense, Anna Ball’s scholarly work in *Forced Migration in the Feminist Imagination: Transcultural Movements*, and the scholarly article of Deirdre Conlon on the impacts of the displacement on refugees’ gender identities in *Waiting: Feminist Perspectives on the Spacings/Timings of Migrant (im)mobility* prove highly relevant.

As suggested, existing scholarship has examined Mohsin Hamid’s novel from various perspectives. Whereas literary critics like Tekin and Turgut have examined the stereotypical image of an oriental refugee woman in Hamid’s novel, critics like Wahla and Asif explore the performative aspect of gender representation in *Exit West*. This paper, however, focuses on the journey of characters, especially Nadia, from an oppressive male-dominated society to a newly liberating society alongside their physical journey from the East to the West. Although the dominant society has forced Nadia and Saeed to adapt to the gender norms of the host country, they never fully accept the imposed gender roles. This thesis contends that, in Hamid’s *Exit West*, the characters’ forced displacement contributes to reshaping their gender identity and social disintegration.

**Transcultural Feminism and Forced Migration**

The transcultural perspective that will serve as the framework of analysis in this thesis was developed by cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein, in *Transculture: A Broad Way between Globalism and Multiculturalism*. The transcultural approach has the
potential to reshape the social structure of power relations and change it into a less oppressive form, and it provides feminists with a valuable framework to adapt and examine women’s common struggles. Epstein presents the idea of transculture as a consciousness of imagining the unfulfilled aptitudes of existing cultures. He describes culture as a complicated and interrelated level of activities, which are divisible into several areas while still firmly connected in practice. Transcultural worlds are not separated but rather exist within all cultures. To Epstein, transculture is “beyond” the whole cultural domain and cultural identity, and it helps people to break free from a particular culture. The intention to break the dependence on a specific culture is for people to discard isolated systems, for moral evaluation of their culture, and to achieve visions to cross the cultural boundaries, rather than avoid their origin culture. As he observes:

Transculture lies both inside and outside of all existing cultures as a Continuum, encompassing all of them and even the gaps and blank spaces between them. The transcultural world is a unity of all cultures and noncultures, that is, of those possibilities that have not yet been realized (Epstein 333).

As Epstein explains, transculturality disapproves of totalizing and homogenizing understandings of any dominant single “culture,” thus it aims to free individuals from clinging to predefined homogenizing identities of their native culture, and to recognize a variety of cultural identities. In the transcultural approach, multiple identifications replace single ethnic, racial and gender identities. As Epstein states:

The global society can be viewed as the space of ultimate diversity: diversity of free individuals rather than that of fixed groups and cultures. Once again,
a rule of thumb for transcultural diversity: oppose yourself to nobody, identify yourself with nothing. No identities and no oppositions—only concrete and multiple differences. The deeper is differentiation, the better is the prospect for universal peace. (Epstein 349)

Epstein explains that accepting the diversity and differences of free individuals instead of narrowing down people to any specific cultural identity creates hope for universal peace.

On the other hand, Epstein emphasizes the importance of cultural identities for individuals in order to be able to think transculturally and transcend their native culture. As Epstein and Ellen Berry (1999) explain “culture” in Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models: “Culture as an integrity of disciplinary spheres presupposes the diversity of cultures as multiple national and historical types, each having its own formative principle, irreducible to others” (Epstein & Berry 17). Cultural actions such as literature and art can define a structure of symbolic meanings, for instance being male or female, and transculture may help people to break free from them. Transcultural human beings do not get away from cultures but destroy the yoke of culture. As Epstein states:

Culture relativizes natural identities, whereas transculture demystifies cultural identities. This process has no limits … Origins need to be acknowledged in order to be exceeded in the transcultural movement of culture that at a certain stage passes into transcultural movement. (Epstein & Berry 85)
In this way, transculture broadens the limits of individuals’ identities without refusing people’s original symbolic identities like being a woman or a man. In such a manner, the world can be seen as a collection of individuals rather than defined cultures. Transculture dismisses the strict characteristics of cultures and creates a new harmony and flexibility in features of various cultures. Epstein’s argument about identity suggests that holding on to some defined identities and the self-righteousness of individuals’ values causes conflicts and hostility: “violence occurs between groups with firmly established identities” (Epstein 347).

