

The Mutations of the City

in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017)

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Abstract: Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid has lived in many cities, including New York, London, and his native Lahore. His novel *Exit West* (2017) also gives the city pride of place, as his characters move from one city to the next through mysterious black doors.

Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's theories on modernity and transnationalisation, this paper offers to read the cities described in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* as cities in mutation. In *Exit West* cities are in crisis; they are confronted to war and mass migration, and as the narrative unfolds, their geographical as well as conceptual boundaries need to evolve and to stretch. This paper ultimately argues that Mohsin Hamid's mutating cities are *plasti-cities* – a material shared with the reader to form new perspectives on modernity.

Keywords: city, contemporary fiction, migration, Mohsin Hamid, mutation

Résumé : L'écrivain pakistanais Mohsin Hamid a vécu dans de nombreuses villes, parmi lesquelles New York, Londres et sa ville natale, Lahore. Son roman *Exit West* (2017) fait à la ville une place de choix, puisque ses personnages sont transportés d'une ville à l'autre à travers de mystérieuses portes noires.

Partant des analyses d'Arjun Appadurai sur les liens entre modernité et transnationalisation, cet article avance que les villes représentées dans *Exit West* sont des villes en mutation. Ces villes sont toutes en situation de crise, touchées par la guerre et par les migrations de masse. Au fur et à mesure que l'intrigue se révèle, les frontières géographiques et conceptuelles de ces villes semblent s'étirer. Nous proposons de lire les villes de Mohsin Hamid comme des *plasti-cités*, se laissant manipuler et former à la fois par l'écrivain et par le lecteur jusqu'à former de nouveaux imaginaires de la modernité.

Mots-clés : ville, roman contemporain, migration, Mohsin Hamid, mutation

Mohsin Hamid's novels are fundamentally urban novels. While his first published work *Moth Smoke* (2000)¹ investigates substance abuse and class conflict in Lahore at the time of the 1998 nuclear tests, his 2007 short novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*² addresses the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks by going to and fro between New York and the historical neighbourhood of Old Anarkali in Lahore. The 2013 mock self-help book *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*³ then plunges the reader in the journey of a young man from a rural area to an unnamed South Asian metropolis,

as he faces the harsh realities of surviving in the city and making one's way to financial success. Mohsin Hamid himself is a man of many cities. He shared his childhood between Pakistan and the United States; in his adult life, he moved to New York, then London, before going back to his native Lahore. He was recently awarded Pakistan's *Sitārāyi Imtiyāz*, the "Star of Excellence" for his services to literature⁴.

His latest novel *Exit West* (2017)⁵ follows the trend set by his previous work, in that it blends anonymous and recognizable cities: the characters move from an unnamed Eastern city to cities which are clearly identified, such as London, and Marin in California. Saeed and Nadia, a young couple who flee their troubled home city, learn that they can be transported from one city to the next through mysterious black doors. The cities they land in are often terrifying, unwelcoming but also tantalizing places where urban space is challenged by mass migration. The reader witnesses the couple's relationship and self-knowledge evolve as they travel across the earth. Along with this journey, the narrative is peppered with the stories of other journeys through the doors, involving unnamed characters in a host of different countries. *Exit West* received broad critical acclaim and was notably shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Besides its timely treatment of the migration crisis, many critics commented on Hamid's subtle use of magical realism, even likening the novel to fantasy – Sukhdev Sandhu went so far as to compare it to C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*⁶ – or speculative fiction,⁷ that is, "a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating 'consensus reality' of everyday experience".⁸ Yet the novel never fully loses touch with real time and space, and the plot always hinges on "a familiar location, landmark or incident".⁹

In their article "Cities and Citizenship," James Holston and Arjun Appadurai contend that cities today are "the place where the business of modern society gets done, including that of transnationalisation".¹⁰ The term "modern" echoes Appadurai's famous *Modernity at Large*, where he explains that modernity is a highly relative concept, which depends on where it is viewed from – he claims that "[...] for many people, modernity is an elsewhere".¹¹ And to Appadurai, one criterion of modernity is the transnational. The adjective "transnational" is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "extending or operating across national boundaries",¹² while the Merriam-Webster defines it as "extending or going beyond national boundaries".¹³ Whether the prefix translates as "across" or "beyond," the cities depicted in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* undoubtedly connect modernity with the "trans-;" with the displacement of perspectives and of perceived boundaries. This paper proposes to explore the many mutations undergone by cities in *Exit West*. The term "mutation," borrowed from the field of genetics, entails a transformation which appears through movement and displacement – the Oxford English Dictionary indeed defines "mutation" as the process of genetic material being "*transmitted*".¹⁴

