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“The Personal is the Political, and the Political is Personal:” Engendering Understanding  
Through Global Allegory in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West*

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Date

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis project to my parents, without whose love, support, patience and sacrifice this work would not have been possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This could not have been completed without the help of the many wonderful people who have provided both inspiration and support each step of this long journey. This work truly began years ago when I completed my undergraduate studies at SUNY College at Old Westbury. There, I had the honor of learning from faculty members such as Anahi Douglas, Jacqueline Emery, and Nicholas Powers. The passion each showed for their work inspired me and has indelibly impacted how I approach my own writing and teaching. I am grateful to have learned from each of you. Thank you.

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Finally, this thesis would not be without the unwavering support of my parents. I am endlessly grateful for your love, and for the sacrifices you have made in your lives for mine. This thesis is for you. Thank you.

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## Introduction

It is well known and has often been stated that literature provides a lens through which we can imagine ourselves walking in the shoes of another. Writers, a subset of the population who are so keenly aware of the human condition, have captured the nuances of lived experiences in their writing for centuries, whether it be through biography and biographically inspired texts, or in novels of completely fictional circumstances that contemplate how another life might be lived. As such, literature has provided fertile grounds for a kind of reckoning within readers, who are encouraged by writers to think differently about what it means to live and be human. In the modern age, the role of literature has become increasingly important, even despite the advent of technology and social media which has made it no longer so difficult to imagine how the other half lives, so to speak. This is because, despite the increase in our technological interconnectivity with those around the world, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, particularly the post-9/11 era, has also evinced growing divisions between peoples of different classes, races, cultures, and nationalities, given the polarization of politics and ongoing wars that have wreaked havoc on populations for years, producing generational trauma and sparking refugee crises across Europe and the United States. In response, writers have come to produce literary works that capture the changing landscape of the world and imagine narrative spaces where we are not defined by separations, but instead bound by our collective experiences of the world. Scholar Joseph Darda captures this shift as a “transnational turn” towards literature that “endeavors to transcend national boundaries and imagine a global community” aligned with the increasing interconnectivity of the modern era and taking on the endeavor of imagining a more global space.

In what follows, I will present an exploration of global literature that will rely on the premise that literature effectively engenders a space for the discussion of the growing pains of a

globalized world. Specifically, I will be considering two novels written by British-Pakistani author, Mohsin Hamid: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008) and *Exit West* (2017). Simply put, my thesis will explore how Hamid wields allegory in both novels, a representational literary device that is particularly conducive to the endeavors of a global literary tradition. Both novels, as will be explored, effectively use allegory as a device to draw attention to the inextricable connection's nations and peoples around the world have to each other, and how we are all bound to each other by the innate human experience of living, no matter what shores we set our sails from.

My first encounter writing about Hamid's fiction was in an essay entitled "Simultaneity and Ruptures in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Chang Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*." In that essay, I performed a comparative analysis of the metafictional novels and considered how both Hamid and Lee narratively depict the immigrant experience in contemporary America. Specifically, I examined how both authors employ unreliable narration and non-chronological timelines to create what I described as unstable narratives that mimic the process of assimilation. Throughout my comparative analysis, I argued that the respective protagonist of each novel (Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Henry Park in *Native Speaker*) cannot maintain simultaneous connections between the culture of their native country and their American identities. As each character struggles with understanding their transnational identities, the effects of the relationship between native and adopted culture on identity are illuminated. I posited that both novels narratively place their readers in the same liminal and uncertain space as the immigrant individual, caught between identities, using unreliable narration. In other words, the reader feels a sense of uncertainty in not being able to fully determine the accuracy of the story being told by the narrators; this constructs an effective



mimesis of the uncertainty the immigrant individual experiences throughout the process of relocation.

In this thesis, I revisit my analysis of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, however this time, I alter and expand the argument of my previous thesis to present the novel as global literature. This analysis will therefore eschew a comparison with *Native Speaker*, as Lee's novel falls more under the umbrella of American literature. The shift in the direction of my thesis synthesized after I examined several peer-reviewed articles written in response to the novel in preparation for the thesis endeavor. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been the subject of extensive literary discussion considering its publication only fifteen years ago in 2007. Many critics have addressed the novel's global scope and allegorical depiction of the United States' international relationships as one distinct from other works of literature that emerged in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. One such scholar, Leerom Medovoi discusses how American literature failed to become "worldly" after 9/11. Instead, Medovoi suggests, American literature turned inward and retreated into a self-congratulatory mode that was focused singularly on depicting America as a benefactor of democracy and personal freedom everywhere and remained ignorant of the long-lasting effects of its international political policies (namely the War on Terror). Medovoi, however, commends Hamid's text as one that instead asks readers to consider America's relations with the rest of the world (economic, political, and social) and perceive America's many faces: as a stalwart for freedom and upward mobility, but also an imperial power and the object of contempt for many around the globe who see the ramifications of America's international policies in their everyday lives.

I find myself in agreement with critics like Medovoi, who consider how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* advances a more global literary tradition that is concerned with capturing the

nuances of a global interconnectivity, and that breaks from nationally focused literary traditions. I would like to add to this ongoing conversation by presenting my analysis of two of Hamid's works of fiction as what I will term "global allegories." Specifically, my argument will posit that using allegory, Hamid presents a narrative that pioneers a space for literature that begins a conversation about transcending national borders, and that does not focus entirely on one nation but instead presents the world as an interconnected space where borders are increasingly archaic and interconnectivity between nations and people is increasing. In doing so, the text also champions global solidarity and understanding for the lives of others who are adversely affected by military and political endeavors. I hope to highlight the importance of allegory in global literature as allegory, an overtly representational form, can be particularly conducive to creating a space for discussions about global connectivity and responsibility.

The basis for my consideration of Hamid's novel as a "global allegory" is Fredric Jameson's theory of "third-world national allegory" in his controversial essay, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." Jameson begins his essay with a call to diversify the western literary canon to include works by authors from nations of the developing third world. Jameson reasons that American and other first world readers often encounter discomfort when reading about the third world as the experiences of the "Other" (Jameson's term for describing the third world subject) are unfamiliar. From the outset, Jameson is candid in his writing; he recognizes that the term "third-world" effects a sweeping generalization of literature that springs from a culturally, economically, and politically diverse group of nations that cannot be classified under one simple term. He adds, however, that the term is entirely descriptive and a guide for understanding third world as a collection of nations that are adversely affected by colonialism and imperialism. The first and second world, in Jameson's definition, are defined by

their production systems: capitalism, and socialism respectively.

Jameson arrives at the thesis of his essay when he declares that “all third world texts are *necessarily...allegorical*,” and further prescribes that they “are to be read as...*national allegories*” (69). The critic reasons that, while first world literature has achieved a level of separation between the personal and political realm (especially in the realist and modernist traditions of western literature), the relations between the personal and political in third world literature remain entwined. According to Jameson, this is because third world novels “project a political dimension in the form of national allegory,” and that the “*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society*,” (italics original): third world literature must thus be understood as “necessarily” allegorical (69).

