

Opening page to *Exit West* – Mohsin Hamid

Mohsin Hamid’s novel “Exit West,” which follows two lovers on the move from a country on the brink of civil war, ...follows two lovers on the move from a country on the brink of civil war,...

“Exit West” begins quietly, despite what’s to come, with a man and a woman meeting in an evening class on corporate identity and product branding.

Yet the first page also gestures at the violence ahead, mentioning that Saeed and Nadia are in an unnamed city “mostly” at peace, “not yet” at war — that it is one of multiple cities “teetering” toward something worse.

The novel, which is grounded in the real but also plays with the surreal, escalates from there.

Like millions today worldwide, Saeed and Nadia are forced to leave their city. Below, author Mohsin Hamid annotates the first page to tell readers what he was thinking as he wrote it.

<p>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 and did not speak to her. For many days. 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 flowing black robe. Back then people continued to enjoy the luxury of wearing more or less what they wanted to wear, clothing and hair wise, within certain bounds of course, and so these choices meant something.</p> <p>It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class – in this case an evening class on corporate identity and product branding – but that is...</p>	<p>city <i>Mohsin Hamid:</i> I wanted Saeed and Nadia’s city to be nameless. In part because I wanted it to be open to the reader, to create the possibility that it could be your city, or the city of your lover, or a city you have seen on the news. And in part because it would have broken my heart to give it the name of my city, as if I were willing something terrible to occur there.</p> <p>not yet <i>Mohsin Hamid:</i> The novel will move forward and back across time, with a narrator who is already aware of what is yet to come. This relationship to time is being signaled here.</p> <p>For <i>Mohsin Hamid:</i> This break here, the new sentence, is for cadence. The novel will build to very long sentences that I hope will read very easily. This rhythm is being established now, at the outset, in smaller sentences, so that it can guide the reader in the much longer sentences to come.</p> <p>Saeed <i>Mohsin Hamid:</i> Of all the characters in the novel, only Saeed and Nadia will have names. We encounter many other characters, enter many other stories, but naming only two of them provides the reader with a tight grip on the central strands to which we will return again and again.</p> <p>stubble <i>Mohsin Hamid:</i> Saeed’s precise form of facial hair</p>
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	<p>is nuanced and important to him. His beliefs will be too.</p> <p>jugular notch <i>Mohsin Hamid:</i> I love this piece of the human anatomy, and the words that name it too. There is something visceral and almost violent to the term.</p> <p>Back then <i>Mohsin Hamid:</i> An old-fashioned temporal perspective is being established here, as if the story is being told from much later in time. Not unlike some children’s books – which were an influence on “Exit West.”</p> <p>within certain bounds <i>Mohsin Hamid:</i> We can almost never truly wear what we wish to wear. But for Saeed and Nadia, moderate restriction will soon give way to severe restriction.</p> <p>abyss <i>Mohsin Hamid:</i> Momentum is being set in motion. Not much happens on this first page. But here it establishes that much is about to happen.</p> <p>still go to class <i>Mohsin Hamid:</i> In my experience, people so often wish to continue living life as normal, even – or rather especially – in the face of great and frightening abnormality. This will be such a story.</p>
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Flock, E. (2018, March 22). Mohsin Hamid annotates the first page of his novel, 'exit west'. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/mohsin-hamid-annotates-the-first-page-of-his-novel-exit-west>

Exit West Excerpt

Nadia had long been, and would afterwards continue to be, more comfortable with all varieties of movement in her life than was Saeed, in whom the impulse of nostalgia was stronger, perhaps because his childhood had been more idyllic, or perhaps because this was simply his temperament. Both of them, though, whatever their misgivings, had no doubt that they would leave if given the chance. And so neither expected, when a handwritten note from the agent arrived, pushed under their apartment door one morning and telling them precisely where to be at precisely what time the following afternoon, that Saeed’s father would say, “You two must go, but I will not come.”

Saeed and Nadia said this was impossible, and explained, in case of misunderstanding, that there was no problem, that they had paid the agent for three passages and would all be leaving together, and Saeed’s father heard them out but would not be budged: they, he repeated, had to go, and he had to stay. Saeed threatened to carry his father over his shoulder if he needed to, and he had never spoken to his father in this way, and his father took him aside, for he could see the pain he was causing his

son, and when Saeed asked why his father was doing this, what could possibly make him want to stay, Saeed's father said, "Your mother is here."

Saeed said, "Mother is gone." His father said, "Not for me."

His father said, "Not for me."