This paper first establishes that *Exit West* shows cities in crisis, struck by forms of violence which impact the descriptions of urban space. It then addresses the role played by boundaries, as both the city and the nation are put to the test of mass migration. These challenges ultimately give way to narrative *plasti-cities*: Mohsin Hamid's cities can be read as essential material to create new imaginaries of modernity.

I Cities in crisis

Exit West relies on an overtly contemporary setting, in which the characters regularly make use of their smartphones and refer to present-day media. But what also makes the novel strikingly contemporary is the sense of urgency that pervades it. The social and political tension builds up around the growing rebellion in Saeed and Nadia's city, and is also replicated in the strikes made against refugees in London, or the precariousness of their living quarters in California. In this context, the novel's cities are cities in crisis, and the exceptional situations faced by the characters are intertwined with the portrayal of cities.

One of the mutations undergone by the city is that caused by violent events. The novel starts in an unnamed city – the reader might deduce it to be Eastern or Middle Eastern, notably considering that the characters' journey west (their "exit west") starts on the Greek island of Mykonos. Although the clues are scarce, Muneeza Shamsie believes that the descriptions of that city bear "many resonances with urban Pakistan".¹⁵ On the very first page of the novel, the unidentified city is described as "a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war".¹⁶ The euphemistic tone and sense of impending doom in these words are soon repeated in the descriptions of urban space. Indeed, the flat owned by Saeed's family is described as a precious piece of property, losing its value entirely in the event of a war:

It was the sort of view that might command a slight premium during gentler, more prosperous times, but would be most undesirable in times of conflict [...]: a view like staring down the barrel of a rifle. Location, location, location, the estate agents say. Geography is destiny, respond the historians.¹⁷

Here, the apartment's view is not merely one of its architectural assets – it is also a major threat for its inhabitants. While the reference to real estate culture makes efficient use of irony, especially by describing a dangerous window view in the tone of a luxury agent ("most undesirable"), the last two sentences are unambiguously dramatic: the ternary pattern ("location, location, location") and the aphoristic phrase attributed to the historians build up the tension towards the onset of the war. As the final aphorism implies, the city's features are always already an emanation of history.

When the war actually bursts, the characters' perceptions of their city becomes highly fragmented, as is the case for Saeed's mother:

[...] Saeed's mother's mental map of the place where she had spent her entire life now resembled an old quilt, with patches of government land and patches of militant land. The frayed seams between the patches were the most deadly spaces, and to be avoided at all costs.¹⁸

The double genitive form insists on the mother's close relationship with the city, the better to emphasize the fragmentation she now experiences. The quilt metaphor is deceptive: instead of covering and protecting the inhabitants, the occupation of territory by both sides of the war gives way to the no-man's lands called "deadly spaces". The mother's loss of bearings progressively comes to be shared by most characters and to trigger migration from the city.

In the midst of a city in crisis, the characters' relation to city dwelling thus raises an ontological question. How can one still exist and find a place when the city's existence is itself under threat? Throughout the novel, cities are more often occu-

pied than inhabited. According to anthropologist Tim Ingold, inhabiting the world entails participating in the emergence of what composes it, in the “mutual constitution of persons and places”.¹⁹ Inhabiting is an active process, whereas “[...] the occupant takes up a position in a ready-made world”.²⁰ In *Exit West*, this opposition is constantly interrogated. The characters often seem to fail at constituting the world by and for themselves: wherever they attempt to settle, Saeed and Nadia have to pack and leave again, seemingly floating from one “ready-made world” to the next.