There is much to be considered in Jameson’s treatise on third world national allegory. For one, according to the first world/third world distinction, the politicization of the third world novel is inescapable (“necessarily allegorical”) and the first world novel is denied the same level of political engagement. Critics such as Aijaz Ahmad, an interlocutor in this thesis, have published various rebuttals of Jameson’s essay. In “Jameson’s Rhetoric on Otherness and ‘National Allegory,’” Ahmad contends that Jameson’s understanding of “third-world literature” is myopic and ignores the nuances of literary traditions in nations outside the United States. Ahmad critiques the first world/third world division and the idea of a national allegory that perpetuates the nation-state instead of viewing the world as one diverse field interconnected by modernization and increased migration. Ahmad contends that “this world includes the experience of colonialism and imperialism on *both* sides of Jameson’s global divide” (emphasis added) (9). Yet other critics, such as Imre Szeman, conjecture that Jameson’s essay has been willfully

misunderstood and defend Jameson's thesis about third world literature as not prescriptive but simply observational.

My usage of Jameson in my reading of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West* is not to say that I agree with his conception of third-world literature and national allegory, or even necessarily that I disagree. Instead, I will be adapting Jameson's definition of third world national allegory to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West* to show how Hamid uses allegory to defy the dichotomous categorizations of "first world" and "third world" texts by producing the antithesis of a national allegory.

Here, I want to highlight one of the first complications of Jameson's thesis that Hamid presents; we need look no further than the author's biography. However, it would be essential to understand Jameson's claims about authors from the third world to understand how Hamid complicates this conception. Jameson describes the third world intellectual author as one "always in one way or another a political intellectual," and someone who writes allegory as an expression of the unstable state of their native nation. Third world authors, according to Jameson, seek the possibility of "narrative closure" through writing allegories for their respective nations (74, 76). Yet Hamid, while certainly a political writer and one who writes allegory, complicates Jameson's definition simply in the fact that he cannot easily be categorized as either a first or third world author. Hamid was born in Lahore, Pakistan and while he grew up mostly in his native city, he spent his formative years living in California. In later years, Hamid moved to London, and obtained British citizenship but later returned to attend Princeton and Harvard Law School. Hamid holds British citizenship, and most recently returned to Lahore to pursue a full-time writing career. This poses the question: if Hamid is not easily classified as a third-world or first-world author, how would one classify *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* or *Exit West*? For what

nation does Hamid write his allegory, and therefore can his novel be considered a national allegory? It is not difficult to see how Hamid complicates Jameson's notion. Hamid is neither a third world nor a first world author; instead, one can think of him as a global author.

With this premise as a foundation, I begin the endeavor of presenting Hamid's fictions as global allegory and literature in earnest. Each novel will be dedicated one chapter of analysis, beginning with an analysis of the global allegory in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. I will first explore how Hamid creates a narrative of liminal spaces that is conducive to a global allegory. The text is liminal in that, although *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* spends the bulk of its narrative space in the United States, the story moves transnationally with the protagonist spending time in the Philippines, Pakistan, Greece, and Chile as he recounts the story of his past. Through his protagonist, Hamid narratively explores the economic and political state of at least three of these locations, and each location has obvious political, economic or military ties to the United States. With this section, I hope to prove that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* transcends the categorization of national allegory given the very global scope of the narrative.

I will then perform a close reading of the allegorical elements that reinforce *The Reluctant Fundamentalist's* exploration of global relations. This will begin with a brief examination of how the narration of the novel itself is global. Hamid achieves this by creating what I term a "liminal space narrative" that moves seamlessly between locations and from past to present (this will be explored in more detail below). Once the texts' liminality has been examined, I will detail the elements of the novel's central allegory. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* begins with Changez ("Changes"), the novel's protagonist arriving New York from Pakistan and wholly enamored with the promise of the American dream. Changez's infatuation with America is reflective of the self-congratulatory nature of other post-9/11 texts,

as Medovoi discusses, and is allegorized in his relationship with a beautiful but elusive American woman named Erica (Am-Erica). After graduating from Princeton, Changez begins to work for Underwood Samson (symbolic for “United States”), a fictional valuation firm that evaluates and decides the fate of small businesses in America and elsewhere. Underwood Samson effectively represents corporate America in the novel’s allegory. Changez’s story in America begins to take a bitter turn after the events of 9/11. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Changez experiences discrimination and contempt, where before he had been valued and accepted by his American peers. As Changez becomes increasingly rejected by and disenchanted with America, his relationship with Erica disintegrates. She retreats into a severe nostalgia which leaves her uncommunicative and she eventually disappears without notice to Changez. While on assignment for Underwood Samson in Chile, Changez also begins to realize how American foreign policy and military decisions affect the lives of those in the third world adversely, especially in times of war (allegorized by his waning performance and disillusionment with Underwood Samson). His travel to nations affected by American imperialism (the Philippines) and by its military policy at the start of the War on Terror (Pakistan) significantly alter Changez’s perspective of the America system and power, and he eventually returns to Lahore and becomes an anti-American lecturer at a university. I will argue that Changez’s experiences of discrimination and rejection in America are an allegorical representation of America’s immediate reaction to individuals considered “Other” after the 9/11 attacks. Changez’s story is one about America that blends the personal and political realms. However, Changez’ story hardly represents a nationalist allegory or one about the third world. Instead, the allegory of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* presents a story about America and its global relations, making it a “global allegory.”

Throughout my discussion of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, I rely on several key critics and theorists to advance my claim about how Hamid's novel creates a literary space for a reckoning of global relations and understanding. I will draw from Judith Butler's theory on precarity and the? recognizability of life from her essay, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation." Using Butler's theory as framework, I will argue that throughout his travels for Underwood Samson, Changez becomes aware of what Butler terms the "frames of recognizability," or a developed understanding that allows us to recognize hardship in the lives of others who live differently from ourselves. Butler employs rhetorical questions throughout her essay to advance her thesis that "ethical obligations do not require our consent" and to contest the notion that "ethical obligations emerge only in the context of established communities that are gathered within borders, unified by the same language, and/or constitute a people or a nation" (137). I hope to synthesize Butler's theory with Hamid's work, specifically tying this to a moment in the text in which Changez reflects on the opening of his "arc of vision" as he travels and becomes aware of America's global influence and the "precarity" it engenders in the lives of those in the third world (Hamid 145).

In developing my point about *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a "global allegory," I will utilize Peter Morey's discussion of the narrative techniques and devices employed by Hamid alongside allegory to advance a global perspective. In his essay, "'The Rules of the Game Have Changed': Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Post-9/11 Fiction," Morey explores how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* "deterritorializes" readers through allegory, unreliable narration, and dramatic monologue, thereby pushing the reader beyond the bounds of familiarity to become a more global reader. In this *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* "forces readers to think about what lies behind the totalizing categories East and West, 'Them and Us' and so

on—those categories continuously insisted upon in the ‘war on terror’ (138). Morey’s thesis directly coincides with my own thesis and will work to bolster my claim that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* eschews nationalist categories, providing a reading of Hamid’s novel that challenges Jameson’s national allegory. Similarly to Morey, Alaa Alghamdi reads the allegory in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as one of Eastern/Western relationships. Alghamdi’s consideration of the narrative structure of Hamid’s text posits that the novel creates a narrative space for an interrogation between East and West. Alghamdi elucidates *how The Reluctant Fundamentalist* “radically displaces” assumptions or prejudices and “forces the creation of a nascent understanding” between both sides (106). I will be adopting this idea, as it is central to my claim about how the text structurally can be categorized as a global fiction that blurs separations between East/West, First/Third World.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I will turn my attention to Hamid’s *Exit West*, a novel with a vastly different premise than *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, but a book that catalyzes a conversation about global relations in its fictional depiction of the refugee experience. Although *Exit West* is not as overtly allegorical as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *Exit West* is a work of global literature in much the same way, employing a subtle allegory to comment on the globalization of communities around the world as migration has increased in recent years. The narrative of *Exit West* follows the lives of Nadia and Saeed, who become impromptu refugees when their native city is enveloped in a dangerous civil war. As the narrative tracks the couple’s migration, it reflects transnational, dissolving borders as it follows the characters to Greece, England, and finally the United States. In a departure from the realism of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid employs magical realism to depict the journey of migration (this will be examined in further detail later). My discussion of Hamid’s use of magical realism will connect



the ideas of liminality and precarity, as it was previously explored in the first chapter of the thesis, and will expound on how, again, Hamid uses narrative to explore these concepts.

