

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*: Invisible Borders and the Exclusion of Refugees

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*This is part of our special feature, **United in Diversity**.*

According to French philosopher Étienne Balibar, the term border “is undergoing a profound change in meaning” (Balibar, 2004). Although Balibar said this more than a decade ago, it is still true that borders in Europe have novel connotations that are utterly different than their conventional associations. Balibar associates European borders with national identity as well as violence. These are not intrinsically territorial borders protected by Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, but rather borders of “new sociopolitical entities,” which permeate in cosmopolitan cities, where they play a crucial role in constituting the public sphere. As sociopolitical borders assume the roles of benchmarks for national identity and social acceptance, a series of sociocultural problems arise that reshape the standards of inclusion, and of course, political agendas. Mohsin Hamid’s most recent novel, *Exit West* (2017), questions the notion of these new sociopolitical borders in Europe by highlighting a public sphere in the city of London where inclusion and exclusion are utilized as political weapons. The public sphere in Hamid’s descriptions and illustrations, which is quite hostile to refugees and tries to exclude them by using nativists as its agents, turns out to be the concentration of political problems as Balibar puts it in a sociopolitical context. Borders, although they are extinct in the novel, are perceived already as points of discrimination, but Balibar’s new borders of sociopolitical entities play a notorious role in the entire society as they deprive foreigners and refugees of any human value and right, any feeling of belonging, because it is carried out as an institutional practice.

Exit West is a novel about two young people, Nadia and Saeed, both students, who fall in love with each other in an unnamed city, which is “swollen with refugees” but “not yet openly at war.” Despite their different worldviews (Saeed is from a conservative and traditional family, but Nadia is secular and lives alone), their blooming romance makes them concur on an exit plan, as tensions escalate and radical militants take over the city. They hear about magical doors that take people to distant places, and thus their journey begins. Nadia and Saeed find themselves on the Greek island of Mykonos, in London, and then San Francisco, respectively. However, their relationship breaks down and they finally go their separate ways. Mykonos, Greece, the peripheral border of the European Union, exactly where Étienne Balibar draws the line between the larger European public sphere and the foreigner, is their first port of entry to the EU (Balibar, 2004). They are not considered intruders here yet, but Greece has historically occupied a discursive and geopolitical role in separating the larger European sphere—be it cultural, historical, political, economic, etc., from anything that is not European. In a sense, Greece serves as the gateway to a different world, which, in the face of

the recent refugee issues, needs to save itself from the people whom it understands as threats to what it has built for centuries. Thus, Greece acts as a geographic and discursive shield for the European territory.

With the exception of London, the number of references to Europe's cosmopolitan places is limited in *Exit West*, but there is one reference to Germany, for example, as a country that opened its borders to refugees, to the astonishment of some of its citizens and the other member countries of the European Union. As people try to find ways out of the camp in Greece, Hamid writes that Nadia and Saeed hear about "a door to Germany" that many dwellers of the camp choose to go through. Yet, Saeed holds Nadia back and they decide that it is not a good idea to try to go through this door, because the crowd is stopped by uniformed men. Attempts were futile (Hamid, 2017). In fact, they both like Mykonos and think that it is "indeed a beautiful place," but lack of employment and money poses a threat to their survival on the island (Hamid, 2017). When Germany seems impossible, they go to London, of course accidentally, without knowing where the door would take them. As they enter a house in London, they see the city that is completely different from their understanding of a city. This city seems almost unreal to them (Hamid, 2017). In addition, the house they stay at in London sounds like a minimal form of Europe, as it has residents "hailing from as far west as Guatemala and as far east as Indonesia." When the housekeeper comes to clean the house and sees the "squatters," she screams, and the police and then soldiers arrive (Hamid, 2017). When refugees refuse to leave the house, the police come again, limiting their stay to a deadline. But then, to their astonishment, "something they could have never expected happened: other people gathered on the street, other dark- and medium- and even light-skinned people, bedraggled, like the people of the camps on Mykonos, and these people formed a crowd. They banged cooking pots with spoons and chanted in various languages and soon the police decided to withdraw" (Hamid, 2017). This support from other people that astounds both Nadia and Saeed, which indicates a form of solidarity among refugees, is a reaction against the xenophobic attitudes of certain groups that want refugees to be banished. The attitudes of these groups toward refugees manifest the unrest felt in London with the entrance of refugees to the city. After this initial scene of intimidation and resistance, Hamid vividly pictures how the presence of refugees in the public sphere in cosmopolitan London cause xenophobic riots and how reactions proceed.

