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# You Are Here: Mapping the World System of Mohsin Hamid's Fiction

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YOU ARE HERE:  
MAPPING THE WORLD SYSTEM OF MOHSIN HAMID'S FICTION

by

TERRIE AKERS

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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## ABSTRACT

You Are Here: Mapping the World System of Mohsin Hamid's Fiction

by

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Mohsin Hamid's novels—*Exit West*, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and *Moth Smoke*—offer fecund ground for thinking through globalization and the changing world system. Bruce Robbins articulates a working definition of the “worldly” or global novel as one that “encourage[s] us to look at superstructures, or infrastructures, or the structuring force of the world capitalist system” (1). Following on Robbins's argument, Leerom Medovoi has written that Hamid's work belongs to a body of literature that “is not so much of or by, but *for* Americans”—which he terms “world-system literature,” a literary application of Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems analysis. This paper considers the ways in which Hamid evokes a world system constituted by distinctions between core and periphery, and describes the breakdown of this system as the walls between them become ever more porous. The paper begins with a brief biographical background of the author and the geopolitical context in which the novels were written, followed by a survey of some key theoretical texts that foreground the world systems structure at work in Hamid's oeuvre. Next, the author traces the triangulation of core/semi-periphery/periphery that Hamid deploys in these four novels; and finally, analyzes the ways in which the reader—particularly the American reader—is positioned and implicated within the world system. Moving from historical to theoretical to literary analyses, this project explores the ways in which Hamid's fiction is exemplar of “world-system literature.”

“Location, location, location, the realtors say. Geography is destiny, respond the historians.”

—*Exit West*

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You Are Here: Mapping the World System of Mohsin Hamid's Fiction

## 1. Introduction

Mohsin Hamid's novels—*Exit West*, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and *Moth Smoke*—offer fecund ground for thinking through globalization and the changing world system. Bruce Robbins articulates a working definition of the “worldly” or global novel as one that “encourage[s] us to look at superstructures, or infrastructures, or the structuring force of the world capitalist system” (1). Following on Robbins's argument, Leerom Medovoi has written that Hamid's work belongs to a body of literature that “is not so much of or by, but *for* Americans”—which he terms “world-system literature,” a literary application of Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems analysis. This paper will consider the ways in which Hamid evokes a world system constituted by distinctions between core and periphery, and describes the breakdown of this system as the walls between them become ever more porous.

I will begin with a brief biographical and historical background of the author and the geopolitical context in which the novels were written. I will then survey some key theoretical texts that foreground the world-systems structure at work in Hamid's oeuvre, including works by Wallerstein, David Harvey, and Giovanni Arrighi. Next, I will trace the triangulation of core/semi-periphery/periphery that Hamid deploys in these four novels; and finally, I will analyze the ways in which the reader—particularly the American reader—is positioned and

implicated within the world system. I will seek to answer the question: In what ways does Hamid's fiction succeed in representing the world system? And more generally, is fiction uniquely positioned to provide something akin to "proper representation," in the Jamesonian sense, of the "unrepresentable totality" of the modern world system?

Moving from historical to theoretical to literary analyses, this project will explore the ways in which Hamid's fiction is exemplar of "world-system literature" in the sense laid out by Robbins and Medovoi. Ultimately, I will seek to position the reader within the world system of Hamid's fiction; for it is one thing for a novel to achieve the "worldliness" described by Robbins—to provide for the reader a cognitive map of a global framework of capitalist superstructures—and quite another to position the reader in relation to that map. I will argue that Hamid's fiction accomplishes precisely that.

## 2. Hamid in the World: Historical Analysis

### 2.1 Biographical Context

Mohsin Hamid was born in 1971 in Lahore, Pakistan, the first child of his family's third generation of Pakistanis since the country gained independence in 1947. At three years old, in 1974, he moved with his family to San Francisco, where his father completed a PhD at Stanford University; meanwhile, little Mohsin "lost [his] Urdu" and learned English. At the age of nine, they returned to the family home in Lahore, where Hamid remained until returning to the US in 1989 to attend Princeton University (*Discontents* 17-19, 27).

While at Princeton, Hamid studied with Joyce Carol Oates and the legendary American novelist Toni Morrison, who oversaw Hamid's writing of the manuscript that would, seven years and many revisions later, be published as *Moth Smoke*, his first novel. During those intervening seven years, Hamid attended Harvard Law School and worked as a management consultant for McKinsey & Company in New York (*Discontent* 90). In 2001, he transferred to the firm's London office; he would remain in that city for nearly a decade, and for more than five of those years at work on his second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (91). In 2009, after the birth of his daughter, he and his family returned to Lahore, building an apartment on the top floor of his parents' home, which had in turn been built onto his grandparents' home, bringing four generations under one roof (58-61). By then he had begun work on his third novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, set in an unnamed country that can rather easily be identified as Pakistan. Hamid writes: "I had spent much of the 1990s in New York, writing about the Lahore of *Moth Smoke*. I had spent much of the 2000s in London, writing about the New York of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Now, I thought, I would try my hand at living in a country and writing about it at the same time" (78). The novel was published in 2013. Hamid's fourth and

most recent novel *Exit West* followed in 2017; the narrative begins in an unnamed city modeled on Lahore and then traverses the globe, with its protagonists landing finally in the San Francisco Bay Area of California.