Through its depiction of Nadia and Saeed's migration, *Exit West* engenders a conversation about migration as a necessary and inherently human act, and draws attention, at least fictionally, to the ongoing refugee crisis and the tensions that have arisen between nativist ideologies and migrant communities. The novel does not shy away from using allegory to bring to the table a conversation about the increased tensions between nativist movements and ideologies and the increasing multicultural landscape. Hamid reminds us that the "personal is the political," as Nadia and Saeed begin to develop divergent ideologies according to their experiences and their romance fades; they each become representative of the tensions of the modern world. By comparatively analyzing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West*, I hope to reinforce the importance of the global literature rubric and the vehicles of narrative and "global allegory" to envision global space and allow for conversations about global relations.

## Chapter 1: Global Allegory in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* begins with an unconventional frame narrative, unorthodox in that it is delivered in the form of a first-person dramatic monologue. The monologue, spoken by the novel's protagonist, Changez, is posed as a conversation between two allegorically symbolic figures: Changez, who sits in a cafe on the outskirts of Lahore and an unnamed American tourist to whom Changez recounts the story of the four years he spent in America. The American is not given a single line of dialogue in the space of the novel, and his motivations for visiting Lahore remain unknown. As Changez weaves together his story, he creates a liminal narrative space that bolsters the globalization of the text. The liminality of the narrative operates on manifold levels. To begin, the narrative is spoken from within the transient space of the busy cafe in Lahore that sees customers, both local and foreign, travel from within and without. A space of constant entries and departures, the cafe is never fully at rest and remains unaffixed to any one state of being because of the movement of human traffic and city noise. Adding to the liminality, Changez occasionally interrupts his narration to observe the goings-on at the cafe, if only to reassure his companion that there are no imminent threats to his well-being as he takes his tea. He makes note of the cast of characters that move about the scene—a group of young schoolgirls, and then the server, whose abrupt appearance concerns Changez's American companion momentarily, and by doing so, shifts the narrative from the past to the present.

The story Changez tells of his life in America is as transient as the space of the cafe in the frame narrative. As Changez recalls his time in working for corporate America to the present, he performs a practice of memory work that takes the story through time and space and even across continents, entering and departing each of the locales—from New York to Pakistan, to the

Philippines and then to Chile—each evoked by Changez’s memory. As the story travels, the frame narrative is laced into the central narrative, pulling readers from the busy cafe in Lahore to moments of Changez’s past. And so, like the cafe, the narrative itself remains unbound to any one location, and liminal.

It is noteworthy that as transient as the narrative of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is, it remains rooted in Lahore, a populous city in the global south. Though it spends most of its narrative time in America, that the novel’s foundation is settled in Lahore is evidence of a purposeful shift of power by Hamid that places the narrative core of the novel firmly in the third world. And so, the novel, as well as being a global allegory, is also essentially a novel that is importantly grounded in the global South. From this vantage point, the allegory then becomes one *for* America and its global politics as *observed* by the global community. In this way, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* offers a moment of reflection for American politics, a novel from a global space that asks America to reckon with the ramifications of its global position and influence.

To solidify this allegorical mediation, Hamid creates a symbolic link between Lahore and America, though this is not limited to the metaphorical and is conceptualized in the representative characters of the frame narrative. Changez allegorically signifies Pakistan while the unnamed American who sits across from him at the table is the representative for America. The meeting between the two men allegorizes a mediation between two countries on which the central allegory of the novel is essentially grounded. This is but one layer of Hamid’s allegory, however an important one that sets up the significance of the global reckoning Hamid brings to the fore.

From this liminal foundation, Hamid renders an allegory that captures the state of the world, and particularly of the United States' international relations after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Hamid's choice of allegory in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is meaningful and deliberate in that the form is optimal for engendering a reflective conversation about global relations and politics. A brief exploration of the allegorical form and its history will help to understand Hamid's choice of the allegorical mode for this narrative. Allegorical storytelling has been employed by humans for centuries, perhaps preceding literature itself in the act of oral storytelling. And yet, as timeless as allegory is, it can often be categorized by the simplicity of its model, with its straightforward representations and the expected "moral of the story" that bookends almost all allegorical storytelling. And yet, as is proffered by Hamid, allegory can exhibit complexity in the symbolic representations and confrontations it foregrounds. In *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, Rita Copeland and Peter Struck have characterized allegorical story writing as a practice in writing with "a double meaning: what appears on the surface and another meaning to which the apparent sense points" (3). Because of the duplicity of its messaging, allegory, as Copeland and Struck effectively describe it, is "fundamentally elusive, its surface by turns mimetic and anti-mimetic" (3). In other words, allegory is ambiguously deceptive in its simplicity, characterized by shifting meanings and changes of frame or perspective, and though highly representational, open to wide interpretation and discussion. Hamid's adoption of allegory in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is not in the slightest ambiguous but connotes a complex symbolic rendering of global relations. Hamid's choice of allegory eases the reader into the complex conversation he begins, and the representational allegorical forms in the text make it easier for the reader to digest the central message of the allegory, however complex it may be.

Hamid's use of allegorical representation is heavy-handed, and impossible to miss. As Changez lays out the cast of characters from his former American life, the allegorical figures are set. Changez (who both ushers in and experiences many "changes" throughout the course of the novel) arrives in New York in the years preceding the 9/11 attacks. Immediately upon arrival, Changez is enamored by the prosperity of the nation. When he graduates from the prestigious Princeton University, Changez cannot help but feel emboldened by the promise of the American dream: "*this is a dream come true*. Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible" (3). When he travels to Greece with his Princeton classmates, Changez meets a young American woman named Erica (Hamid's allegorical representation of "Am-Erica") and is quickly as infatuated by the "stunningly *regal*" young woman as he is with America (17). Soon, Changez and Erica develop a romantic relationship, although their love story is eventually stymied by Erica's profound emotional connection to her deceased boyfriend Chris ("Christ" or the idealization of America's past, an idea that will be explored in detail later), who passes away before the events of the narrative (17). After graduating from Princeton, Changez begins working at a valuation firm named Underwood Samson (representing the "U.S." and capitalism). Newly hired and enthused, Changez meets his work for the company with vigor and drive; like so many others who come to work for Underwood Samson, Changez is willing to give Underwood Samson (and America) his all.

The allegorical representations of global relations that unfurl in the relationships between Changez and other characters may be easily deciphered; major characters represent countries and socioeconomic models and how they interact comment largely on global relations between America and Pakistan in the wake of 9/11. The simplest and most readily interpreted allegory for

global relations in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is that of Changez's disenchantment with America, as becomes evident in the parallels between the slow deterioration of Changez's relationship with Erica and the increased rejection Changez faces while living in New York after the attacks.