And this was true in a way, Saeed's mother was not gone for Saeed's father to leave the place where he had spent a life with her, difficult not to be able to visit her grave each day, and he did not wish to do this, he preferred to abide, in a sense, in the past, for the past offered more to him.

But Saeed's father was thinking also of the future, even though he did not say this to Saeed, for he feared that if he said this to his son that his son might not go, and he knew above all else that his son must go, and what he did not say was that he had come to that point in a parent's life when, if a flood arrives, one knows one must let go of one's child, contrary to all the instincts one had when one was younger, because holding on can no longer offer the child protection, it can only pull the child down, and threaten them with drowning, for the child is now stronger than the parent, and the circumstances are such that the utmost of strength is required, and the arc of a child's life only appears for a while to match the arc of a parent's, in reality one sits atop the other, a hill atop a hill, a curve atop a curve, and Saeed's father's arc now needed to curve lower, while his son's still curved higher, for with an old man hampering them these two young people were simply less likely to survive.

Saeed's father told his son he loved him and said that Saeed must not disobey him in this, that he had not believed in commanding his son but in this moment was doing so, that only death awaited Saeed and Nadia in this city, and that one day when things were better Saeed would come back to him, and both men knew as this was said that it would not happen, that Saeed would not be able to return while his father still lived, and indeed as it transpired Saeed would not, after this night that was just beginning, spend another night with his father again.

Saeed's father then summoned Nadia into his room and spoke to her without Saeed and said that he was entrusting her with his son's life, and she, whom he called daughter, must, like a daughter, not fail him, whom she called father, and she must see Saeed through to safety, and he hoped she would one day marry his son and be called mother by his grandchildren, but this was up to them to decide, and all he asked was that she remain by Saeed's side until Saeed was out of danger, and he asked her to promise this to him, and she said she would promise only if Saeed's father came with them, and he said again that he could not, but that they must go, he said it softly, like a prayer, and she sat there with him in silence and the minutes passed, and in the end she promised, and it was an easy promise to make because she had at that time no thoughts of leaving Saeed, but it was also a difficult one because in making it she felt she was abandoning the old man, and even if he did have his siblings and his cousins, and might now go live with them or have them come live with him, they could not protect him as Saeed and Nadia could, and so by making the promise he demanded she make she was in a sense killing him, but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind.

Exit West by Mohsin Hamid second excerpt

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

Saeed was emerging and Nadia crawled forward to give him space, and as she did so she noticed the sinks and mirrors for the first time, the tiles of the floor, the stalls behind her, all the doors of which save one were normal doors, all but the one through which she had come, and through which Saeed was now coming, which was black, and she understood that she was in the toilet of some public place, and she listened intently but it was silent, the only noises emanating from her, from her breathing, and from Saeed, his quiet grunts like those of a man exercising, or having sex.

They embraced without getting to their feet, and she cradled him, for he was still weak, and when they were strong enough they rose, and she saw Saeed pivot back to the door, as though he wished maybe to reverse course and return through it, and she stood beside him without speaking, and he was motionless for a while, but then he strode forward and they made their way outside and found themselves between two low buildings, perceiving a sound like a shell held to their ears and feeling a cold breeze on their faces and smelling brine in the air and they looked and saw a stretch of sand and low grey waves coming in and it seemed miraculous, although it was not a miracle, they were merely on a beach.

The beach was fronted by a beach club, with bars and tables and large outdoor loudspeakers and loungers stacked away for winter. Its signs were written in English but also in other European tongues. It seemed deserted, and Saeed and Nadia went and stood by the sea, the water stopping just short of their feet and sinking into the sand, leaving lines in the smoothness like those of expired soap bubbles blown by a parent for a child. After a while a pale-skinned man with light brown hair came out and told them to move along, making shooing gestures with his hands, but without any hostility or particular rudeness, more as though he was conversing in an international pidgin dialect of sign language.

They walked away from the beach club and in the lee of a hill they saw what looked like a refugee camp, with hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colours and hues – many colours and hues but mostly falling within a band of brown that ranged from dark chocolate to milky tea – and these people were gathered around fires that burned inside upright oil drums and speaking in a cacophony that was the languages of the world, what one might hear if one were a communications satellite, or a spymaster tapping into a fibre-optic cable under the sea.

In this group, everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was. Nadia and Saeed quickly located a cluster of fellow countrywomen and -men and learned that they were on the Greek island of Mykonos, a great draw for tourists in the summer, and, it seemed, a great draw for migrants this winter, and that the doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from – although almost no one ever did – or perhaps because there were simply too many doors from too many poorer places to guard them all.