In 2015, Hamid's American publisher Riverhead Books released a collection of essays and articles published in various journals and magazines from 2000 – 2014, called *Discontent and its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London*. Interwoven within these essays are innumerable details, small biographical *nota bene*, that can be seen to have influenced the world of his novels. Hamid recalls returning to Lahore in 1980 at nine years old after having spent the previous six in the US, and finding “an almost complete absence of familiar consumer brands. Here in Lahore there were no Frosted Flakes, Twinkies, Nestle Quik, Trapper Keepers, Nerf Balls, Bactine, no No More Tears shampoo” (19). By the time *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* was published in 2013, this no-brand world had vastly changed, and the consumerism that leads to the novel's unnamed protagonist's dramatic rise and fall hinges strongly on a Pakistani adoption/absorption of western-style branding and marketing. It is interesting to note that Hamid's non-writing career included a stint in brand consultancy: in 2004, he consulted for the London-based Wolff Olins firm (under the condition that he be able to work only three days per week to allow himself time to work on his fiction). Hamid's experience in the corporate world seems often to inform the world of his characters, such that they are positioned within a capitalist landscape but on decidedly personal terms. For example, the opening page of *Exit West* sketches the tension between the protagonists' capitalist ambitions and their city's uncertain future, with the primordial existential fear of death as the obliterating force underlying the superficiality of their circumstances:

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 the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying, and our eternally impending ending does not put a stop to our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does. (*Exit West* 3)

Like his protagonists Saeed and Nadia, Hamid himself was steeped in the world of corporate identity and product branding as tragedy befell the world around him and descended into war—it was during his time working as a management consultant for McKinsey & Company that the World Trade Center towers fell, the US invaded Iraq, and the US-led war on terror began to implicate his home country of Pakistan.

There are many moments where Hamid’s personal politics manifest in his fiction, sometimes in the very same words. In his introduction to *Discontent and its Civilizations*, 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). A strikingly similar sentiment is articulated in a significant moment in *Exit West*, published two years after *Discontent*. In this passage, an unnamed old woman has lived her entire life in the same home in Palo Alto, watching as her town, her country, her entire world, changes around her. The chapter concludes: “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. We are all migrants through time” (209). I will

further analyze the significance of this passage—and its implications for the reader—in a later section.

Hamid's novels often utilize second-person narration, and this is not merely a formal choice, but also a political one. In *Moth Smoke*, the protagonist Daru is on trial before a judge whose character is addressed as “you,” putting the reader in the position of presiding over Daru's fate. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* takes the form of a dramatic monologue, with the reader positioned as Changez's American interlocutor at a café in Lahore. *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is structured as a self-help book, where the protagonist is addressed as “you” throughout, effectively conflating the reader with the novel's tragic hero. Indeed, Hamid himself writes: “In my writing, I have tried to advocate the blurring of boundaries: not just between civilizations or people of different ‘groups,’ but also between writer and reader. Co-creation has been central to my fiction, the notion that a novel is made jointly by a writer and a reader. Co-creation is central to my politics as well” (*Discontents* 10).

## 2.2 Geopolitical context

Hamid's personal biography sheds some light on the structural and thematic balancing act of familiarity and alteriority at work in his novels. As he writes in *Discontent and its Civilizations*, “...I turned to my writing to help me understand my split self and my split world. *Moth Smoke* had been for me a look at Pakistan with a gaze altered by the many years I had spent in America. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, I thought, would be a look at America with a gaze reflecting the part of myself that remained stubbornly Pakistani” (91). But this tension between familiarity and alteriority in Hamid's work extends beyond mere personal experience or biographical detail. The contemporary historical grounding of his novels provides the reader with

a recognition of important world events, then forces her to confront those events from a different perspective. Thus these historical events serve as reference points—the familiar—that invite the reader into the experience of the fictional world—the alterior.

*Moth Smoke* is set against the backdrop of the 1998 South Asian nuclear arms race. In May of that year, India conducted a series of five nuclear tests, known as Pokhran-II—the first such tests in the country since 1974. With Indian-Pakistani relations already strained by the ongoing dispute over the territories of Kashmir, Pakistan bristled and immediately undertook a series of nuclear tests of their own, Chagai-I (adst.org). As Murad Badshah, the self-described “rickshaw fleet captain and land pirate” of *Moth Smoke*, says:

It was a summer of great rumblings in the belly of the earth, of atomic flatulence and geopolitical indigestion, consequences of the consumption of sectarian chickpeas by our famished and increasingly incontinent subcontinent. Clenched beneath the tightened sphincters of test sites and silos, the pressure of superheated gases was registering in spasms on the Richter scale. (67)

Another consequence of the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan in 1998 was the Foreign Currency Account (FCA) freeze initiated by the Pakistani government in April, prior to the nuclear tests. In *Moth Smoke*, the pseudonymous journalist Zulfikar Manto is investigating the sudden withdrawal of foreign money from Pakistani banks; Manto speculates that “they knew they would have to freeze the accounts when they tested [in Chagai-I], because it was obvious everyone would be nervous about sanctions and start converting rupees into dollars.... they tipped off a few insiders, and just hours before the accounts were frozen, millions of dollars left the country” (181). Indeed, in reality, international sanctions against both India and Pakistan came swiftly after the tests. The Pakistani government had ordered the FCA freeze six weeks

prior; Finance Minister Sartaj Aziz explained after the fact that “in a period of uncertainty, foreign currency deposits begin to be withdrawn and it was apprehended that it could take place on a large scale and sustained basis in the post-May 28 period” (Aziz qtd. in Haqqani). In the 1998 of *Moth Smoke*, the novel’s protagonist Daru has recently lost his banking job, and with the economy in the tank, his prospects are next to nil; his prolonged joblessness becomes one of many factors that lead ineluctably to his tragic fate.

In the novel, the 1998 nuclear tests function both as historical grounding and as metaphor. Daru is first told of the tests by his supposed-best friend Ozi, who shows up unexpectedly at Daru’s bedside as he recovers from a drug binge. Ozi explains that “the neighbors have gone nuclear” and tells Daru:

“...It’s mayhem outside. I had to drive through a demonstration just to get here.”

“So what happened?”

“They tested three. A hundred kilometers from the border.”

“How symbolic.” (94)

Symbolic indeed, since Daru has just met and will soon embark on an affair with Ozi’s wife, fittingly named Mumtaz Kashmiri. She too lies not far beyond the border—the border of Daru and Ozi’s friendship—and like Kashmir, she too will become disputed territory.