When Changez first experiences New York, he describes an ease of transition and recalls feeling "immediately a New Yorker" despite years of not feeling "American" while studying at university in New Jersey. In the same breath, however, Changez hints at the complicated "circumstances under which, after only eight months of residence," he leaves the city and returns to Pakistan (33). After the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Changez experienced increased hostility from the residents of the city that once so readily accepted him. He explains, "more than once, traveling on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight the subject of whispers and stares" (130). As the city, and America, is left reeling from the attacks, Changez becomes increasingly rejected and is left to reckon with where he stands.

In "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim," Mahmood Mamdani provides a definition of what he terms "culture talk," or the mode of thinking about religion and politics that emerged in the United States in the wake of 9/11. Mamdani frames "culture talk" as the assumption that "every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and then explains politics as a consequence of that essence" (767). This formulation breeds "cultural explanations for political outcomes" (767). Other cultures and entire communities are understood according to what becomes the "essential essence" of that culture. This "essential essence" is then used to explain the "inherent" politics of the nation according to this "essence." The rejection Changez experiences in America after 9/11 is a direct effect of the United States' attitudes towards the perceived politics and ethics of

Muslim majority countries in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and suggest an understanding of Islam as political and, in turn, “fundamentalist.” After living in and experiencing America before the biases of “culture talk,” Changez suddenly finds himself “othered,” defined by his religion and by that the ethics assumed to coincide with his religion.

Changez’s relationship with Erica provides the essential allegory through which Hamid reflects on the “culture talk” that fueled the American psyche after the attacks. It is, in fact, after 9/11 that Erica becomes increasingly unwell, debilitated by the “dangerous” nostalgia that afflicts her psyche. Her inability to reckon with Chris’ death results in her disappearance and presumed suicide, and Changez is in turn forced to reckon with her unexplained rejection. In his final meeting with her, he describes Erica as someone who “was about to complete a month of fasting and had been too consumed with prayer and reading of the holy book to give sufficient thought to a nightly meal” (134). Confronted with her rejection, Changez describes Erica as “a religion that would not accept me as a convert” (114). The religious metaphor Changez uses to describe both Erica and the devolution of their relationship is layered in that it refers to the allegorical significance of Chris as a symbolic figure representing America’s relationship with its past. Though the most readily understood allegorical signifier is “Chris(t),” pointing to America’s Christian past, one must reckon with the fact that *America is not and has never been a purely Christian nation*. One can deduce, then, that Erica (or America’s) obsession with the past (Chris) is rooted in an idealized version of America, one predominantly white and predominantly Christian, especially in response to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The “dangerous nostalgia” from which she suffers, then, signifies America’s nostalgia for the idealized past, when the population demographics were homogenous and the religious makeup of the country less diverse. Changez’s understanding of himself as a “religion” that Erica cannot accept allegorizes America’s hostility

toward Islam and unwillingness to accept the Islamic religion and culture after 9/11. This is paralleled in the allegory as Changez begins to understand the connection between the “growing and self-righteous rage” that colored America and Erica’s slow withdrawal:

I prevented myself as much as possible from making the obvious connection between the crumbling world around me and the impending destruction of my personal American dream. The power of my blinders shocks me, looking back—so stark in retrospect were the portents of coming disaster in the news on the streets, and in the state of the woman with whom I had become enamored. (93)

The allegory of Changez’s relationship with (Am)Erica illustrates a blending of the personal and the political realms. The two cannot be separated, especially since Changez’s personal relationship is an allegory for U.S-Pakistan relations and directly challenges Jameson’s argument in “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” Jameson delineates his understanding that one of the primary signifiers of the difference between first-world and third-world texts (third-world texts are, as he explains, “*necessarily...allegorical* and [are] to be read as *national allegories*) is that the first world text has achieved a level of separation between the public and private realms, while the third world text “necessarily projects a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always the allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (Jameson 69). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, however, challenges Jameson’s conception of both the third-world national allegory and the first-world novel. The allegory of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* comprises a study of the “private individual” (in this case Changez) that reveals a broader study of American society. Given that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is not a third-world allegory, and



that it demonstrates a blending of the personal and political, it can, rather, be classified as a global allegory.

Hamid also employs the personal allegory of Changez's growing awareness of the far-reaching effects America's global politics on nations around the world to advance global solidarity. Darda discusses how Hamid's novel challenges the logic of the U.S.'s war on terror in "Precarious World: Rethinking Global Fiction in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*." Darda argues that war often skews our understanding of what lives are considered valuable and elaborates that "who we are able to recognize as a living being is always conditioned by social norms, and social norms are all the more limited during times of war" (110). To bolster his claim about the relative value of human life, Darda borrows from Judith Butler's discourse on life's precarity from "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation." Butler's thesis calls for ethical relations between lives we deem vulnerable because they are in proximity to us, as well as those that live at a distance, who we typically devalue do to our spatial relationships. The theorist suggests that, as a global community we all bear ethical "obligations to those who are far away as well as to those who are proximate" and that moral/ethical obligations for their well-being "cross linguistic and national boundaries" (Butler 137). Butler also contends that certain lives are more at risk than others (in the face of life-threatening war, poverty, sickness, etc.). In her discourse, Butler elaborates on how mourning the lives of others, particularly those lost to war, can inspire global solidarity that reaches beyond often polarizing boundaries of nationality or ethnicity that produce us vs. them mentalities, but instead considers the inherent precariousness of *all* human life. Darda introduces the "frames of recognizability," or what Darda explains are the metaphorical lenses through which we grasp an understanding that not all human lives are affected by war and political

circumstances similarly, but rather that “other” lives (such as those in the third world) are exponentially affected by their given circumstances. It is once we can recognize precarity in the lives of others than we can begin to build global solidarity.

Changez’s growing awareness of the “frames of recognizability” begins markedly earlier than the 9/11 attacks. As already explored, before beginning his work at Underwood Samson, Changez’s understanding of America is naïve, blinded by the power and optimism of the American Dream. To Changez, as to myriad others worldwide, America is the ideal nation, a stalwart for opportunity, freedom, and stability and he cannot help but view the nation through rose-tinted lenses upon arrival. However, this begins to change when Changez travels internationally for Underwood Samson.

Over the course of his time working and traveling the world for Underwood Samson, Changez soon becomes increasingly aware of the precariousness of the lives of others; his understanding is allegorized in his recognition of the effects of valuations he performs on small businesses while working for Underwood Samson. The “help” Underwood Samson offers to small businesses around the world seems, on the surface, positive: when companies are failing, Underwood Samson steps in and makes necessary alterations to their operations. However, these changes come at the cost of compassion, as Changez expresses when he describes the tunnel vision he adopted while working for the company that encouraged him to remain ignorant of the ramifications of his work:

Focus on the fundamentals. This was Underwood Samson’s guiding principle, drilled into us since our first day at work. It mandated a single-minded attention to financial detail, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset’s value. And that was precisely what I continued to do, more often than not

with both skill and enthusiasm. Because to be perfectly honest, sir, the compassionate pangs I felt for the soon-to-be-redundant workers were not overwhelming in their frequency; our job required a degree of commitment that left one with rather limited time for such distractions. (98)

Underwood Samson asks Changez to suspend compassion for the lives affected by its operations, and Changez realizes that to “focus on the fundamentals” in his line of work is to ignore the human cost of corporate operations.