Throughout the novel, the number of refugees in London come to sound quite terrifying to many locals and especially nationalist and xenophobic groups. It is narrated in the media that in "London houses and parks and disused lots were being peopled . . . , some said by a million migrants, some said by twice that," leaving legal residents and native-born-ones in a minority. What is shocking is that these areas in London are referred to in the local newspapers "as the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation" (Hamid, 2017). Hamid portrays the media as increasingly used as a propaganda apparatus to smear the refugees and antagonize them. In addition to the racist and xenophobic descriptions and statements in the news, some of the vocabulary Hamid opts to use such as "withdraw, destruction, and surrender" have a stern nature, because they seem to be used to describe an incoming war or

a battlefield where a military force wages war on a group of unarmed people. It is not astonishing to consider Hamid's London as a battlefield in that the "measures" authorities want to take in the wake of problems emanating from the arrival and stay of refugees sound like measures taken against an occupying force, namely, an enemy. So, the state decides to be extremely precautionary as regards an impending danger. After the riots of xenophobic groups in London, "the talk on the television was of a major operation, one city at a time, starting in London, to reclaim Britain for Britain, and it was reported that the army was being deployed, and the police as well, and those who had once served in the army and the police, and volunteers who had received a weeklong course of training" (Hamid, 2017).

Every detail of this operation sounds like the items in the agenda of a far-right organization. As if this is not enough, and to get and increase popular support, Hamid narrates, political authorities let "nativist extremists . . . [form] their own legions . . . and the social media chatter was of a coming night of a shattered glass" (Hamid, 2017). This is a long list of decisive state and public forces and groups who determinedly seek to make refugees *exit* London or Britain. The list also includes prime examples of using popular sovereignty in ways that endanger the lives of refugees, but secure the positions of politicians as they spark the controversy concerning the refugees by emboldening extremist and nationalist groups.

What makes Hamid's fictional portrayal of London in so relevant to the current discussions is the presence of a great number of refugees in the member countries of the EU. As their numbers have increased in Europe, especially after the recent refugee flows, national identity and sovereignty are discussed more evidently and fervently. Moreover, European political rhetoric tends to be increasingly populist and nationalist as a tactic to achieve political power. According to this rhetoric, refugees are intruders of the public sphere and political agendas promise to push them out of it by consolidating sovereignty. Pushing refugees out of the national borderlines is served as a secure and ultimate solution. However, there are borders in European cosmopolitan cities that are unsurpassable, whereas the borders that refugees actually cross to go to another country are almost extinct in Hamid's novel. Rather, border in this case is a constructed notion with a different function. Borders are no longer lines that draw the "outer limit of territories," but they are rather "everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled" (Balibar, 2004). Balibar suggests the cosmopolitan cities, in this sense, are at the center of constituting the public sphere, which brings about the topic of inclusion and exclusion and alarmingly leads to a discussion of nationalism and sovereignty. Once refugees enter actual societies, they become visible persons in the public spheres of, say, London, Paris, and Berlin, and their actual passing of the border is perceived as a threat to national identities constructed and represented in these cosmopolitan atmospheres. Hence, borders protect and enforce national identity that comes out as national sovereignty in the eyes of nationalists in that, for Balibar, nationalism "is the organic ideology that corresponds to the national institution, [which] . . . rests upon the formulation of a *rule of exclusion, of visible or invisible "borders,"* materialized in laws and practices "(Balibar, 2017). It should not be forgotten that exclusion is directed towards the foreigner and *invisible* borders are the invaluable instruments of this

tactically political act which abuses laws and public practices. Drawn invisibly to protect national identity or traditional and cultural tenets of a country, these borders are more dangerous, because they are hardly passable and they harbor violence as depicted in the London chapters of Hamid's novel. Despite the first half of the novel taking place in an undisclosed city, Hamid attempts to focus on the target of these people, the European territory.

Although his protagonists are able to enter the European territory through doors, not borders, they encounter colossal borders in the social spaces of their second stop, namely London. The public sphere of Hamid's London, as a vital representative of the European sovereign territory, does not allow them to exist as a free member of that society with democratic rights. Therefore, their hope to find a better place than their hometown, which is already "swollen" by refugees, shatters with the impact of a series of troubles and events swollen by violence. Nadia and Saeed, not to mention many more refugees like them, always stand as outsiders in London, excluded from the social space and forced to live in secluded ghettos. Their presence disturbs certain social groups, and of course political circles, and that is how their exclusion starts and practiced by "the mob," which Hamid seems to believe to be the hub of nationalist and xenophobic dispositions.

Using their journey and experiences in London, Hamid illustrates the fracturing of London as it emerges as a struggle to reinforce British national identity through violent attempts by eliminating refugees and migrants from the social space that is to be the new sovereign and national territory. Indeed, just as numerous other refugees or "the unwanted" in London, their exclusion from this territory surrounded by invisible borders happens through violent attempts that occur in the form of attacks that hampers the freedom of refugees in one of the capitals of Europe. Exclusion, Balibar argues, is "a way of pushing foreigners out, sometimes a way of admitting them and "integrating" or "assimilating" them in a more or less compulsory way, and sometimes a way of expelling certain nationals by imaginarily representing them as "foreigners" (Balibar, 2004). In *Exit West*, the demarcation of invisible borders happens through the information disseminated in various platforms which consequently turns into a xenophobic political practice that forces people like Nadia and Saeed out of the national territory. Beliefs and practices formed in political agendas as new nationalist institutions in the novel lead to violent outcomes, which signifies Balibar's analysis of nationalism.