At other times, the metaphor functions in more subtle ways. *Moth Smoke* is not an overtly political book with an overtly political agenda. Rather, the geopolitical tensions that serve to contextualize the world of the book in place and time are, in a sense, writ small. They impact the characters in the way that such events impact the average person: that is, both significantly and profoundly, and at the same time, not much at all. With the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests, the world may have been irrevocably changed, but for most people, daily life continued apace. But

this feature of Hamid's writing entails a double movement: in much of his work, while the historical is writ small, the personal is writ large. The backdrop of nuclear tensions between India and Pakistan serve as a metaphor for the tensions between the characters in *Moth Smoke*; but the tensions between the characters also serve as a metaphor for the geopolitical tensions in South Asia in 1998.

Hamid is adept at deploying history simultaneously as fact and as metaphor; it is a recurrent feature throughout his work. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York serve as the historical moment on which the plot turns, but this was not the novel's original geopolitical backdrop. In fact, Hamid had completed a draft of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in the summer of 2001, prior to the attacks. Hamid describes this early draft as a "stripped-down, utterly minimalist love story of a young Pakistani man in New York who is troubled by the notion that he is a modern-day janissary serving the empire of American corporatism" (*Discontent* 91). But after 9/11, as Hamid watched a new reality unfurl itself upon the world—the war in Afghanistan, increasing harassment of Muslims in the US and other western countries, escalating tensions between Pakistan and India—he realized that "just as in my exterior world, there was no escaping the effects of September 11 in the interior world that was my novel" (92). But it is not merely the fact of the attacks that so changes the narrative as Hamid originally conceived it—it is the self-confrontations and realizations that it enables on the part of his characters. The protagonist Changez *already* saw himself as a man divided: a Pakistani man of Muslim heritage with "a sort of Third World sensibility," living a secular life in corporatized America, working in finance (67). But it is the events of September 11 and their aftermath that force a psychic rupture, where before there was only a fracture. Pre-9/11 Changez seeks to reconcile his two selves; post-9/11 Changez feels

compelled to choose sides. Here again, history-writ-small is simultaneously the personal-writ-large.

Hamid's third and fourth novels, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West*, cannot be so specifically pinpointed on a timeline of world historic events. Rather, they are historically contextualized by a geopolitical milieu of capitalism, of violence, of uneven economic development, and of migrancy. The plot of *Rising Asia* unfolds in an unnamed city, in an unnamed developing country, but against a backdrop of technology and consumer brands; an omnipresent fear of terrorism; entrepreneurship and late-capitalist finance; and political corruption and bribes. The reader is therefore given a pretty clear sense of a general location (Lahore, or something like it) and of time (now, or something like it). But unlike the novels that preceded it, *Rising Asia* aspires to a certain timelessness and universality that lends the story the air of a fable.

This effect is even more pronounced in *Exit West*, which utilizes a touch of magical realism to lift the story beyond the bounds of historical reality, beyond the confines of a specific time and place. At the same time, its central tension—its “geopolitical *raison d’être*,” to borrow Medovoi’s phrase—is easily identifiable as the current global refugee crisis. The first line of the novel identifies its setting as “a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war.” That trepidatious peace soon begins to crumble, and the protagonists are forced to flee. While certain clues in the novel suggest that this unnamed city is modeled on Lahore, one could easily imagine the story taking place in Syria, or Yemen, or North Africa, or South America.

### 3. Representations of Imperialism and Capitalism in Hamid's Fiction

In this chapter I will examine the ways in which Hamid's work represents and critiques the "structuring force of the world capitalist system" (Robbins). Hamid's novels can be read as an ongoing narrative of the twilight of American hegemony. We can trace this hegemonic decline from *Moth Smoke's* sense of injustice at the unequal opportunities afforded to those who study in the US and return flush with foreign wealth; to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist's* fledgling distrust of the US by the rest of the world; to *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia's* repositioning of transnational capital and its potential from the US to Asia; and to *Exit West's* vision of a possible movement beyond the wildly uneven nation-state world system. In this way, we can think of Hamid's work in terms of Wallerstein's sense of 'terminal structural crisis:' the crisis of the current capitalist world system. I will trace the key issues of imperialism and capitalism through each of the novels in turn.

#### 3.1 *Moth Smoke*

Hamid's first novel *Moth Smoke* was written over the course of seven years, beginning when Hamid was a senior at Princeton and under the tutelage of novelist Toni Morrison. It was published in the US in 2000. Hamid was living and working in New York at the time, but the novel takes place in his native Pakistan, in the city of Lahore.

The novel traces the decline of protagonist Darashikoh Shezad, or Daru, over the course of a year in 1998. At the story's outset, Daru is employed as a banker, and he lives a comfortable if modest middle-class lifestyle. But Daru's life is soon upended by two nearly-simultaneous events. First, he is reunited with his childhood friend Ozi, who has returned to Lahore after attending university and racking up a fortune in the US, and is introduced to Ozi's new wife,

Mumtaz. The very next day, he is fired from his job for speaking impertinently to one of his clients, “a rural landlord with half a million US in his account, a seat in the Provincial Assembly, and eyebrows that meet in the middle like a second pair of whiskers. His pastimes include fighting the spread of primary education and stalling the census” (18-19). Over the ensuing months, Daru falls in love with Mumtaz and embarks on an illicit affair with her, while at the same time building up a drug habit that slowly drains his meager financial resources until he finally turns to selling drugs and other illegal activities. We know from the first chapters—which Daru narrates from a jail cell, and then a brief courtroom scene starring him as defendant—that he has ended up in prison. The rest of the novel traces the acts of will and of fate that landed him there.