When Changez travels internationally with the company, he becomes increasingly aware of the “frames of recognizability” and the precariousness of other lives affected by the company’s work. When he travels to the Philippines on a work assignment, Changez experiences a connection he does not, at first, understand to a Filipino jeepney driver he encounters while stuck in traffic in Manila. Their brief interaction works on various levels to exemplify Changez’s growing recognition of precariousness, and a budding solidarity he feels between him and the jeepney driver, both individuals from the third world whose country and lives had been affected adversely by American imperialism (namely the Phillipine-American war). Realizing his connection with the man, Changez ruminates on the “third world sensibility” he shares with the jeepney driver in contrast to the distance he feels from his colleague:

he and I shared a sort of Third World sensibility. Then, one of my colleagues asked me a question, and when I turned to answer him, something rather strange took place. I looked at him—at his fair hair and light eyes and, most of all, his oblivious immersion in the minutiae of our work—and thought, you are so *foreign*. I felt in that moment much closer to the Filipino driver than to him; I felt

I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street. (67)

Changez apprehends at this moment the precariousness of the jeepney driver's life. As Darda elucidates, Changez suddenly grasps the jeepney driver's "life according to the material, historical, and social factors that differently endanger it" (113). His recognition of the solidarity between him and the Filipino man advances "a solidarity that goes beyond nationalism" and that bases a shared familiarity in the recognition of societal factors, such as those of the third world, that differently affect the lives of others (113). The solidarity that is advanced here posits a global feeling of understanding that is at the core of Darda's thesis and is the overarching message of Hamid's novel.

Once Changez's "arc of vision" expands, he cannot see past the underlying effects of the work Underwood Samson performs. No longer blinded by the company's prosperity and promise, Changez states:

Yes, I too had previously derived comfort from my firm's exhortations to focus intensely on work, but now I saw that in this constant striving to realize a financial future, no thought was given to the critical personal and political issues that affect one's emotional present. (145)

The allegory of Changez's opening to the "frames of recognizability" is clear: if Underwood Samson represents America, what Hamid beckons in his allegory is for America to reflect on the human cost of its international relations. In recognizing the need for a more compassionate understanding of the personal and the political, Changez also advances the need for a global solidarity and understanding of the plight of others.

In the opening paragraphs of “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Jameson claims that the western reader’s resistance to reading third world texts stems from fear of confrontation with the unfamiliar and “Other” reader. Differences in culture, linguistics, socio-economic and political factors produce a blind spot for the first world reader in understanding the context for a third world allegory. As Jameson suggests, the first world reader cannot verily comprehend the third world, making the third world subject and novel thus an “alien” concept to readers of western countries. In the following excerpt, Jameson writes specifically about the collective discomfort experienced by first world readers when interacting with the “Other:”

We sense between ourselves and this alien text the presence of another reader, of the Other reader for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naive, has a freshness and a social interest that we cannot share. The fear and resistance I am evoking has to do, then, with the sense of our non-coincidence with that Other reader, so different from ourselves; our sense that to coincide in any adequate way with the Other ‘ideal reader’—that is to say, to read this text adequately. (66)

Through choices in narration, Hamid achieves a narrative that forces an encounter between the first-world reader and the third-world “Other,” placing the first-world reader in a position to experience discomfort Jameson mentions above. Hamid is able to achieve this effect through his employment of dramatic monologue and first-person narration as these are the essential elements via which Hamid begins a “deterritorialization project,” a term which I borrow from Peter Morey (1). Morey explains “deterritorialization” as a method via which writers ask readers to “expand and defamiliarize [their] imaginative territory...to find a space between conflicting interests and positions” (Morey 138). Morey argues that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a “deterritorializing”

novel in that it pushes readers to think “beyond the categories of East and West” and to think of the world as a more global space.

Hamid’s project of “deterritorialization” begins with the opening lines of the novel.

Changez establishes himself as both “Other” and familiar:

Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed you are looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a *mission*, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services. (1)

With these opening words, Changez establishes several important characteristics of his narration. First and foremost, he qualifies himself as the sole narrator of the text by speaking for the unnamed American in the scene. Concurrently, Changez immediately insists upon his familiarity as a narrator when he states, “I am a lover of America,” and describes himself as “both a native of this city and a speaker of your language.” By both confirming his love for America and reiterating to his companion and the reader that he is an English speaker, Changez confirms his familiarity with the first world, marking himself as distinct from the typical third world subject. For the first world reader of Jameson’s conception, Changez provides the comfort of familiarity. However, there still remains an element of the “Other” in Changez narration that assures the reader that he is not entirely western, thereby “deterritorializing” the reader. While Changez presents himself as familiar, he too provides moments in his narration where he disrupts familiarity. Hamid intermittently interrupts the main narrative with the frame narrative. At the beginning and end of each chapter, the reader is made privy to Changez observations at the cafe and the American’s reaction to what is going on around them as they explore the narrative of

Changez's life. His tone towards the American sitting across from him is one of reassurance, though it does not hide the obvious difference between the two men, and the bias the unnamed American holds toward Changez, as evidenced by Changez's unperturbed reactions to the subject's discomfort: "Ah, I see I have alarmed you" (1); "You seem worried. Do not be; this burly fellow is merely our waiter, and there is no need to reach under your jacket, I assume to grasp your wallet, as we will pay him later" (5); "Do not look so suspicious. I assure you, sir, nothing untoward will happen to you, not even a runny stomach" (11). By interjecting the narrative with these moments of reassurance for the American sitting across him, Changez reminds the reader of his "Otherness," and of the text's setting in the global south. Ultimately, Hamid achieves "deterritorialization" by presenting a narrator that is both familiar *and* unfamiliar to the western reader.

Other critics, such as White, argue that Changez's dramatic monologue narration is a "strategy of authority" (453) or a domination of the narrative of the text that creates uncertainty for the reader. Specifically, White argues that the novel's narration, "the formal structure of the novel—its frame narrative and its unreliable narrative voice—works to create a textual uncertainty, even paranoia, that allegorically represents the global fear of terrorism in the post 9-11 world" (447). While White reads the narration as one of allegorical representations of global attitudes after 9/11 (and not to say that I disagree with this), I interpret Changez's narration and unreliability in the frame narrative as a "destabilization" or a purposeful defamiliarization for the first world reader that forces the first world reader to encounter discomfort with the unknown, and thus to slowly drive the first world reader to become a more global reader, as Hamid, in my interpretation, intends. When Changez asserts, "I am a lover of America," readers become aware of his "exoticism"; he is not the familiar Western subject yet expresses an understanding and

appreciation for Western life. And yet, as he states to his unnamed companion, Changez is both a “native of this city” (Lahore) and a speaker of English, having lived in America for a time; he is an amalgamation of both East and West, a global narrator for a global narrative.

By familiarizing the first world reader with the unfamiliar, and by utilizing allegory as a vehicle for narrative intervention, Hamid renders *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* a “global allegory” that challenges readers to think beyond the polarizing categories of first and third world, or us versus them. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is unconventional in this way: not a national allegory about one nation, but rather a global text *for* America and American readers to reckon with the nation’s global position and their own understanding of the inextricable ties between cultures and peoples in a globalized world.

In the second chapter, I will be using the framework I have developed above to perform an analysis of global allegory in Hamid’s *Exit West* and expand on literary explorations of global interconnectivity. *Exit West* is quite different from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, beginning with the fact that *Exit West* does not concern the events of 9/11, nor is its allegory of global relations as explicit as in the previous text. My analysis of *Exit West* highlights the subtleties of allegory in the narrative and draws attention to other literary devices, particularly magical realism, to explain how the novel can be read as a global allegory. In this publication, Hamid places focus on the refugee crisis that has shaped our modern understanding of human movement and belonging. This section will track the varied ways the allegory of the story captures the polarization of nationalist movements that idealize a homogenous past and the increasing globalization of the world given the movement and settlement of migrant populations.