Yet in the context of contemporary mass migration, Mohsin Hamid shows that occupation might still have an impact on one’s environment. In Saeed and Nadia’s home city, occupation is first understood as a siege, a stake of power, when the militants start “taking over and holding territory throughout the city [...]”.²¹ But occupation is mostly mentioned in regard to the war refugees, whose very presence is a challenge to urban space. Before Saeed and Nadia experience occupation themselves, the narrative voice describes the internally displaced people occupying their home city:

Refugees had occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents in the green belts between roads, erecting lean-toes next to the boundary walls of houses, sleeping rough on the pavements and in the margins of streets. Some seemed to be recreating the rhythms of a normal life, as though it were completely natural to be residing, a family of four, under a sheet of plastic propped up with branches and a few chipped bricks. Others stared out at the city with what looked like anger, or surprise, or supplication, or envy. Others didn’t move at all: stunned, maybe, or resting. Possibly dying.²²

The passage shows the fundamentally alienating experience that is occupation: while some refugees find a half-existence on the edge of the city, others remain observers, utter outsiders – the repetition of the pronoun “others” is a reminder of this condition. The final emphasis on petrification, ultimately leading to death, hints at the tragic consequences of occupying the city instead of inhabiting it. Strikingly, the only spaces refugees can occupy are the liminal ones: the “green belts,” the “boundary walls,” the “margins,” mirroring the social position they are assigned. However, as occupation touches upon the “boundary walls” of the city, the refugees’ multi-dimensional occupation (“erecting,” “pitching,” “propp[ing] up”) can be read as a shaping process which inevitably changes the face of the city. Hence, the crisis of occupation acts as a trigger for the city’s mutations: as war and the ensuing mass migration hit the cities described in the novel, these cities have to adapt, to mutate, and to extend their physical and conceptual boundaries.

I Boundaries on the move

The crises underwent by cities, as well as the blending of identified cities with unknown, unnamed places, make for a reinterpretation of geography in the novel. If the physical borders of nations are no longer materialized in the era of the “doors,” some obstacles remain, and the narrative toys around with the meaning of boundaries, whether they are physical or mental ones. For philosopher Thomas Nail, “the boundary is always in motion”:²³ boundaries are not a static limit, but an active binding process which confronts the outside and the inside. By presenting boundaries as a constant movement, Mohsin Hamid creates what Christian Moraru has termed “a certain narrative technology of displacement mixing up geocultural marking and *unmarking*”.²⁴ As it displaces the characters from one city to the next, *Exit West* constantly re maps urban space and re-locates cities, taking into account the unstable boundaries of the global era.

In their article “Cities and Citizenship,” Appadurai and Holston assert that “[...] in many postcolonial societies, a new generation has arisen to create urban cultures severed from the colonial memories and nationalist fictions on which independence and subsequent rule were founded”.²⁵ The pre-eminence of “urban cultures” over the nation is central in *Exit West*, and the nation-state is questioned throughout the narrative. Azade Seyhan, as for her, notes how this shift operated by migrating writers is first and foremost a creative impetus: “The resistance to national myths and narratives of common culture allows the writer the latitude to move across not only temporal and geographical coordinates but also diverse linguistic and social communities”.²⁶

In the case of *Exit West*, resistance to the concept of nation is expressed in practical terms: the nation, it seems, has no purpose anymore when faraway cities can be reached instantaneously. Halfway through the novel, the narrator describes the growing number of “black doors” in the world, leading to an increasing number of migrations. In the news, people start questioning the binding role of nations:

[...] it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart. Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they had to play.²⁷

The enigmatic, simultaneous movement of “coming together” and “moving apart” hints at the speed with which people travel through the doors, but also the gap between physical closeness and mental boundaries, epitomized by the conflicting groups of migrants in London. With the adjective “illusory,” nations are reduced to a fiction inside the narrative itself. They are overpowered by the new transnational paradigm. The death of the nation is then further enacted in a disturbing simile: “[...] in fact some said Britain had already split, like a man whose head had been chopped off and yet still stood, and others said Britain was an island, and islands endure, even if the people who come to them change [...]”.²⁸ In this uncanny revolution, Britannia’s head is chopped off but the enduring life of the body indicates that the death of the nation-state is a slow process. One cannot but read the passage as a reference to Brexit and to its divisive consequences – *Exit West* was termed “the first post-Brexit novel”,²⁹ a novel belonging to what Kristian Shaw called “BrexLit”.³⁰ In the end, the contradictions of the divided nation meet with its geography; the physical limits of the island seem to remain the only unquestioned fact, when other boundaries are more uncertain. But while the nation seems to struggle in the face of change, neither is the city a fully adaptable replacement for the nation: its boundaries have to be negotiated, too, and these are initially represented as walls for the refugees.