The geopolitical underpinnings of the novel can be understood in terms of world systems analysis, an approach articulated by Immanuel Wallerstein as a critique of the popular theories of ‘development’ or ‘modernization’ that had taken hold in the post-World War II social sciences in the United States and in Europe. World systems analysis insists on “seeing all parts of the world-system as parts of a ‘world,’ the parts being impossible to understand or analyze separately” (“Rise and Future Demise of World Systems Analysis” 106). In his seminal 1974 paper “The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System” (later elaborated into the book *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, in 1976) Wallerstein proposed “an alternative model with which to engage in comparative analysis, one rooted in the historically specific totality which is the world capitalist economy” (391). He theorized that the nation states of the world are structured within imperial categories of core, semi-periphery, and periphery. This hierarchy describes “each region’s relative position within the world economy as well as certain internal political and

economic characteristics” (Halsall). The states that constitute the core are the most advanced capitalist nations; the states of the periphery are just beginning to undergo the transformation into capitalist societies. Semi-periphery countries are generally former periphery countries that have seen significant advancement in capitalist development, and sit somewhere near the middle of the imperial hierarchy.

The primary imperial tension at work in the novel lies in Pakistan’s relation to the United States, on the one hand, and India on the other. World systems analysis places the US in the core, India at the semi-periphery, and Pakistan in the periphery of the current world system, and this tension is readily apparent in *Moth Smoke*. From an economic standpoint, the US is in a greater position of power in relation to Pakistan, and this power is represented in the novel by the characters who have accumulated American wealth. Daru’s bank client, Malik Jiwan, is a powerful man by virtue of the “half a million US in his account” (18). Daru’s friend Ozi has returned from the United States, after deciding that “he’d had enough of being a well-paid small fish in Manhattan”—back in Lahore, flush with American dollars, he would be a big fish instead (169). Both of these characters wield considerable power over Daru’s fate: Jiwan is responsible for Daru getting fired from his job at the bank, and Ozi is able to have Daru framed for a crime that ultimately lands him in jail.

But for Pakistan, India is the closer neighbor—both in terms of the imperial hierarchy of the world system, and geographically. It sits on the semi-periphery, thanks to recent advancements in the areas of software development and other industrial sectors, and also right next door. When this “neighbor” (never mentioned by name in the novel) begins nuclear testing, this is perceived by Pakistan as a threat even greater than the threat of US economic sanctions.

The entire nation becomes swept up in the counter-tests that Pakistan immediately undertakes.

When the tests finally succeed, Lahore erupts into celebration. Daru observes:

How everyone knows I don't understand. The excited *trrrring* of bicycle bells brings me to the gate, witness to the victory parade.... "We've done it," [Manucci] pants. "What?" "We've exploded our bomb." I feel something straighten my back, a strange excitement, the posture-correcting force of pride. (132).

The financial crisis that would follow with the governmental freeze of Foreign Currency Accounts are of little concern in this celebratory moment, but the consequences will soon come into focus. In this way, Pakistan is positioned throughout the novel as a place that must have eyes turned in two directions: one towards the core, and one minding the threat of force closer to home, on the semi-periphery.

\*

In his article "Structural Crisis, or Why Capitalists May No Longer Find Capitalism Rewarding," Wallerstein describes the architecture of the capitalist world system. The functioning of this system, he argues, is dependent on "the persistent search for the *endless* accumulation of capital," and importantly, "for this characteristic to prevail, there must be mechanisms that penalize any actors who seek to operate on the basis of other values or other objectives, such that these nonconforming actors are sooner or later eliminated from the scene" (10). Across his four novels, Hamid's characters can be analyzed according to whether they are conforming or nonconforming actors in the imperial hierarchy of capital. In *Moth Smoke*, just as Wallerstein would predict, the fate of a nonconforming actor—one who does not properly behave according to his placement in the hierarchy—is grim indeed.

At the beginning of *Moth Smoke*, Daru is a conforming actor, however begrudgingly so. He has given up working on his PhD dissertation in favor of a job in finance. His former Professor Julius Superb, when asked why Daru abandoned his studies, says: “Money, I think. . . . He got a job offer from a bank, and he couldn’t resist. He told me it was impossible to make a living in academia” (37). But he soon loses his job, and the already-precarious economic situation in the country is worsened by the mass exodus of foreign money in anticipation of international sanctions. Unable (and perhaps also somewhat unwilling) to find a new job, Daru slowly turns towards extra-legal activities—activities that are unaccounted for in the proper capitalist economy, like selling drugs and robbing boutiques—to scrape by. His financial misfortunes are mirrored and complicated by the harm that befalls his physical body: he is beaten nearly to death by the father of a boy he has been selling drugs to, and he succumbs ever further to the heroin he has started using to ease his physical and emotional pain. As a broad metaphor, Daru can be seen as a cautionary tale for what happens when a conforming actor falls into nonconformity. The system no longer has any use for him; expelled from his place within the machinery, he is ground up and spit out by the gears churning above him.

### **3.2 The Reluctant Fundamentalist**

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can likewise be read as world-system literature, a critique of “the structuring force of the world capitalist system.” It spans the years leading up to and following September 11, 2001, but we might call it a post-post-9/11 novel: one that considers the aftermath of the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York.

In 2007, when the novel was first published, the United States was four years deep into the war in Iraq. President George W. Bush had been reelected and was serving his second term

with a mission to track down Osama Bin Laden, who was suspected to be holed up in Afghanistan. Pakistan was being rocked by suicide bombings and a Taliban insurgency, which the government had been battling alongside their ally the United States since 1999 (Council on Foreign Relations). The economy of the Philippines had nearly doubled over the previous decade, following a general trend of global capital shifting from the west to the east (World Bank; Rachman). This is the geopolitical climate that serves as a backdrop to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

The story centers around a conversation between the protagonist, Changez, and an unnamed American interlocutor who is addressed by Changez in the second person. Over the course of this conversation, which takes place in a Lahore marketplace, Changez recounts the story of his time in America: born in Pakistan to a middle-class family on the decline, educated at Princeton, and eventually hired by Underwood Samson, a top-tier financial firm in New York, Changez's affection and admiration for the United States become compromised in the wake of September 11, 2001.