Epstein in his argument refers to “interference,” which emphasizes that transculturality does not advocate the co-existing of various cultures, but it suggests the interference of the differences. As Epstein observes:

Interference produces not unification but rather more diversification within existing diversity; differences no longer isolate cultures from each other but rather open between them perspectives of both self-differentiation and mutual involvement. (Epstein & Berry 9)

With the aid of interference, differences complete each other and form a new transcultural society where individuals accept their differences.

The approach of transculture has been considered from a feminist viewpoint before, such as in the work of Anzaldúa and Lugones. Thus, in Playfulness, “World”-Traveling and Loving Perception Lugones (2003) articulates transcultural themes, such as “world-traveling.” The author contends that “worlds” shape people and their identities. Lugones describes the concept of travel as the process in which individuals change into another person while living in an intersection or traveling in and out of the “worlds.” Through her investigation of the ways that women of color
in the US must transit between “worlds” to survive, Lugones explores the notion of “World”-Traveling as the background of her feminist scholarship.

Lugones refers to the concept of fragmentation as an instrument of social control and argues that feminists should refuse the logic of fragmentation and take on “a non-fragmented multiplicity that requires an understanding of oppressions as interlocked” (Lugones 141). Fragmentation happens due to the “interlocking of oppression” and when individuals are split into groups with similar interests and are associated with the group values. She suggests that individuals need to identify with each other in order to defeat social fragmentation and resist oppression. By identification, it does not mean that individuals need to be similar, but rather “seeing ourselves and each other interrelating ‘worlds’ of resistant meaning” (Lugones 85).

The author asserts that the group identity rests on dissimilarity among group members that form their identities such as gender, class, and ethnicity. Lugones highlights the significance of interaction and condemns ethnocentrism and the superiority of culture to others. She offers “world”-traveling as an awareness that helps individuals to identify with other people and stand up for oppression. She differentiates the “world” from culture and regards it as “less determined.” As she states:

My use of the word “world” understands meaning and communication to be both less coded and less determined by cultural codes. And it understands the existing codes as less ossified and, as the result of ongoing transculturalism, interworld influencing and interworld relations of control and resistance to control. (Lugones 25-26)
She does not regard the “world” in a physical sense, and through traveling to others’ “world,” an individual can achieve a deep understanding of others’ “world” and find the importance of the interdependence of each other.

A feminist approach reveals not only a desire for gender consciousness but also a necessity for change in social structures. Although this motivation for societal changes has been suggested in previous studies on forced migration, a transcultural feminist perspective is concerned with the changes in the interrelation of gendered, race and economic circumstances regarding women’s displacement. In a similar manner, Ball extends previous scholarship and sheds new light on the experience of women’s forced migration. The author suggests that the women’s struggle in forced migration and feminist mobilization is not emphasized enough. Ball argues that although women’s gendered needs and experiences in the political sphere are presented as insignificant, in the cultural landscape women are featured prominently and their position is often used to exemplify “the refugee” in general (Ball 20). Women’s stories have often been told as the typical personification of the “refugee experience” and the authentic hardship of people who were forced to migrate is pictured through their stories. This is evident in the journalistic photos report that the images of refugee women are usually pictured as either very vulnerable or they express strength and resilience (for instance, UN Women, ‘Displacement and Resilience: Five Women, Five Stories’, UN Women, 17th June 2019) (Ball 20). Regardless of the integrity of such representations, these images tend to show women in polarized positions that do not include the whole variety of human identities. Therefore, as Ball observes: “‘refugee women’ are employed as figures of advocacy, rather than as complex, even contradictory individuals who may not meet expected standards of ‘need’, ‘pity’, ‘heroism’, or indeed ‘womanhood’ as
expected” (Ball 21). In this context, forced migrant women’s behaviors affirm the morals and standards anticipated by their community. Given what has been discussed, one of the missions of the transcultural feminist imagination is to survey the ways in which women can be portrayed that do not simply confirm the expectations of the dominant culture. The transcultural feminist imagination provides us with richer depictions of “forced migrant female identity.”