Rather than focusing on the long-term cultural negotiation which takes place after settlement in the city, as is the case for instance in Zadie Smith’s or Monica Ali’s Londons,³¹ the London portrayed in *Exit West* is a city which rejects the very first step of immigration: the arrival. In an overwhelmingly oppressive description, the refugees hear about their own enclosure:

[...] a tightening cordon being put in place, a cordon moving through those of London’s boroughs with fewer doors, and hence fewer new arrivals, sending those unable to prove their legal residence to great holding camps that had been built in the city’s green belt, and concentrating those who remained in pockets of shrinking size.³²

In a serpentine movement, the police cordon seems to be drawing the contours of a new London, one whose borders are highly exclusive. In the passage, the organization of city space leaves no agency to the refugees, who are “sent” and

“concentrated” as if they were objects. They are further deprived of agency as they are only designated by the pronoun “those.” In the end, the similarly gated hotel occupied by Nadia, Saeed and the other refugees is another instance of enclosure at a micro level. In a three-dimensional perspective, the characters are surrounded by “soldiers and armoured vehicles” as well as “drones and helicopters”.³³ As the city destroys the place they have made for themselves, Saeed and Nadia appear to be collateral victims of its problematic negotiation with change.

What first appears as a stalemate soon leads to a surprising design. Since it cannot morph on the inside, the London in *Exit West* mutates through expansion, and the characters’ enclosure in the city is followed by a re-mapping that occurs on the margins of the city. In his study *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*, John Clement Ball contends that postcolonial writings tend to make London smaller than it is, using a “descriptive downsizing”³⁴ as a form of resistance to the Empire. Instead of a “descriptive downsizing,” Mohsin Hamid’s novel proposes to imagine a bigger London, one which might be able to expand drastically. Indeed, the council offers the refugees a deal whereby they can build their own houses in a development:

In the formerly protected green belt around London a new ring of cities was being built, cities that would be able to accommodate more people again than London itself. This development was called the London Halo, one of innumerable human halos and satellites and constellations springing up in the country and in the world.³⁵

The “London Halo” appears as a heavenly remedy, a utopia which not only occurs in London but in other cities throughout the world. The image of “satellites and constellations” points to the interconnectedness of cities in a transnational world. Still, these new cities are built “around London” and not as boroughs *inside* the city, because London remains reluctant to include others, even though it is described as filled with empty houses and hotels. They form a fake, duplicated London, which can contain the same number of people as the original city. Besides, the refugees accepted in the London Halo scheme have to toil in order to build the houses themselves and can only access housing once they have worked long enough on the building sites. The foreman on the building site, whom Saeed has befriended, reflects upon this disturbing expansion: “[...] he felt they were remodelling the earth itself”.³⁶ While the forced expansion of urban space endows the characters with creative power, and a renewed agency in the face of their plight, the conditions of its construction are shown as eminently problematic, and the refugees’ very presence in urban space is still under negotiation. In fact, the “remodelling” undertaken in the diegesis joins the modelling operated by the writer, and his description of 21st century space as a work in progress. The building of cities – or the expansion of cities – mirrors the act of storytelling and means that cities are a highly malleable material for the contemporary writer.

I “Remodelling the earth itself:” narrative plasti-cities

In his study of transnational London, John Clement Ball explains that “[...] novels are by one definition ‘possible worlds,’ they can imagine narratives not only of the city as it was and is but as it could be [...]”.³⁷ Mohsin Hamid’s novel undoubtedly proposes the city as a “possible world,” given that he takes inspiration from genres that have the “possible world” as their guiding principle: magical realism, dystopia and utopia all transpire through the writer’s cities. Through the

novel, the city can offer, if not actual shelter, at least renewed perspectives, and an alternative where national narratives no longer prevail. According to Azade Seyhan, urban writings can engage a wide readership precisely because they reach to a universal sense of displacement. Cities “[...] become a point of affiliation for both the noncitizen in exile and others who see themselves exiled within their own lands and societies [...]”.³⁸ Such an affiliation goes even further with Mohsin Hamid, who has often advocated the need for what he calls “co-creation:” a “blurring of boundaries, [...] the idea that a novel is made jointly by a writer and a reader”.³⁹ The cities in *Exit West* are a pivotal aspect of this joint creation; they are *plasti-cities*, moulded in the irregular shape of the contemporary world.