In his 1990 book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey describes the aesthetic-political shift of the 1980s to a cult of personality and policy that was image based and media driven. This was personified by Ronald Reagan, who was elected to the presidency in 1980 and soon unleashed "Reagonomics" onto the world. It was during that decade that New York abandoned its long-established traditional garment trade and became a global finance capital. As Harvey notes, in 1990, "The biggest physical export from New York [was] now waste paper" (329, 331-332). "The emergence of this casino economy, with all of its financial speculation and fictitious capital formation...provided abundant opportunities for personal aggrandizement" (332). This is the New York to which Changez arrives a decade later, in the late 1990s.

The novel's representation of a transnational milieu is multi-dimensional. First, it exists in the character of Changez himself: a Pakistani who not only embraces but actively participates in American financial imperialism, before coming to reject and actively fight against it. But it is not simply a US versus Pakistan, West against Middle East tension at play: As Medovoi notes, Changez's conflicted American-Pakistani identity becomes particularly fraught while he is on business trips to "third" places (647). Here again, Wallerstein's formulation of a core/semi-periphery/periphery world system can be seen at work. In Manila, Changez is shocked to realize that the Philippines are better off than his homeland: "it was one thing to accept that New York was more wealthy than Lahore, but quite another to swallow the fact that Manila was as well" (*Reluctant* 64). As a result, he reluctantly attempts to "act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an *American*" (65). All at once, Changez is confronted with the shape of the capitalist world system, and struggles to locate himself—as a Pakistani who has found success and an adopted home in the financial core of New York—within that system. Later, Changez is traveling in a limousine with his American colleagues when he makes eye-contact with a Filipino jeepney driver. Turning from the jeepney driver, with whom he feels he shares "a sort of Third World sensibility," to a fair-skinned colleague, he undergoes a momentary crisis of allegiance. Gazing out through the tinted windows of his air-conditioned limousine, Changez laments: "I felt I was play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home, like the people on the street outside" (66-67). Ultimately, Manila serves as a mediator for Changez's conflicted identity; it alludes to an intermediary rung (from Changez's perspective) in the ladder of civilization; and it triangulates Changez within a complex system of imperial power dynamics.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* "explicitly asks to be read as the literature of imperial critique" (Medovoi 649), and this is most readily apparent in the scenes set in Chile. It is there

that Changez's assumed American identity is ultimately unraveled. Watching his native homeland descend into a state of crisis in the wake of 9/11, he has grown increasingly disenchanted with his adopted country. He travels to Valparaiso on behalf of Underwood Samson to value a book publishing operation; this proves to be a pivotal moment in Changez's identity crisis, and in the larger narrative. We might even wonder whether Hamid had world systems analysis in mind when he describes Changez's disequilibrium in Valparaiso in this way: "I did not know where I stood on so many issues of consequence; I lacked a stable *core*. I was not certain where I belonged—in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither..." [emphasis in original, but I would have added it myself were it not] (148).

The Valparaiso publishing company is run by a man named Juan-Bautista, and Changez's team is tasked with valuing the company, and ultimately determining whether it would benefit the owners to shutter Juan-Bautista's doors: "Although [Juan-Bautista] had run the company for many years, he did not own it; the owners wanted to sell, and the prospective buyer—our client—was unlikely to continue to subsidize the loss-making trade division" (*Reluctant* 137, 141). Juan-Batista is keenly aware that the curation and production of literary works, such as those published by his company, function as a "nonconforming agent" in a capitalist world system. At his first meeting with Changez's team, he asks "What do you know of books?" "I specialized in the media industry," Jim, Changez's boss, replies. "I've valued a dozen publishers over two decades." "That is finance," Juan-Bautista retorted. "I asked what you knew of books" (141-142).

Changez and the publisher sense in each other a mutual affinity, and Changez is invited to a private lunch. There, an indignant Juan-Bautista tells Changez of the janissaries: Christian youths captured and turned into soldiers for the Ottoman empire's Muslim armies (151).

Changez comes to realize that he is “a modern-day janissary,” that he has sided with and abetted the Americans in their war against his true comrades: “I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire, when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion for those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain” (152). This time, unlike in Manila, Changez embraces rather than represses this revelation. He abandons his post, returns to Lahore, and becomes a professor and leader of a student protest movement against American intervention in Pakistan (154, 179). In Valparaiso, as in Manila, a third reference point enables the triangulation of a truly global schema, one that reveals “the structuring force of the world capitalist system.” After years of striving to conform and succeed within the capitalist system, Changez becomes, in the end, a nonconforming actor.

### **3.3 How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia**

Hamid’s third novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, published in 2013, takes the nominal form of a self-help manual, with chapter headings such as “Move to the City,” “Don’t Fall in Love,” and “Learn from a Master.” Throughout, the protagonist is “you.” “You” are advised to get an education, avoid idealists, and work for yourself on your path to the novel’s titular promise (17, 55, 95). Within this construct, the book narrates the rise and eventual fall of a bottled water magnate in an unnamed city modeled after Lahore (NPR). You begin as a young boy “huddled, shivering, on the packed earth under your mother’s cot one cold, dewy morning. Your anguish is the anguish of a boy whose chocolate has been thrown away, whose remote controls are out of batteries, whose scooter is busted, whose new sneakers have been stolen. This is all the more remarkable since you’ve never in your life seen any of these things” (4). From there, you will apprentice for a less-than-legal operation that fudges the date on recently-expired

canned goods; fall in love with a woman, marry a different one, have a child, and become an absentee father to him just as your father was to you; capitalize on a dire and underserved need for clean drinking water in your country by establishing a home-kitchen-based purifying and bottling operation; succeed wildly; then suffer the indignity of a slow, steady marital and financial decline. In typical Hamid fashion, this very personal story—a bildungsroman, a rags-to-riches tale, a comedy and a tragedy all rolled into one—is structured by a capitalist world system.