As already hinted at in introduction, Hamid explores the physical and psychological journey of immigrants in Exit West. During their journey to the West, Nadia and Saeed stay in various refugee camps, an experience that opens their eyes to diverse cultures in the world. Similarly, Conlon analyzes the impacts of the displacement on refugees’ gender identities. In her article Conlon explores mobility as a gendered notion and a feminist concern. The author states that mobility, place, and gender are interlinked, and displacement and power dynamics regulate gender ideologies. Conlon’s analysis relies on the seminal work by Mimi Sheller and John Urry, The New Mobility Paradigm (2006). According to this paradigm, the role of movement is vital in the construction of social relations. Based on the scholarly analysis provided in the article, Conlon contends that refugees who stay in camps in the global South are regarded as passive, feminized, and considered to be more “authentic refugees.”

**Exploring Nadia and Saeed’s Gender Identity Before Migration**

As Nadia and Saeed travel to different parts of the world, their gender behavior is informed by the culture and society surrounding them. In their native land, Nadia and Saeed are expected to follow the gender roles and regulated responsibilities of their home culture. For instance, Saeed should accompany his father to the weekly
communal prayer, and “every Friday, without fail, Saeed’s father would drive home and collect his son and Saeed would pray with his father and the men, and prayer for him became about being a man” (Hamid 201). However, as they travel from one destination to the other, they find themselves trapped in gender norms that the culture of their home country has imposed on them. The novel’s beginning is set in an unnamed city where political crisis and chaos make people leave their hometown. The fact that the name of the city and country is not specified can be interpreted differently. It may suggest that their home could be in any country, and any human could become a refugee, therefore it contributes to humanizing migrants and inspires the readers to position themselves as protagonists. However, Hamid’s description of the fragile environment of the city helps readers to guess the geographic position of the city and to picture it vividly:

In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom. […] His name was Saeed, and her name was Nadia, and he had a beard, not a full beard, more a studiously maintained stubble and she was always clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch in a black robe. (Hamid 3)

Even though the author does not name the city, the situation of unrest that Hamid describes and the protagonist’s appearance in addition to the brief glimpses into the lives of characters in a non-secular (most likely Muslim) culture can indicate that the city is situated in the Middle East.

From the beginning of the novel, Nadia is portrayed as opposed to the dominant culture and social norms. Nadia and Saeed’s encounter happens in an
evening class, and they start forming an intimate relationship as the conflict between the government and the militants grows. Forming an intimate relationship between a man and a woman is not approved in Muslim culture. In the same manner, Ball refers to the harmful effects of displacement motivated by religious and traditional beliefs that effect especially Afghan women and mentions: “widowed women particularly suffer when displaced due to the system of *mahram*\(^1\), which places restraints on their ability to work, appear in public, or travel without a male relative” (Ball 71). The author points out “increased threat of sexual violence, material restrictions on housing, healthcare and education, and reduced financial circumstances” as common circumstances women encounter on conflict zones due to their gender (Ball 71). In *Exit West*, Nadia is forced to seclude herself from her family who find her behavior inappropriate based on the gender norms in their traditional Muslim society. As Hamid describes:

> When Nadia was a child, her favourite subject was art ... The art in Nadia’s childhood home consisted of religious verses and photos of holy sites, framed and mounted on walls… her father a man who tried to be quiet, thinking this a virtue, but who none the less came to a boil easily and often where Nadia was concerned. Her constant questioning and growing irreverence in matters of faith upset and frightened him. (Hamid 17)

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\(^1\) According to John L. Esposito in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* in Islam, *mahram* refers to family members with whom marriage is unacceptable: “parents, siblings, foster siblings, and the like. Because they are forbidden to marry, they are permitted to associate” (101). One's spouse is also *mahram*. 
As the quote suggests, Nadia grew up in a religious family and her curious personality and questioning religious issues worried her father. Finally, when “after finishing university Nadia announced, to her family’s utter horror, and to her own surprise for she had not planned to say it, that she was moving out on her own, an unmarried woman,” her family condemns her decision (Hamid 18).

In a relatable manner, Ball suggests that in Afghan families socio-economic precarity in addition to patriarchal traditions regarding female “honor” exposes young women to forced marriage in early age (Ball 82-83). Contrary to the social norms of her country, when Nadia finishes university, she ends her relationship with her family and informs them that she will live alone. The idea of a single woman living without the protection of her male guardian is not acceptable in Muslim culture. She manages to formulate some strategies that help her to navigate through the oppressive structure, to lead a free life and reclaim her identity. In this case, Nadia plants the idea of resisting and she breaks the traditional family structure by living alone.