"The difficulty," writes Balibar as to nationalism, "does not reside in the good or bad, advanced or backward character of nationalism, but in the combined economy of identities and structural violence, in the subtle differences between forms of violence combined with beliefs, ideals, and institutional norms, and in the way these forms crystallize on a mass scale" (Balibar, 2004). In the novel, the precautionary measures taken by the authorities in Britain exemplify Balibar's description of the emergence of nationalism on a mass scale. Hence, popular sovereignty turns out to be a situation in which discriminatory practices both determine the destiny of the social space and decides who can be a member of it. What this

does is distorting the image of the refugee, which successively leads to “the prohibition of access to the public sphere and to rights of free expression and the possibilities for struggle they offer.” Just like Nadia and Saeed and other refugees in London, these nationalistic and xenophobic attacks confine refugees “and confinement in ghettos and in some cases in an “underground” seek to prevent *both* the individualization and the socialization of foreigners, the conquest of individual and collective freedoms, exactly as occurs in colonial situations” (Balibar, 2004). Similarly, motivation from authorities and politicians makes the social space even a more dangerous place for refugees in that prevention from individualization and socialization contains traces from Europe’s colonial past. For Balibar, “the emergence of a European public sphere, whatever detours and conflicts it may have to pass through, will inevitably pose the problem of a transcendence of atavisms inherited from a political history marked as much by exploitation and colonialism as by democratic conquests and movements of social emancipation” (Balibar, 2004). In *Exit West*, London, the capital of a country that has a well-known colonial history, presents the impacts of such an atavistic legacy. Despite the fact that human rights and social justice have been the hallmarks of Britain’s diplomatic discourse, scenes of nativist backlash prove that:

[w]hereas information has become practically “ubiquitous,” and whereas the circulation of goods and currency conversions have been almost entirely “liberalized,” the movements of men are the object of heavier and heavier limitations. This difference in status appears essential to the defense of state “sovereignty” in the international political and diplomatic field; it goes together with an intensification of the *socially discriminatory function of borders* (Balibar, 2004).

Balibar talks here about the discriminatory functions of real borders, but the aforementioned invisible borders are stricter in terms of limiting the movements of foreigners and refugees. This limitation is carried out through violence. Among the three forms of violence Balibar lists, namely institutional, reactive, and ideological, the third one, “perpetrated by nationalist groups or marginal figures influenced by them against non-European residents” is the most disturbing form of violence (Balibar, 2004). Similarly, there are numerous instances of ideological violence in Hamid’s novel. In addition to “drones and helicopters and surveillance balloons” used by the state as means for public security, which are already extremely frightening and threatening, fights with “nativist provocateurs” break out” that appal the refugees (Hamid, 2017). Allowance to such forms of atrocities in the fictional world of the novel corresponds to “the invasion of public space by practices of non-right or what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze called “microfascisms” (Balibar, 2004). The city Hamid writes about, London, is a biased, unwelcoming, and nativist space rather than a tolerant and open society. Through the portrayal of the exclusion of immigrants and refugees, that is, *the other*, Hamid questions the validity of the European project. Hamid wrote in 2015 that “[a]nti-migrant parties are in the ascendant across the EU, and Britain is considering leaving the bloc, in large part because of anger over migrants” (Hamid, 2015). Hamid, in his own words, elaborates on this crisis:

The US and the EU, despite the internal victories they have won for democracy and the rule of law, are stumbling on the world stage. Perhaps this is in part because their models are attempts at uber-nations, not a post-national collective humanity. Such models are too small-minded for the challenges the globe faces, thrown off-balance by the conflicted ambition of mating individual equality with national superiority (Hamid, 2015).

In the mind of a system of national superiority, people like Nadia and Saeed do not deserve to exist in their uber-nations, because they have inferior lives that should be lived somewhere else. Hatred against the foreigner presents itself in the form of nationalism in *Exit West* in that “nationalism emerges out of racism” (Balibar, 1991). In the novel, Britain is plagued by nativist ideologies which gain more room with the suspension of the law. Hamid narrates that “wholesale slaughter” and “massacre” is advocated by nativists as a way of clearing the migrants from the country. Although real events are a source of inspiration for Mohsin Hamid, hyperbolic literary language works in the novel as a warning that this danger might not be too far, if racist-nationalism becomes an ingrained problem in European societies. Nadia and Saeed find other doors to go to safer places, but a reactionary nationalism afflicts the very spirit of the European Union today under the guise of national sovereignty and public safety. If its motto, “united in diversity,” will be maintained and seen as a guiding principle, the EU has to develop policies to establish and allow to a collective community and impede the progress of any racist and nationalist ideology that views migration as a synonym for terrorism and refugees as agents of a religious, political, or cultural scheme to seize European jobs, wealth, and even European territory. Mohsin Hamid does not write about the possibility of obliterating national borders, but rather about the danger of drawing invisible borders in societies.

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