In *Exit West*, the main protagonists change in the course of their successive migrations. Saeed and Nadia fall in love in a city at war, move to other cities, meet a variety of hardships before realizing, in the city of Marin, California, that they have to go their own ways. In spite of their unusual journey, the reader witnesses in them the common processes and changes that can run through one’s life: a spiritual awakening, the revelation of one’s sexual identity, or evolving perspectives on childhood and parenthood. Running parallel to their trajectories, the cities they cross are also struck by a number of events and are shaped and distorted accordingly.

Although these cities are impacted by various forms of political unrest, the novel also evokes the usual, natural changes that can impact a city over time. Early in the novel, Saeed and Nadia’s first romantic encounters are paralleled with what Saeed’s parents experienced in the same city:

The cinema where Saeed’s parents met was long gone by the time their son met Nadia, as were the bookshops they favoured and most of their beloved restaurants and cafés. It was not that cinemas and bookshops, restaurants and cafés had vanished from the city, just that many of those that had been there before were there no longer.⁴⁰

The narrator openly rejects the nostalgia that is sometimes inherent to depictions of the city. The matter-of-fact tone contrasts these ordinary changes with the sudden, unexpected changes triggered by war. Besides, the passing of time never causes a full erasure, and the traces of the past can still be read on the city’s walls, as the narrative voice adds: “the building had taken the same name as the cinema that preceded it”.⁴¹

This contrasted gaze on change is echoed again at the end of the novel. The narrative ends with a sense of cyclic order as the characters both return to their city of origin, having travelled an almost full revolution around the earth. The last chapter begins with their chance encounter in that city:

Half a century later Nadia returned for the first time to the city of her birth, where the fires she had witnessed in her youth had burned themselves out long ago, the lives of cities being far more persistent and more gently cyclical than those of people, and the city she found herself in was not a heaven but it was not a hell, and it was familiar but also unfamiliar, and as she wandered about slowly, exploring, she was informed of the proximity of Saeed [...].⁴²

The passage sets “the city of her birth” apart from “the city she found herself in,” as two separate entities. But does the city itself really change, or does the change occur in our perception of it? Like a phoenix, the city rises from its ashes (the “fires” of war) and can be renewed through the gaze of its onlookers. Cities are personified here, yet made oddly eternal by the adjective “persistent.” As the novel reaches its end, the reader can thus hope to make sense of the narrator’s earlier

riddle, “[w]e are all migrants through time”:⁴³ in this lifelong journey, the city is the assessment criterion which can help take the measure of our life experience.

While the physical city might remain a stable landmark, discourse on the city is more elusive. Indeed, urban tropes are often de-centered in *Exit West* and form another playful re-modelling of city imaginaries. Between the lines, the novel questions the power relations which usually emanate from discourse on the city, and the very structure of the plot revisits the ways we move in and out of cities. In the novel, migration is not only a process undergone by war refugees; it is, from the onset, a multi-directional movement which has become a universal experience. While long parts of the plot are dedicated to London and to the characters’ unnamed birth city, Mohsin Hamid debunks the binary East/West and North/South divides often epitomized by cities, by evoking a multiplicity of world cities throughout the narrative. For example, two elderly men fall in love across a black door between Amsterdam and Sao Paulo,⁴⁴ and a lady near Marrakesh cannot follow her daughter who has gone in search of a better future.⁴⁵ These micro-stories punctuating the main plot aim at broadening the scope on migration, showing a variety of individual motivations.