Nadia might be considered a nonbeliever when it comes to the notion of the black robe, as it should serve as protection against potential sexual assaults. Despite wearing a Muslim outfit, Nadia wears jeans and T-shirts under her black robe and rides a motorcycle. She reflects on the cliché perspective on the black robe, and despite the traditional point of view that a proper Muslim woman should obey religious principles, the Western view perceives her robe as a sign of patriarchal oppression. According to Nadia’s understanding, her choice of covering herself has no religious motivation but to stay safe, and as she states: “So men don’t fuck with [her]” (Hamid 17). Similarly, Ball’s reflection on the burqa (garment worn by Muslim women in public), suggests that burqa mirrors the complicated connection
between social, political, and personal pressure, and signifies the connection between the female body and its surroundings. According to Ball, scholarly researchers show many women in Herat and Kabul kept wearing the burqa even after the arrival of NATO forces and the invasion of Taliban militia in the area. She explains *burqa* is a “culturally situated practice” that women have been wearing for many years. It also liberates women’s transition in society, and wearing it reflects the level of security they feel in society (Ball 78). Lynne Brydon and Sylvia Chant (1989) in *Women in the Third World* suggest that the burqa “symbolizes the invisibility of women in “male spaces” such as the street or public places” (qtd. in Ball 78). It is notable that in her journey toward freedom, Nadia learns that the black robe facilitates her transition into society. At the beginning of her path, Nadia encounters some dangerous moments that she was warned against by her family. However, she manages to surpass the situations that put her in peril: “She learned how to dress for self-protection, how best to deal with aggressive men and with the police, and with aggressive men who were the police, and always to trust her instincts about situations to avoid or to exit immediately” (Hamid 23).

In the novel, Hamid depicts the hardship that women may encounter for breaking rules or challenging gender discourses in a patriarchal society. Despite various strategies Nadia acquires to overcome possible difficulties challenging women who live alone in a city on the verge of war, there are some moments that reflect the danger that threatens her. When Nadia ignores a man’s greeting while they stand before the traffic light of an intersection, the man begins to swear and says: “only a whore would drive a motorcycle, didn’t she know it was obscene for a woman to straddle a bike in that way, had she ever seen anyone else doing it, who did she think she was, and swearing with such ferocity that she thought he might
attack her” (Hamid 42). The quote highlights the limitations that women encounter in Nadia’s home culture due to their gender. The man’s angry reaction indicates hostility and strongly suggests the inferior position of women in that culture. Nevertheless, Nadia crosses many of the prohibited borders drawn by the oppressive culture in her home country to control women in society. She secures a job in an insurance company to ensure her economic independence, and “she [shuffles] off the weight of her virginity” while having an affair with a musician she meets in an underground concert” (Hamid 33). Nadia’s resistance and her trespassing, boundary behavior in an oppressive culture illustrate a powerful symbolic critique of the limited ways that remain open to women in the patriarchal society.

Thus, in *Exit West*, Nadia contradicts gender stereotypes of a woman in a patriarchal society, such as being passive. When the conflict in the street increases, particularly when Saeed’s mother dies because of a stray bullet, Nadia and Saeed start to feel more insecure. Nadia moves to Saeed’s apartment, and together, they try to soothe Saeed’s mourning father. When they realize that there is no future waiting for them in their country, they decide to leave. Saeed’s father knows he cannot start a new life somewhere else and leave his past life behind. In his last conversation with Nadia, Saeed’s father asks Nadia to stay with Saeed until they are safe. Ironically, in a patriarchal culture, men hold all the positions of power and authority and are considered strong and capable, as opposed to women, who are regarded as weak. Due to male superiority in a patriarchal culture, men make all decisions in both society and their family unit, and consequently, they can influence women’s freedom of movement in the public sphere, including international migration. As a result, women are encouraged to migrate with their spouses. Regarding female migration and the possibility of their cases being approved, Ball
mentions that women who seek asylum as spouses have a better chance of their cases being granted in other countries: “Indeed, women’s individualized claims to asylum may be further undermined by the fact that many women are encouraged to make claims as spouses, and hence dependents – an arrangement that may subsequently lock them into a controlling or abusive situation within the home” in the host country (Ball 10).