## Chapter 2: Movement and Migration in *Exit West*

*Discontent and its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London*, a collection of essays by Hamid, gathers the author's thoughts on the changing landscape of the world, brought on by the increased interconnectedness and mobility of the global population. In one of the opening essays of the collection, Hamid writes:

On our globalizing planet, where the pace of change keeps accelerating, many of us are coming to feel at least a bit foreign, because all of us, whether we travel far afield or not, are migrants through time. Even if you are eighty and have never left your hometown, yours has become another country from that of your childhood. (9)

The unquestionable truth of an altered and globalized world is precisely what Hamid endeavors to capture and explore in *Exit West*, his latest publication (2017). The narrative of *Exit West* subtly blends allegory, metaphor, and magical realism to construct a contemplation of the complexities of the refugee's experience traversing national borders as they endeavor to escape war and strife. The novel brings a timely topic to the fore, especially considering the increase in the number of refugees and displaced persons the world has experienced in response to various humanitarian crises around the world. Nadia and Saeed, the young couple around which the bulk of the narrative revolves, fall in love just as their country plunges into the depths of a violent civil war. As the war rages, Nadia and Saeed are left with no other option but to flee their city. They quickly become impromptu refugees in a world that, like ours today, struggles to reconcile the increasingly diverse and global makeup of its national populations and nationalist ideologies. As Nadia and Saeed relocate, they are confronted with hostile attitudes towards migrants in countries that, as Hamid writes, "were building walls and fences and strengthening their borders,

but seemingly to an unsatisfactory effect,” given the ever-increasing flow of migrants to their borders (73). As the narrator tracks their story, Hamid’s allegory becomes clear: we are all migrants, moving through time in an ever changing social and global landscape.

As in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *Exit West* employs allegory to explore what it means to be a refugee forced by war and political circumstance to live in a state of constant movement and uncertainty. However, the allegory of *Exit West* does not abide by the strictest definition of the term, unlike *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; there are no obviously allegorical figures, like Changez and Erica, and the interactions between characters do not necessarily represent larger constructs or ideas. The allegory instead lies in the symbolic significance of the entire narrative and more specifically in the narrative choices Hamid makes. In imagining the world of *Exit West*, Hamid creates a space of understanding for the western reader, who is generally unfamiliar with the experiences of the refugee or in other cases is simply detached from the lived realities of the refugee crisis. Hamid creates familiarity, and the third-person omniscient narration and lyrical prose Hamid wields engenders a feeling of universality that challenges the first world/third world distinction Jameson proposes in his essay. Instead, and counter to Jameson’s conception, Hamid utilizes his text to allegorically dissolve national borders and narratively imagine a global space where borders become increasingly anachronistic given the movement of populations across them.

Similarly, to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the narrative format of *Exit West* demonstrates Hamid’s deconstruction of national borders in the context of globalization. As the narrative of Nadia and Saeed’s migration moves forward, the omniscient narrator pauses to interweave brief vignettes that detail the lives of random individuals around the world. Each vignette offers a candid glimpse into the lives of unnamed individuals, running parallel to Nadia

and Saeed's lives' progress in the main narrative. The narrative moves seamlessly from Nadia and Saeed's lives to the varied continents the vignettes take place in, including Australia, Tokyo, and Mexico among others. The narration is fluid, unaware of borders as it moves across continents and space. Time is suspended as Hamid relocates the narrative focus to detail other lives simultaneous with Nadia and Saeed's, creating a global narrative that connects the experiences of individuals across the globe, enacting a narrative deconstruction of borders.

Expanding the text's global quality, Hamid maintains a locational ambiguity about the city where Nadia and Saeed begin their journey. As I will posit here, this ambiguity of the text's setting works in multiple registers to render the experience of migration understandable to the first world reader. As the novel begins, the city Nadia and Saeed live in is described as one "swollen by refugees," and "mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war" (3), in limbo between stability and revolution. Saeed and Nadia attend college, where they meet, and take classes on "corporate identity" (3). Nadia is unconventional; she wears a "virtually all-concealing" black robe while in public, although she does not pray, drives her motorcycle around the city, and lives alone in a small apartment in the city center. Saeed, the more traditional of the two, works for an advertisement agency whose billboards were placed all around the city, on "bus lines, sports stadiums, and...tall buildings" (5). Saeed lives with and enjoys a close relationship with his mother and father. Their relationship is unique as far as modern romances go: Saeed refrains from having sexual intercourse with Nadia until after marriage, a policy which she consents to out of respect for his chaste beliefs. When they are not together, Nadia and Saeed communicate exclusively through texting and social media on their cellphones, as most young people do in the modern age.

The world Hamid builds is not entirely foreign to the reader, and in fact closely resembles cities and the everyday of the modern Western world. Unlike *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the western reader is not “deterritorialized” (again, borrowing from Morey) or made to feel uncomfortable in the world Nadia and Saeed inhabit as it rendered familiar. The adaptability of the narrative opens up the possibility that the refugee’s journey can be, at least metaphorically, universal, and invites the reader to imagine themselves in the position of the third world subject by making the setting recognizable and at least somewhat mundane, despite the threat of war looming. The reader becomes aware of how easily the refugee’s experience can become one’s own, in the correct circumstances; it thereby familiarizes what feels foreign and generates questions about global responsibility that attend to the perils of the refugee’s experience. From this undisclosed outpost, Nadia and Saeed soon begin an international westward journey of almost constant relocation, escaping their war-ravaged city and settling first in Mykonos, albeit temporarily, and then staying for a longer stretch in London. The lovers settle then in Marin County, California, bringing their westward journey to a stop on the American shore just miles from the expansive Pacific Ocean.

In stark contrast to the realism of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Hamid’s previous publications, Hamid employs subtle magical realism in *Exit West*, expressed solely through the advent of the magical doorways that the main characters use to migrate west. The portals materialize inexplicably in various war-stricken cities around the world, including Nadia and Saeed’s. Rumors of the door’s ability to transport people to cities throughout Europe spread amongst the residents of Nadia and Saeed’s city, and the couple soon contemplates possible passage through the mysterious portals. As the doors grow in popularity, they become increasingly policed by militants, who promise death as punishment to those who attempt to pass

through. Threats of violence, however, do not deter those desperate enough to leave, including Nadia and Saeed, who eventually make the difficult decision to emigrate, stepping through one of the doors to an unknown fate.