In one striking passage, this change of focus questions idealized perceptions of the city. The usually longed-for London is perceived not only as a place of arrival, but as a city one needs to escape: not only does it reveal itself to be unwelcoming to refugees, but it is also a hell to some of its own citizens. A depressed Londoner thus notices a black door in his apartment as he is about to commit suicide. The concluding sentence of the passage again sheds light on the relativity of life in the city: “With that he was gone, and his London was gone, and how long he remained in Namibia it was hard for anyone who formerly knew him to say”.⁴⁶ Upon leaving, the man takes with him “his London,” his own narrative of the city. While the reader is left to wonder what “his London” might have been – a London of affluence and success or one of unhappiness–, the man’s new landscape, we are told, is “a desert seaside,” a virgin space for a new beginning.

Discourse on the city also shifts through the motif of rumour. Throughout the novel, Saeed and Nadia’s experiences are constantly echoed by what they hear, what they read on social media, by what they understand from collected pieces of information. While the refugees are contained by the London police forces, the drawing of a new border between refugees and Londoners is reported to characters and readers alike by a rather hesitant narrative voice: “Rumours began to circulate [...]”; “Whether it was true or not [...]”.⁴⁷ In this passage as well as through the recurring expression “some said that”,⁴⁸ the contours of the city seem to be drawn by this patchwork of echoes. In “Poétique de la Rumeur,” Xavier Garnier explains that contrary to the vertical, authoritative discourse of power, the use of rumour is de-centered (“non nuclear”), and spreads horizontally, thus creating a network.⁴⁹ In “Usages littéraires de la rumeur,” he also contends that the specificity of a rumour is space-defining, insofar as the rumour creates its own space for propagation.⁵⁰ In *Exit West*, the spreading of rumours about the police cordon directly contributes to building the spatial imaginary of the city. For the migrant characters, who access information second-hand, the border is being drawn, and their perceptions of London are shaped through this divisive experience. Like the characters, the readers are given no other information; the rumour is not contrasted or contradicted by more authoritative discourse. As the rumour becomes the main type of speech evoking London, it appears as yet another device for the narrative to mould city imaginaries.

The most striking re-modelling of the city, in the end, is that which takes place through the gaze of refugees. Mohsin Hamid's characters are certainly storytellers: as Saeed and Nadia move from one city to the next, the internal focalization reveals the new narratives they create for themselves, turning the city into their own blank page. But there is no unique migrant gaze: these readings of the city are composed of a multiplicity of perspectives, which differ depending on where people come from. In London, the community of refugees imagines a palimpsest on the trees near Kensington Palace:

The cherry trees exploded on Palace Gardens Terrace at that time, bursting into white blossoms, the closest thing many of the street's new residents had ever seen to snow, and reminding others of ripe cotton in the fields, waiting to be picked, waiting for labour, for the efforts of dark bodies from the villages, and in these trees there were now dark bodies too, children who climbed and played among the boughs, [...] and as bloodshed loomed they made of these trees that were perhaps not intended to be climbed the stuff of a thousand fantasies.⁵¹

The “explod[ing]” cherry trees are an uncanny image, calling to mind both the spring blossoms and the threat of an attack by the police. While some refugees poetically mistake blossoms for snow, others think of cotton fields and see the “dark bodies” in the trees: both images are reminiscent of the Atlantic slave trade, another history of forced movement, and of its consequences in American history. These bodies in the trees inevitably summon Billie Holiday's “Strange Fruit”,⁵² and the lynching processes that occurred in Southern states. These hints once again explore the persistence of human movement and violence through the ages, however different the circumstances. But these grim perceptions of Kensington's trees are soon countered by the children's imagination, an untainted, a-historical reading of the cityscape. By climbing trees that are “perhaps not intended to be climbed,” these children adapt their viewpoint to challenge the usual imaginaries of Western city space and invite the reader to do just the same.

I Conclusion

In *Exit West*, cities are not mere backdrops to the story. Cities mutate along with the refugee characters as they journey across the world and strive to re-invent themselves. The city thus appears as an utterly modern entity, since it can adapt to the times and to the geographies of the global age. As *Exit West* describes journeys across nations, the city appears as the site of many encounters, and perhaps as the meeting point between writer and reader. The fable-like quality of the cities depicted in the novel enables the characters but also the reader to imagine their own stories there. The addition of “black doors” or a “London Halo” to existing urban geographies indeed demonstrate the potential of these fictional cities in stretching and adapting to contemporary realities. In *Exit West*, cities seem to illustrate the assertion by Appadurai and Holston that in the midst of conflicts, “[...] the city can be pretext and context, form and substance, stage and script.”⁵³ The city's protean quality and the possible interactions it offers through the novel are thus what make it a privileged ground for imaginaries of modernity.