The chapter headings in the novel run as follows:

1. Move to the City
2. Get an Education
3. Don't Fall in Love
4. Avoid Idealists
5. Learn from a Master
6. Work for Yourself
7. Be Prepared to Use Violence
8. Befriend a Bureaucrat
9. Patronize the Artists of War
10. Dance with Debt
11. Focus on the Fundamentals
12. Have an Exit Strategy

These twelve steps, taken out of context, could be read as the table of contents of a very different kind of book: a step-by-step instructional guide for becoming a good capitalist. (A cynical mind might wonder whether the reason for the U.S.'s hegemonic decline might partly lie in a failure to heed step twelve.) Of all Hamid's novels, this is the one that most directly addresses an imperial economic hierarchy; it offers both insight into and a critique of that system, sometimes at the very same moment.

In describing the political-economic transformation of late twentieth-century capitalism, David Harvey posits that there are two primary difficulties in wrangling its complex dynamism. One lies in the “anarchic qualities” of the system, and the other is a matter of control over labor

and its deployment so as to maximize profits for the maximum number of capitalists (122).

Harvey argues that:

“Some degree of collective action—usually state regulation and intervention—is needed to compensate for the market failures....to prevent excessive concentrations of market power, or to check the abuse of monopoly....and to guard against runaway failures due to speculative surges, aberrant market signals, and the potentially negative interplay between entrepreneurial expectations and market signals....” (122)

For Harvey, state intervention and regulation are integral to the functioning and “stable growth” of capitalism. The self-help writer cum narrator of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* agrees. In the chapter titled “Befriend a Bureaucrat” he writes: “we exist in a financial universe that is subject to massive gravitational pulls from states. States tug at us. States bend us. And, tirelessly, states seek to determine our orbits” (139). As a fledgling entrepreneur, one might be tempted to escape this gravitational pull:

“You might therefore assume that the most reliable path to becoming filthy rich is to activate your faster-than-light marketing drive and leap into business nebulas as remote as possible from the state’s imperial economic grip. But you would be wrong.

Entrepreneurship in the barbaric wastes furthest from state power is a fraught endeavor, a constant battle, a case of kill or be killed, with little guarantee of success. No, harnessing the state’s might for personal gain is a much more sensible approach” (140).

To succeed within the imperial economic hierarchy, the narrator insists in this passage, one should behave as a conforming actor. But we soon see that conformity and playing by the rules are not necessarily the same thing. Having established a “fairly aboveboard” operation, you must now secure a state license in order to bid on municipal projects and take your business to the next

level. But your application has been rejected. Here enters the bureaucrat, purportedly responsible for ensuring the soundness of the business operations he oversees and thereby the quality of consumer products. After a long presentation wherein you assure him of your qualifications on both counts, he pushes a hand-written note across the table that simply reads: “How much?” You are immensely relieved. The bureaucrat can be bought (141-143).

This is an important step on your journey to becoming filthy rich in rising Asia, and it demonstrates a key dynamic in the functioning of the capitalist world system. States do not *control* the global market; they only help to shape it. They constrain it in some cases—as Harvey says, in order to compensate for market failures, check the abuse of monopoly, and guard against “speculative surges, aberrant market signals, and the potentially negative interplay between entrepreneurial expectations and market signals.” But states are also themselves shaped in turn. In the world of the novel, the fate of your business may seem to be in the hands of the bureaucrat, of the state, but the tables will turn, if you can only settle on the proper figure for a bribe. You write down a number and slide it back to him, and the haggling begins: “[The bureaucrat] has slid off his viceroy’s throne and into a salesman’s stall. You are his buyer, and though you must not squeeze, you have him by his enormous, greedy, and extremely useful balls” (143). The state does not sit detachedly above and outside of the capitalist world system, overseeing it and dutifully checking its powers. Rather, the state functions *within* the system, as an integral part of it—sitting across the table from finance and haggling over a “fair” price that will satisfy both sides.

### 3.4 Exit West

Hamid’s fourth and most recent novel, *Exit West*, tells the story of Saeed and Nadia, two young people who meet and fall in love against a backdrop of growing unrest in their unnamed

city, modeled on Lahore. As their world begins to crumble in the face of increasing violence and failing infrastructure, they begin to hear whispers of a network of doors opening around the world. These are ordinary doors—sometimes in an apartment, or an office building, possibly a stairwell—that suddenly and utterly unpredictably become portals to other places. Those who walk through them know not where they will land; but with their city at war and their lives increasingly in danger, Saeed and Nadia know that their best chance at survival lies in the mystery that awaits them on the other side of one of these ‘open’ doors.

*Exit West*, published in 2017, landed in American bookstores in the midst of a global refugee crisis. Civil war raged Syria and Yemen, and millions of civilians fled to neighboring countries, to the EU and elsewhere, legally or illegally, to wherever they might find refuge and safety. Meanwhile, nativism in the west had evolved from latent anti-immigrant sentiment into full-blown public policy: Britain had voted to leave the European Union; American President Donald Trump sought to build a border wall between the US and Mexico, and to institute a travel ban against a group of Muslim-majority countries. Everywhere, the decisions and policies of state actors were wreaking havoc on the world system, on the imperial hierarchy, and most significantly, on their own citizens. It’s ironic to observe that in our current geopolitical moment, as the doors that allow the free passage of capital from place to place continue to open ever more widely, the doors to the laborers who enable the production of that capital are increasingly slamming shut.

The work of Italian scholar Giovanni Arrighi is concerned with looking at the lifecycle of capitalism using Fernand Braudel’s conception of the *longue durée*—that is, distilling its essential features by analyzing its patterns and cycles over its entire lifetime. Contrary to a commonly-held assumption within the post-war social sciences, capitalism did not arise during

the industrial era; it has been around for quite some time. By Arrighi's estimation, capitalism has existed for more than five hundred years, and has unfolded as a succession of "long centuries," each defined by a primary global hegemon whose rise and fall has operated according to a logic of cyclicity that can only be understood by taking the long view of history. Arrighi argues that each of capitalism's "long centuries" has unfolded according to a similar pattern, one that can be identified as inherently capitalist. The modern world system, according to Arrighi, "has been formed by, and has expanded on the basis of, recurrent fundamental restructurings led and governed by successive hegemonic states" (31-32). Each of these long centuries represents a systemic cycle, and with each cycle, each subsequent hegemon has shown a greater consolidation of financial, political, and military power than the one that came before. Arrighi writes: "The main purpose of the concept of systemic cycles is to describe and elucidate the formation, consolidation, and disintegration of the successive regimes through which the capitalist world-economy has expanded from its late medieval sub-systemic embryo to its present global dimension" (*Long Twentieth Century* 10). And the greater the consolidation of power of the hegemon, the greater the complexity and thus the challenges of maintaining it.