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 the dark so he never made a sound. The island was pretty safe, they were told, except when it was not, which made it like most places. Decent people vastly outnumbered dangerous ones, but it was probably best to be in the camp, near other people, after nightfall.

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The first things Saeed and Nadia bought, Nadia doing the negotiating, were some water, food, a blanket, a larger backpack, a little tent that folded away into a light, easily portable pouch, and electric power and local numbers for their phones. They found a patch of land at the edge of the camp, partway up the hill, that wasn't too windy or too rocky, and set up their temporary home there, and Nadia felt as she was doing it that she was playing house, as she had with her sister as a child, and Saeed felt as he was doing it that he was a bad son, and when Nadia squatted down beside a scraggly bush and bade him squat down as well, and there concealed tried to kiss him under the open sky, he turned his face away angrily, and then immediately apologized, and placed his cheek against hers, and she tried to relax against him, cheek to bearded cheek, but she was surprised, because what she thought she had glimpsed in him in that moment was bitterness, and she had never seen bitterness in him before, not in all these months, not for one second, even when his mother had died, then he had been mournful, yes, depressed, but not bitter, not as though something was corroding his insides. He had in fact always struck her as the opposite of bitter, so quick to smile, and she was reassured when now he held her hand and kissed it, as if making reparations, but she was a bit unsettled too, for it struck her that a bitter Saeed would not be Saeed at all.

They took a nap in the tent, exhausted. When they woke Saeed tried to call his father but an automated message informed him that his call could not be completed, and Nadia tried to connect with people via chat applications and social media, and an acquaintance who had made it to Auckland and another who had reached Madrid replied right away.

Nadia and Saeed sat next to each other on the ground and caught up on the news, the tumult in the world, the state of their country, the various routes and destinations migrants were taking and recommending to each other, the tricks one could gainfully employ, the dangers one needed at all costs to avoid.

In the late afternoon, Saeed went to the top of the hill, and Nadia went to the top of the hill, and there they gazed out over the island, and out to sea, and he stood beside where she stood, and she stood beside where he stood, and the wind tugged and pushed at their hair, and they looked around at each other, but they did not see each other, for she went up before him, and he went up after her, and they were each at the crest of the hill only briefly, and at different times.

As Saeed was coming down from the hill to where Nadia again sat by their tent, a young woman was leaving the contemporary art gallery she worked at in Vienna. Militants from Saeed and Nadia's country had crossed over to Vienna the previous week,

and the city had witnessed massacres in the streets, the militants shooting unarmed people and then disappearing, an afternoon of carnage unlike anything Vienna had ever seen, well, unlike anything it had seen since the fighting of the previous century, and of the centuries before that, which were of an entirely different and greater magnitude, Vienna being no stranger, in the annals of history, to war, and the militants had perhaps hoped to provoke a reaction against migrants from their own part of the world, who had been pouring into Vienna, and if that had been their hope then they had succeeded, for the young woman had learned of a mob that was intending to attack the migrants gathered near the zoo, everyone was talking and messaging about it, and she planned to join a human cordon to separate the two sides, or rather to shield the migrants from the anti-migrants, and she was wearing a peace badge on her overcoat, and a rainbow pride badge, and a migrant compassion badge, the black door within a red heart, and she could see as she waited to board her train that the crowd at the station was not the normal crowd, children and older people seemed absent and also there were far fewer women than usual, the coming riots being common knowledge, and so it was likely that people were staying away, but it wasn't until she boarded the train and found herself surrounded by men who looked like her brother and her cousins and her father and her uncles, except that they were angry, they were furious, and they were staring at her and at her badges with undisguised hostility, and the rancour of perceived betrayal, and they started to shout at her, and push her, that she felt fear, a basic, animal fear, terror, and thought that anything could happen, and then the next station came and she shoved through and off the train, and she worried they might seize her, and stop her, and hurt her, but they didn't, and she made it off, and she stood there after the train had departed, and she was trembling, and she thought for a while, and then she gathered her courage, and she began to walk, and not in the direction of her apartment, her lovely apartment with its view of the river, but in the other direction, the direction of the zoo, where she had been intending to go from the outset, and where she would still go, and all this happened as the sun dipped lower in the sky, as it was doing above Mykonos as well, which though south and east of Vienna, was after all in planetary terms not far away, and there in Mykonos Saeed and Nadia were reading about the riot, which was starting in Vienna, and which panicked people originally from their country were discussing online how best to endure or flee.