**The Journey to the West: Exploring Nadia and Saeed’s Gender Identity in Refugee Camps**

Exploring refugee’s experiences from the perspective of transcultural feminism encourages new attention to power and the individuals, and provides a deeper perspective on the relationship between the dominant culture and those who are subjected to discrimination. Referring to the UNHCR statistics, Ball argues that female refugees encounter more violence compared to other women in the world (Ball 9). In a similar manner, in *Exit West*, Hamid’s description of the refugee life in Mykonos (Greece) emphasizes the camp’s violent milieu specifically for families and women:

> The camp was in some ways like a trading post in an old-time gold rush, and much was for sale or barter, from sweaters to mobile phones to antibiotics to, quietly, sex and drugs and there were families with an eye on the future and gangs of young men with an eye on the vulnerable and upright folks and swindlers and those who had risked their lives to save their children and those who knew how to choke a man in dark so he never made a sound. (Hamid 101)
In Mykonos, Nadia and Saeed had to sleep fully clothed and “buddled together” inside their blanket that “provide[ed] [them] a degree of cushioning against the hard and somewhat uneven ground” (Hamid 106).

Difficult conditions in refugee camps affect male and female refugees differently. According to Conlon male asylum seekers are considered “less vulnerable” and more “self-reliant” (Conlon 357). Contrary to these representations, however, in Exit West, Nadia displays self-reliance, and a sense of confidence and strength. Hamid describes the journey through the doors as: “both like dying and like being born” (Hamid 104). Even though “Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it” (Hamid 104), it is Nadia who manages to get hold of herself first when they appear in a public bathroom, again showing her resilience. While trying to flee from Mykonos to Germany through doors, they are swindled by a smuggler (Hamid 109). Despite Saeed’s awareness about many immigrants who are swindled by human traffickers, he continues to pray for him and remains hopeful for his return. As opposed to Saeed’s emotional and naïve reaction, Nadia reasonably considers the incident an inevitable action.

In a transcultural approach, Lugones highlights the importance of interaction and condemns ethnocentrism and the superiority of culture to others. The author suggests “world”-traveling as an awareness that helps people to identify with others (Lugones 25-26). In regard to Exit West, Lugones’s concept about interaction is also relevant here. In the first refugee camp, the couple meet people from different cultures and races, “from dark chocolate to milky tea” and “speaking in a cacophony that was the language of the world” (Hamid 106). In Mykonos, Nadia bonds with a volunteer girl who works at a clinic, and their friendship opens a new door that leads
them to London. During their stay in London, the house that they seek refuge in is occupied by people of various nationalities, and it makes Saeed anxious and frightened. He keeps his distance from all migrant groups to avoid making conversation: “It suggests that Saeed has opted for avoidance as a tool to survive” (Wahla & Aasif 31). Where Saeed’s actions imply vulnerability, and he is entirely dependent on Nadia, she remains fearless, and her outgoing and positive personality allows her to contact others more easily. Tekin argues: “In fact, Nadia’s instinct to protect Saeed against internal and external threats is another proof of reversed gender roles in that the couple’s native patriarchal society posits the male” (Tekin 66).

In a transcultural approach, Epstein argues that holding on to some defined identities and the self-righteousness of individuals’ values causes conflicts and hostility (Epstein 349). There are instances in Exit West that agree with Epstein’s argument. As Nadia and Saeed move towards the West, Nadia notably acts more freely and securely. Nadia is pleased when the Nigerian group who live in Palace Gardens Terrace accepts her, and the diverse cultural environment gives her a new perspective. However, Saeed encounters aggressive behaviors and is harassed by some Nigerians from the community, and he does not show any interest in new people. Consequently, Saeed does not try to integrate into the host culture and pulls toward people from his own culture. Saeed gets close to a Muslim immigrant community that satisfies him spiritually and reminds him of home.

According to Epstein transculture is against the totalizing and homogenizing understandings of any single dominant culture (Epstein 333). In a transcultural experience, people surpass their cultural identities and exist beyond any specific culture and their racial, sexual and other identities. Similarly, in Exit
Hamid’s symbolic representation of a fox may highlight the same notion. On two consecutive nights, Nadia and Saeed see a fox stroll around the garden of London (Hamid 137, 139). The author’s intention of positioning a fox that is not in its natural environment can make a connection between the fox and Nadia. A fox is an animal that is found in diverse habitats and survives in urban spaces without getting trapped. Nadia is forced to migrate from her native country, transgresses geographical borders, and exists beyond any specific culture and racial or sexual identities, hence she gets through the hardship she encounters in different countries.