Wallerstein, too, insists that capitalism must be analyzed and understood in terms of its *longue durée*, and he similarly views the lifespan of capitalism as having consisted of a series of hegemonic cycles over the past 500 years. But Wallerstein speculates that there may be something different about our current geopolitical moment. He writes that any system "should be analyzed as consisting of three qualitatively different moments: the moment of coming into existence; their functioning during their 'normal life' (the longest moment); the moment of going out of existence (the structural crisis)" ("Structural Crisis" 10). He posits that the current systemic cycle and its hegemon—the United States—is in a stage of terminal structural crisis,

which will see the end not only of the era of US hegemonic power, but possibly the entire capitalist superstructure altogether.

According to Wallerstein, “All systems fluctuate. That is, the machinery of the system constantly deviates from its point of equilibrium” (“Structural Crisis” 11). In response to these fluctuations, there is always a pull back to equilibrium: the system constantly seeks stability. But fundamental changes in the functioning of the world system since 1968 lead Wallerstein to conclude that there is no going back; the deviations from equilibrium are ever more erratic, and the center cannot hold. He cites two primary causes for this erraticism. One, that “the basic costs of production have risen constantly and have now each approached close enough to their asymptotes that the system cannot be brought back to equilibrium” in service of the endless accumulation of capital (24). Two, the legacy of the world revolutions of 1968 has been that the centrist leftist ideology that once dominated the geoculture has failed, leaving the “exponents of truly conservative and truly radical ideologies [to resume] their autonomous existences, and [to begin] to pursue autonomous organizational and political strategies” (28). The far right and the far left are engaged in an ever more violent game of tug-of-war, pulling the system further from equilibrium.

These crises of the global capitalist system have been compounded by the crises of its current hegemon. Wallerstein writes:

“The decline of US hegemony became irreparable after the blowback caused by the political-military fiasco of the neocon program of unilateral military machismo undertaken in the period of 2001-2006 by the administration of President George W. Bush. The outcome has been the reality of a multipolar world, in which there are eight to ten centers of power, sufficiently strong that they can negotiate with other centers with

relative autonomy. However, there are now too many centers of power. One consequence is the frequent tentative geopolitical realignments, as each of these centers seeks maximum advantage. Fluctuating markets and currencies are thereby reinforced by fluctuating power alliances.” (31)

It is precisely within that time period—the 2001-2006 period, the post-9/11 moment when Changez confronts the fact of his fractured identity—that Hamid left us at the end of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. His fourth and most recent novel, *Exit West*, turns its gaze toward the increasing instability of the world system, and imagines what might happen next.

Structural crisis is expressed in *Exit West* in the breakdown of imperial structures in the periphery, through violence and war; and then in the core, through the opening of the network of doors. As migrants pour through them in greater and greater numbers, Hamid writes that the world is “full of fracturing...of regions pulling away from nations, and cities pulling away from hinterlands, and it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart” (158). The structure of this new world “cut[s] across divisions of race or language or nation, for what did those divisions matter now in a world full of doors, the only divisions that mattered now were between those who sought right of passage and those who would deny them passage” (155).

Against this backdrop, at the beginning of *Exit West*, the world system is generally recognizable as our own. There are references to the hierarchy of the world system that signal the novel’s contemporaneity with our own time. But we begin to see the breakdown of this system as doors become portals. The systematicity of the world system becomes a system of an entirely different sort: one that is unpredictable and even in the world of the novel, incomprehensible. It is a system that signals the breakdown of a system.

At the outset of *Exit West*, the infrastructure of the world system is already breaking down in Nadia and Saeed's city via the usual methods articulated by Wallerstein. There are the precursors to civil war and other signs of social unrest—of disequilibrium—not only in Nadia and Saeed's unnamed city, but in other parts of the world as well. We see these symptoms of Wallerstein's "structural crisis" in the interludes that describe others passing through the system of doors, even before our protagonists discover or give credence to them.

The breakdown of infrastructure for industrial production and distribution in Nadia and Saeed's city begins in ways that can be easily understood in the context of a realist mode of world-system literature. The advertising agency that Saeed works for is shuttered; citywide, internet access is disabled; the power goes out; companies shut down, including the insurance agency Nadia works for; travel by land or air becomes difficult or impossible. But this breakdown only spreads to the rest of the world—specifically to the core—with the unintended opening of the network of doors.

*Exit West* seems to suggest that, for the periphery, the infrastructure of the world system breaks down as these metaphorical "doors"—the doors of communication and of movement—are closed. But for the core, the breakdown of empire is manifested by the *opening* of doors. While the doors represent the possibility of escape and safety for those at the periphery—for Nadia, Saeed, their compatriots, and others fleeing similar circumstances elsewhere—Hamid writes that "even the most reputable international broadcasters had acknowledged the doors existed, and indeed were being discussed by world leaders as a major global crisis" (88).