Hamid's choice to use the doors as the sole modality via which migrants traverse national borders may be interpreted as an oversimplification of the processes of migration. Transporting through the doors ostensibly erases the hardships of physical migration that refugees and migrants experience as they traverse borders. However, examined more closely, Hamid's descriptive rendering of the passage through the doors complicates the assumption of a simplified migration. Although the doors make migration an evidently easier feat, those migrants who transport through them undergo what is described by the narrator as a traumatic experience during the transport. Hamid uses descriptive language to describe the doors and passage through the portal, taking the moment when Nadia walks towards the opening to characterize their nebulous nature. As Nadia approaches, she perceives the "opacity" clouding the entryway that stands between her and her fate. The darkness refuses to "reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side" (103). The door feels to Nadia "equally like a beginning and an end" (103). Hamid extends this idea further when he describes Nadia's physical passage through the doorway as such:

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, she felt cold and bruised and damp as she lay on the floor of the room, trembling and too spent to stand, and she thought, while she strained to fill her lungs, that this dampness must be her own sweat. (104)

Both time and space cease to exist as Nadia crosses transnationally through the door. The “gasping struggle” she experiences is both a “beginning and an end,” the “extinguishing” of a prior life and rebirth into a new one that leaves her “cold and bruised and damp” as she emerges. When Saeed exits after Nadia, he struggles to find his footing and is visibly weaker than Nadia appears from the commute. While their passage is certainly instantaneous, the couple’s fragile states upon arrival are evidence of the physical ramifications of the endeavor. By illustrating the traumatic effects of migration through the doorway as a metaphor for life and death, Hamid highlights the precarity inherent to the physical uprooting and relocation of the migrant experience. The disorienting space between life and death that Nadia and Saeed experience as they journey through the doors places their lives in a precarious position. The passage represents the precarity of the migratory experience and places the refugee within a space of liminality, where their next step is uncertain, and their lives are always at risk. As in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid reminds readers of the inherent risks that come with traversing global spaces. While critics may characterize the magical passageways as rudimentary, Hamid is not remiss in reminding us of the uncertainty migrants encounter on their cross-national journeys.

After their passage through the doors, Nadia and Saeed arrive on the Greek island of Mykonos and face further hardship while sheltering at a refugee camp. They find themselves amongst a crowd where “everyone was foreign,” and must learn to survive frigid nights sleeping in tents, must ration their food, and trade their belongings for more practical items (106). They remain connected and aware of the “tumult of the world, the state of their country, the various routes and destinations migrants were taking and recommending to each other” via their phones and social media (108). Nadia and Saeed learn of the riots taking place in cities all throughout Europe, violent protests provoked in “reaction against” the migrants “who had been pouring

into” the cities (109). Uncomfortable in their new environments, Nadia and Saeed must consider whether to “endure or to flee” (109). At the camp, the doors that promise passage to richer, safer destinations are “heavily guarded,” while those doors “from poorer places,” are “left mostly unsecured,” perhaps, Hamid writes, “in the hope that people would go back to where they came from”—telegraphing Hamid’s commentary on global attitudes toward refugees and migrant communities (106). Soon, rumors spread about doors with passage to Germany, and Nadia and Saeed join a crowd of refugees rushing to escape through the portal, only to find it impossible to penetrate.

Denied further passage, Nadia and Saeed must endure an extended period of waiting in Mykonos. During this time, Hamid writes, “days passed like this, full of waiting and false hopes, days that might have been of boredom, and were for many, but Nadia had the idea that they should explore the island as if they were tourists” (113). In “Waiting in Motion: Mapping Postcolonial Fiction, New Mobilities, and Migration Through Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*,” Amanda Lagji reads the novel through the lens of mobility studies to explore the idea that both mobility and immobility are essential characteristics of the experiences of “refugees, migrants, and other movers” (226). Lagji asserts that migrants endure waiting periods, or periods of immobility, at various stops “en route to destinations in the global north” (219). Lagji argues that *Exit West*, a novel in which “movement is the rule rather than the exception,” reveals that the “existential and affective experiences of waiting persist even as mobility resumes” (219). Lagji describes the period of immobility Nadia and Saeed experience as a time of “waiting in motion” where the couple remains suspended in a space between movement and stillness and is unable to settle comfortably into their new environment. Lagji keenly draws attention to Nadia’s decision to remain and “explore the island as if [a] tourist” and reads this as Nadia’s insistence on making

the waiting period “unproductive.” The critic explains that while many refugees use this waiting period for “explicitly productive ends—building a social network, filing legal paperwork, learning local languages, working where possible—Nadia here reclaims this unproductive time for herself, as leisure.” By refusing to use the period of waiting to build social ties with other refugees, Nadia “lays bare the time of the camp as such: it is a time of protracted and uncertain waiting” (225). Further, Hamid’s use of the word “tourist” to describe how Nadia envisions herself waiting speaks to the temporality of her stay in Mykonos; as a “tourist,” Nadia does not actively seek integration into the community gathered there, but rather she maintains a transitory state, anticipating further movement. Given that the doors offer instantaneous passage, waiting “predominates [the] sense of time” in Nadia and Saeed’s journey of migration. Their temporary stay at the camp and subsequent locales “draws attention” to the uncertainties of the “waiting that persists after arrival” as migrants around the world wait for safer passage (219).

“Waiting in motion” becomes a recurrent practice for Nadia and Saeed. Living in a flat in London after leaving the migrant camp in Mykonos, Nadia and Saeed find themselves confined to their living quarters as tensions rise and rumors of a government operation to “reclaim Britain for Britain” begin to spread (137). Groups of nativist extremists harass the migrant and refugee communities, and the city quickly becomes filled with “soldiers and armored vehicles,” with “drones and helicopters” circling the “ever more dense zone of migrants” (137). Restrictions enforced by the government condense the spaces migrants can move in, and soon Nadia and Saeed, “who had run from war already, and did not know where next to run,” find themselves “waiting, waiting, like so many others” for an opportunity to, again, transport through the doors (137). And yet, the couple meets this period of uncertainty with solace in the fact that the waiting is a collective experience, and only temporary. The narrator



articulates Nadia and Saeed's understanding that waiting between movement is "the foundation of human life, waiting there for use between the steps of our march to our mortality, when we are compelled to pause and not act but be" (138).

As they spend time "waiting in motion," Nadia and Saeed's relationship begins to alter. They each develop divergent understandings of their place in the changing landscape of the world that eventually draw them further apart from one another. Lagji notes that while in London, the temporality of waiting invites Nadia and Saeed to "remap not only their sense of the future, but also their sense of space—and in particular, the tension between the national belonging that characterized affiliation prior to the opening of the doors, and the emerging sense of belonging by virtue of shared movement alone" (226).

Despite having fled his native country and experienced the western world, Saeed grows increasingly nationalistic as he struggles to reckon with the unfamiliarity of his environment. Saeed's nostalgia for home and discomfort in being "the only man from his country" he recognizes amongst the crowd of migrants in London makes Saeed slowly revert to what the narrator describes as a "tribal" sense of needing to belong to what feels comfortable (150). The unfamiliar, namely the heterogeneous makeup of London, evokes a "tension and a sort of fear" threatening enough that Saeed seldom feels comfortable outside of his London flat. Eventually expressing his concerns to Nadia, Saeed suggests moving back to their native city to be "among their own kind" (153).

Saeed's ideology closely resembles that of the militants and extremists who, out of nostalgia for a culturally homogenous past, resort to violence against those perceived as "other" or who threaten an idealized nation. In direct contrast to Saeed, Nadia develops an outlook that is acutely attuned to the reality of a globalized society and is cognizant that "without borders

nations appear to be becoming somewhat illusory” (158). Ideological differences effect distance in Nadia and Saeed’s relationship. As they grow increasingly estranged, their relationship becomes an allegory for the schism between nationalist movements and ideologies and the concurrent development of diverse national populations. The narrator reflects on the distance between Nadia and Saeed and lays bare the allegory therein:

All over the world people were slipping away from where they had been, once from fertile plains cracking with dryness, from seaside villages gasping beneath tidal surges, from overcrowded cities and murderous battlefields, and slipping away from other people too, people they had in some cases loved, as Nadia was slipping away from Saeed, and Saeed from Nadia. (213)

Nadia and Saeed’s changing politics and relationship dually reinforces Hamid’s point that the “personal is the political,” as much of Hamid’s fiction reminds us. As in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid employs the personal—a failed romantic relationship—to offer his insight into the political: the tensions of our changing and globalized world.