Contrary to Lugones’s emphasis on avoiding social fragmentation which is an instrument of social control and causes group members to identify with group values (Lugones 141), Saeed forms relationships with a group from his homeland culture. During his journey, Saeed cannot adopt the Western culture since he becomes more religious due to his sense of nostalgia. Saeed is not able to fill the emptiness that he feels inside and his connection with the leader of the group helps him to stay away from his sentimentality, and thus he establishes a sense of belonging by being a member of a community from his culture. Saeed tries to convince Nadia to move into where his people live. However, Nadia does not accept his offer because she does not feel connected to her native culture. On the contrary, Saeed feels close to the preacher’s daughter because she “was born of a woman from Saeed’s country” (Hamid 218). As Hamid describes Saeed’s life:

Around a bend, on Vicarage Gate, was a house known to be a house of people from his country. Saeed began to spend more time there, drawn by the familiar languages and accents and the familiar smell of the cooking. One afternoon he was there at prayer time, and he joined his fellow countrymen in prayer […]. (Hamid 148)
By spending more time amongst his native people and praying, he tries to overcome his internal conflict of living in a new land. However, before leaving his city, Saeed is not fully dedicated to do his prayers on prayer time, and when Nadia asks him whether he says his evening prayers: “Saeed conjured up his most endearing grin. ‘Not always. Sadly’” (Hamid 2).

In the novel, the author portrays Saeed as a character who never fits into the male category considering the stereotypical gender role in his native culture, where men are expected to be dominant and strong, and his love for his family and hometown impedes his integration into Western culture. When Nadia and Saeed go to a labor camp outside the city due to anti-immigrants’ hostility towards immigrants in London, they move away from one another. Nadia’s feeling for Saeed is brotherly and “it [is] a relief for her to be away from [him]” (Hamid 172). At the beginning of Nadia and Saeed’s journey, their familiar culture made them seek comfort from each other. However, living in a foreign country ruins that closeness and their feelings for each other changes from love to affection that exists between siblings. Another important reason that changes Nadia’s feelings is her realization regarding her sexual identity. Nadia’s dream about a girl she bonded with in Mykonos makes her experience new urges: “And sometimes when Saeed was out or asleep, she pleasured herself, and when she pleasured herself, she thought increasingly of that girl, the girl from Mykonos, and the strength of her response no longer surprised her” (Hamid 200).

Nadia’s awareness or curiosity regarding her sexual identity is another motivation for her migration. In Nadia’s home culture, heterosexuality is believed to be authentic, and it defines the masculine and feminine roles, as opposed to
homosexuality, which is against the norms. Hamid presents Nadia as a character who does not follow the rules, and her homosexual identity rejects the traditional gender norms. Similarly, Ball mentions Homophobia as one of the reasons that increase the rate of “female-identified asylum applicants who flee their homes due to discrimination and persecution levelled against them on the basis of their sexual identification” (Ball 141). The author explains that the queer experience intolerance and hostility which lead to alienation from their home culture, and “induces spatial and psychic exile for the queer subject” (Ball 141). Ball also points out the different experience of LGBTQ members in society and with referring to the U.K. Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group evidence states: “while gay men may more often be the targets of legal sanction and mob violence, lesbian women tend to face punishment through gender-based violence and sexual harassment, as well as forced marriage during which they may face rape by their husband” (Ball 136).

During their journey, Nadia maintains her active and strong character and mainly decides their destination. She is hopeful of saving their relationship and decides that they should go to Marin, San Francisco. However, it does not keep their relationship alive, and Saeed becomes “melancholic,” quiet and religious (Hamid 195). As Saeed moves farther from his home country, he finds it more challenging to integrate into the culture, and he becomes more introverted. According to Conlon, this is an anticipated feature of a male refugee to display some behavior that is attributed to females, as she mentions:

men also come to realize that the asylum-seeking process demands that they wait patiently and ‘present themselves as passive victims, grateful for being granted whatever minimal tolerance they are shown.’ Thus, asylum seekers’ encounters with waiting belie the masculinist hue with which they are cast
en route to the global North as they are re-inscribed with feminized codings of statis and passivity. (Conlon 357)

Saeed stays in a phase of passivity until his relationship with preacher’s daughter affects his masculine characteristics. This is the moment that Nadia’s role as Saeed’s protector ends, and they decide to part. Their relationship that began in “an old city” and was shaped by traditional beliefs ends in the new city, Marin, the city that is home to migrants from diverse cultures and language.

