

## 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.

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.

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...

### **city**

*Mohsin Hamid:* 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.

### **not yet**

*Mohsin Hamid:* 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.

### **For**

*Mohsin Hamid:* 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.

### **Saeed**

*Mohsin Hamid:* 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.

### **stubble**

*Mohsin Hamid:* Saeed's precise form of facial hair

	<p>is nuanced and important to him. His beliefs will be too.</p> <p><b>jugular notch</b> <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><b>Back then</b> <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><b>within certain bounds</b> <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><b>abyss</b> <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><b>still go to class</b> <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>