As explored in the previous chapter, Butler’s theory of precarity highlights that lives incur different levels of risk according to the social, political, and economic circumstances that surround them. War especially renders life more vulnerable and those living in the third world, affected by poverty and other life-threatening circumstances, live in closer proximity to precarity than citizens of the first world. In fact, Jameson’s thesis rests on this fact, and further extends that the first world reader cannot comprehend the experience of the first-world subject as the circumstances of the third world are unfamiliar. As explored in Chapter 1, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* dismantles this conception by introducing the reader to the “frames of

recognizability and making them aware of precarity of others. *Exit West* explores these two concepts as well.

Throughout *Exit West*, Hamid's characters are keenly aware of their own precarity, as well the precarity of others given the circumstances of their migratory state. Awareness of his own fragility is what, in fact, drives Saeed to an isolationist ideology, seeking to safeguard a sense of familiarity as he reckons with a foreign environment. However, Saeed's consciousness of precarity stems from his earlier experience of living in a country on the brink of war. Within the first pages of the novel, Saeed understands that his life living in a war-torn city is particularly fragile, more precarious as it is always in the grips of danger:

Growing up in the not infrequently perilous circumstances in which he had grown up, he was aware of the fragility of the body. He knew how little it took to make a man into meat: the wrong blow, the wrong gunshot, the wrong flick of the blade, turn of a car, presence of a microorganism in a handshake, a cough. He was aware that alone a person was almost nothing. (9)

In recognizing his own precarity, Saeed does not disavow how fragile *all* life is. Alongside the recognition of his own precarity is the idea that *all bodies* are vulnerable; Saeed is keenly aware that "alone a person was almost nothing," subtly acknowledging, perhaps, the obligation we have, as Butler proposes in her theory on precarity, for the lives of others.

As Nadia and Saeed travel further west, and eventually settle in Marin County, California they face the increasing hostility and negative attitude towards migrants that pervades cities where migrants appear as they travel through the doors. Nadia remains throughout the novel more free-spirited than Saeed, and often more daring. Nadia's disposition allows her to readily accept the ever-changing environment around her, unlike Saeed. And yet, even she cannot escape

the precarity of her life, increased by her status as a migrant. After parting ways with Saeed, Nadia begins working at a food cooperative in California. The women who work alongside her perceive her as a threat because of the clothes she chooses to wear; her black robe is seen as “off-putting” and “self-segregating,” or even, as Hamid writes, “vaguely menacing” (216). Because Nadia presents as “other” or foreign to the other women (migrants themselves) they conclude that she is not trustworthy. Their perceptions of Nadia change when one day she is threatened by an American man holding a pistol while she completes a shift at the counter. Witnessing the precarity of Nadia’s life, the women “recalibrate” their opinion of their colleague. The narrator explains:

They were impressed by her mettle in the face of danger or because they recalibrated their sense of who was threat and who was threatened or because they now simply had something to talk about, several people on her shifts began chatting with her a lot more after that. (216)

Perceptions of Nadia shift as the precariousness of her being is understood by the women at the food cooperative. She is no longer perceived as a threat, no longer “vaguely menacing” when the threat to her life is made obvious. The women’s ethical obligations to Nadia, as Butler suggests in her theory, now crosses “linguistic and cultural boundaries.” Ultimately, the women become aware of the “frames of recognizability” and find solidarity in their shared precariousness. Their lives, however different from Nadia’s, share the bond of precarity.

Hamid uses the moments after which Nadia is accepted by the women of her cohort to create a metaphor for belonging and permanence. Shortly after the incident at the counter, Nadia feels as though she is “beginning to belong” amongst the group, feeling a change as though “a door was opening up, a door shaped like a room” (216). Nadia’s feeling of belonging being

visualized as a room is significant, especially given the symbolism of the magical doorways. As discussed above, the doorways represent liminal spaces between locations, a mode of transportation from one locality to the next and imply a temporariness to the act of migration. A room, in relation to a doorway, signifies a space of permanence; a room is what lies beyond a doorway, and the four walls thereof provide a sense of closure and safety. To Nadia, the feeling of belonging is akin to the safety and permanence offered by a room. She can perceive safety once she has been accepted amongst other migrants despite their obvious cultural and linguistic differences. Understanding precarity and valuing the lives of those different from us, as the allegory of *Exit West* suggests, engenders a space for understanding that transcends nations and borders.

Near the closing of *Exit West*, the narrator relays the story of an old woman who lives nearby Nadia and Saeed in the south of California. The vignette details the lifetime the woman has spent living in the same house, and lists the many friends, lovers, and family members who had passed through its doors. The woman realizes that “throughout this time, she had never moved, traveled, yes, but never moved,” and yet, the woman can hardly recognize the neighborhood around her. She no longer knows the names of neighbors and doesn’t care to since people “bought houses the way they bought and sold stocks” (209). When she reflects on the changing landscape around her, the woman recalls the doors and how they’ve come to shape the small town she’s known her entire life. The narrator writes her of thoughts:

Now all these doors from who knows where were opening, and all sorts of strange people were around, people who looked more at home than she was, even the homeless ones who spoke no English, more at home maybe because they were younger, and when she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that

everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it. (209)

The brief vignette encapsulates succinctly Hamid's message and purpose in writing *Exit West*. The old woman's observation of the "strange people" around her who "looked more at home than she was" speaks to the diversification of communities all around the United States, and around the world, as human movement continues. When the woman stops and observes the now unfamiliar town and expresses feeling as though "she too had migrated," she becomes cognizant of the changes brought by the influx of migrants, and how the blending of cultures existing at their convergence has changed the landscape around her. Finally, she concludes that "everyone migrates," some physically, as Nadia and Saeed, and others like herself "even if" they "stay in the same houses [their] whole lives" (209). Movement and migration, as is expressed in the old woman's sentiment, is intrinsically human, as Lagji suggests and as Hamid highlights in this novel. Humans have moved across landscapes since prehistoric times, as it is our nature to; "we can't help it." Rediscovering Hamid's words from the beginning of this chapter, what Hamid poses in *Exit West* is that we should as a collective society embrace the changing, ever more globalized world around us, as "we are all migrants through time" (209).

## **Conclusion: Global Literature and Allegory for a Globalized World**

I have combined readings of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid to explore the use of allegory in developing global narratives. Specifically, this thesis has endeavored to highlight the importance of allegory for creating works that transcend our ideas of the national, making room for a discussion of the increasing globalization of the modern world. This thesis is concerned with the literary works of one author. However, I do want to emphasize that my focus on Hamid's work would ideally operate as a window onto other authors and novels which provide lenses through which to study our ever-changing world, and importantly for understanding the plight of others whose lives are different from our own. Authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, whose novel *The Namesake* tracks its characters' routes from Massachusetts to Calcutta; Junot Diaz, who connects Patterson, New Jersey to the Dominican Republic in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*; and plenty of others who craft influential transnational narratives that imaginatively cross borders to create a global literary space. Each iteration of the global novel challenges the conception of the nation-state and the archaic notions of defined borders and culturally homogenous nations, while also making readers aware of how differently lives are lived once they step outside of the borders of their own comfort zone. As I hope to have argued here, literature is perhaps one of the most conducive sites for conversations of this nature. Through novels we can begin to advance global solidarity in a world that seems to be moving towards increased separations, at least politically. Global literature, aided by the representational device of allegory, might help us to imagine a more globally interconnected space that breeds "togetherness" instead of separation.

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