This plasticity of cities (or “plasti-city”) is reflected in other novels by Mohsin Hamid: in *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, for example, the main urban setting is never clearly identified, but it is almost personified and presented as a treacherous, changing environment which can hold many dreams for a rural youth— but also lead him to his downfall. The city, in that novel, is “not laid out as a single-celled organism [...]”⁵⁴ Rather, like the cities in *Exit West*, this “*plasti-city*” always seems to be mutating together with the character's experiences and the reader's perspective.

For some, Hamid's mutating cities run the risk of over-simplifying the Eastern world. To Zain R. Mian, both *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West* lack "any sense of localised politics," and describe "generalise-able cities" which misinform the First World readership⁵⁵. The choice of narrating contemporary cities does indeed raise questions of representation and accuracy. But more than political carelessness, Mohsin Hamid's urban geography forms part of his active "blurring of boundaries,"⁵⁶ and might be read as a thrust towards a critical collective mapping (a "co-creation"⁵⁷) of the contemporary world. In fact, as critics have noted, contemporary Pakistani novelists writing in English often lean towards a "disorientation"⁵⁸ in their approach to space. Striking examples can be found in Nadeem Aslam's fictional – and somewhat mythical – geographies of Pakistan, in novels like *The Blind Man's Garden* or *The Golden Legend*.⁵⁹

Ultimately, Mohsin Hamid's multifaceted cities display his larger poetics, whereby the blurring of geographical landmarks unveils the possibility of approaching worlds other than one's own through fiction. While it points to the limits of the nation-state as a defining frame, *Exit West* does not seek to ignore the specificity of places. Rather, the novel reveals some common urban realities – for instance, the phenomena of occupation, enclosure or expansion discussed here – which always unfold in a given place, yet are experienced from a variety of different perspectives. Instead of a concern for "localised politics," narratives like *Exit West* seem to offer a "localising poetics," which leaves it to readers to situate these realities and question their own place in the contemporary world order. ●

¹ Hamid Mohsin, *Moth Smoke*, London, Penguin, 2011.

² Hamid Mohsin, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, London, Penguin, 2008.

³ Hamid Mohsin, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, London, Penguin Books, 2014.

⁴ On March 23, 2018. See Agha Saira "Renowned Writer Mohsin Hamid, Veteran Actor Khaled Anam Honoured with Sitara-i-Imtiaz", *Daily Times*, 24 Mar. 2018, [accessed 31 August 2019], <https://dailytimes.com.pk/218838/renowned-writer-mohsin-hamid-veteran-actor-khaled-anam-honoured-with-sitara-i-imtiaz/>.

⁵ Hamid Mohsin, *Exit West*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 2017.

⁶ Sandhu Sukhdev, "Exit West by Mohsin Hamid – Magical Vision of the Refugee Crisis", *The Observer*, 12 Mar. 2017, www.theguardian.com, [accessed 31 August 2019], <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/12/exit-west-mohsin-hamid-review-refugee-crisis>.

⁷ Menger Eva, "What It Feels like to Be an Other: Imaginations of Displacement in Contemporary Speculative Fiction", *Studies in Arts and Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 2, Jan. 2019, pp. 79–95, [Accessed 31 August 2019], www.sahjournal.com, doi:10.18193/sah.v4i2.141.

⁸ Oziewicz, Marek, "Speculative Fiction", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2017. oxfordre.com, [accessed 5 October 2019], <https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-78>.

⁹ Shamsie Muneeza, "How the West Was One", *Newsweek Pakistan*, Apr. 2017, [Accessed 31 August 2019], <https://www.newsweekpakistan.com/how-the-west-was-one/>.

¹⁰ Holston James, and Arjun Appadurai, "Cities and Citizenship", *Public Culture*, vol. 8, no. 2, May 1996, p. 189.

¹¹ Appadurai, Arjun, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, 1998 [1996], p. 9.

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