Nadia’s character not only challenges societal standards in her country, but she also remains unconventional in Western countries. In Marin, her robe is perceived as a religious symbol and is even related to terrorism and triggers anti-Muslim reactions. Therefore, many people around Nadia consider her a threat and do not reach out to her; for instance, her colleagues in the food cooperative consider her appearance to be “off-putting” or “self-segregating.” Shazia Sadaf in “We Are All Migrants through Time”: History and Geography in Mohsin Hamid’s Exit West describes Nadia’s robe: “as a sign of her agency, Nadia finds new confidence in her identity and refuses to be labeled immutably by her choice of clothing. In other words, she keeps her robe on but liberates her identity to new experiences” (Sadaf 643). Similarly, Nick Hopkins and Ronni Greenwood in “Hijab, Visibility and the Performance of Identity” explain how wearing hijab is connected to the psychological significance of visibility in society and to take control over one’s categorization (442). The authors argue the motivations for British Muslim women wearing hijab and also the ways hijab affects people’s perceptions of Muslim women’s national and gender identities in UK. From the viewpoint of western non-Muslim audience, hijab can be a political statement, expression of religious
extremism, and hijab-wearing women may be considered “plain and boring” and oppressed. However, some women use hijab to perform their gender identity “so as to communicate their femininity and/or ‘personality’” (Hopkins & Greenwood 443). In this way, Nadia’s robe in the liberal Western context might be perceived as a shield that she holds on to protect herself against the eastern and western stereotypical image of women created by society.

Conclusion
In Exit West, Hamid presents a picture of forced migration caused by unrest political situation and manifested through the physical and psychological experiences of the protagonists. Nadia’s journey and the cultural effects by which it is driven remain complicated and conflicting in terms of cultural feminism. Before their migration, she upholds her responsibilities based on the gender roles of their homeland, even though she makes many sacrifices. Against societal standards, she must leave her family to gain independence and hide her body under the black robe to stay safe from male stares and assault. Nadia’s appearance allows her to stay away from the judgment of the oppressive culture of her own country; on the other hand, it makes her exposed to men who consider her weak and passive. It remains noteworthy that the robe acquires a different signification as she travels across cultures. In her country, it serves as a protection against potential sexual assaults, and it also liberates her transition in society. However, in the west, it is an anti-acculturation statement that can be interpreted as a defense of her own identity and a hybridity she has formed for herself.

While leaving their homeland, although Nadia seems to hold on to Saeed as a passive woman, she takes power as she promised to Saeed’s father. She proves her
protection and support for Saeed during their journey. During their journey, while Saeed acts weak, vulnerable, dependent and “unmanly,” Nadia embraces and “cradled” him (Hamid 99). While Saeed avoids “interaction” in refugee camps by keeping his distance from all migrant groups, Nadia takes control of the situation and puts herself in gatherings to find a way to move them forward. Contrary to the submissive female cliché of a male-dominated society, Nadia chooses to stand up and fight. The hardship of the refugee life and internal conflicts for rejection by the host society leads Saeed to fragmentation. Thus, he is interested in forming a relationship with a group from his homeland culture and he finds it more challenging to integrate into the Western culture. However, Nadia interacts with others and in opposition to the depiction of refugee women particularly in refugee camps, Nadia performs self-reliant, less vulnerable, and represents her own version of female resistance.

Hamid’s novel highlights the migrant’s vital need for safety and criticizes the deficient asylum system. The magical doors provide a safe passage for refugees to flee from war zone countries and avoid suffering of forced displacement. Regarding women’s experience of forced migration, writers like Hamid, knowingly or unknowingly give rise to feminist perspectives by emphasizing the political and cultural aspects of forced migration. As Ball observes “transculturalism” is related to transnationalism, a notion that has impacted the feminist analysis through its understanding of the “politics of location” and identifying “the grounds for historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities and possibilities for alliances” (Ball 15). Transnational awareness helps us to understand feminism as a
framework that includes a multitude of perspectives, and it helps to reconsider the politics of migration.

Works Cited