*Exit West* is not merely interested in exploring the problematics of a world in which refugees seek safe passage from their turbulent homelands to places of greater wealth and stability. It is also interested in the question of destabilization, of rupture, of unpredictability in

the empire that is the world system, such that the powerful are powerless to stem the influx of the periphery into their bounded and privileged core territory. So when I refer to the *systematicity* of the novel's network of doors, I also refer to its opposite. The mechanics of the door portals are consistent. The doors are dark: as Hamid writes when the doors first appear, on page eight, they are "darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness" (an explicit colonial reference). The passage through these doors is strenuous, with the passagers emerging on the other side falling supine and weakened. And once opened, the doors seem to remain open; hence the need for armed guards to protect these newly opened borders. But they also represent a sort of anti-systematicity. The breakdown of the world system is enabled by the introduction of this system of doors, which function in an unpredictable and disjunctive way. In *Exit West*, this unpredictability is expressed both narratively and formally: through this network of doors that could open anywhere, at any time, and lead to any place; and through the intermittent intrusions into the otherwise straightforward narrative of Saeed and Nadia by unnamed characters' travels through these doors. This anti-systematicity points towards the breakdown of the rigidly structured hierarchies of our current world system.

Over the course of the novel, there is a geographical movement towards the West. But Nadia and Saeed's westward movement assumes and is preceded by a movement in the opposite direction: of finance, technology, imperialism, honed in the west and spreading to the east, whether by infection or imposition in the form of colonial rule. Perhaps we can read this reversal—west to east becoming east to west—as an erasure, an undoing. As these orphaned children of capital brave the headwinds of the world system in their journey westward, they are eroding the power of that system—or at least the novel seems to hope so.

Movement is a central theme in the novel, not only from east to west, but from west to east, from south to north, from north to further north. On page 169, Hamid writes that “the whole planet was on the move, much of the global South headed to the global North, but also Southerners moving to other Southern places and Northerners moving to other Northern places.” Migrancy in the novel is multi-directional and circuitous; it seems to undermine the privileging of a movement to the west, or to the core. So what does it mean that Nadia and Saeed end up in the US, in the San Francisco Bay Area—basically as *far west* as one can go in the west? They are “exiting towards the west” in the sense that every door they step through lands them further west geographically. But perhaps they are also “exiting the west”—in the sense that the world system of western domination is being broken down and remade.

It is therefore possible to see the novel’s “System of doors” as an analogy for an emergent post-capitalist system, one that renders our existing borders meaningless: borders between states, between the periphery and the core. Wallerstein writes of the impending demise of the capitalist world system that “Although the outcome is unpredictable.... What we can all do is try to analyze the historical options [and] make our moral choice about the preferred outcome” (“Structural Crisis” 35). *Exit West* seeks to offer one vision of a post-capitalist future that Wallerstein alludes to but cannot predict.

#### 4. Literary Analysis: Mapping the World System

In “Terminal Crisis? From the Worlding of American Literature to World-System Literature,” Medovoi writes of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* that “Hamid’s novel is not so much of or by, but rather *for* Americans. That is to say, America serves as the novel’s geopolitical raison d’etre and as the object of its rhetorical design rather than as its generative cultural ground.” Medovoi means this in the sense that America is the hegemonic force of the current world system described in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and the novel speaks to the American reader—literally and figuratively—in a way that both describes and calls into question her particular place in it. As Medovoi notes, Hamid was born in Pakistan, educated in the United States, and currently holds Pakistani and British passports; although he has spent significant time in the US, it would be a dubious claim to call him American. The same is true of his work. Hamid’s first novel, *Moth Smoke*, is set in Lahore, Pakistan. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is set primarily in New York and Lahore, with side trips to the Philippines and South America. *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is set in an unnamed country in “rising” Asia. *Exit West* moves from an unnamed country to Greece, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with narrative detours in Australia, Namibia, Nigeria, and many other places; as Hamid writes, “as west as Guatemala, as east as Indonesia” (127).

Medovoi subverts the debate about American literature versus World literature by arguing that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* “belongs to a current mode of world literature engaged by the transitional moment associated with Giovanni Arrighi’s sense of the ‘terminal crisis’ in American world-system hegemony” (644). Medovoi calls this sort of literature “world-system literature.”

This chapter will conduct a literary analysis of Hamid's work that illuminates the ways in which his novels serve to create for the reader a cognitive map of a globalized world, and then position the reader—for my purposes, a specifically American reader—within this map.

#### 4.1 Triangulating the World System: Fiction as Cognitive Map

In a 1988 essay, Fredric Jameson described our postmodern moment as one in which “a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere,” in places that are “unknown and unimaginable,” and leaves the subject with an “inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole” (“Modernism” 50-51). Later, Jameson sets forth a definition of cognitive mapping as a device which “enable[s] a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole” (*Postmodernism* 51). In *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, and *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid provides just such a cognitive map for a globalized world—one that both positions and implicates the reader in a global schema. The novels accomplish this by constructing a fictional representation of a properly unrepresentable global milieu, one that triangulates the core/semi-periphery/periphery of the world system, and positions the reader within it.

Medovoi interrogates the ways in which *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* “cognitively, imaginatively, and affectively map[s] a world in which Pakistan orbits around the US in a larger global system of wealth, culture, and power” (645). This is also true of *Moth Smoke*, and although their original settings are not made explicit, the same might be inferred of both *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West*. In an interview with Hamid for the *New York Times*, Parul Seghal writes of his work, “He's never merely telling a story, he's pitting his story

against prevailing narratives about Pakistan, the roots of radicalization, the unevenness of economic growth” (Sehgal).

We can see this triangulation at work in the first pages of *Exit West*. What assumptions do we make about the unnamed city where Saeed and Nadia live? The novel opens in an unnamed country, an unnamed city, “A city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war.” Their names are Saeed and Nadia. He keeps a beard, she wears a flowing black robe. We can’t be sure, but it seems that we are solidly in the periphery, probably in a Muslim-majority country: the Middle East, or Southeast Asia, or possibly northern Africa. By the end of the first paragraph, the reader—here I refer especially to the American reader—has likely made a number of assumptions about the novel and its characters. (3)

Then, within the next several pages, we learn that Saeed and Nadia meet while attending the same class on corporate identity and product branding. She rides a motorbike; he works in advertising, with a boss who spouts inspirational corporate speak like “It’s not a story if it doesn’t have an audience,” like a caricature of an American executive (6). Points of reference include both car bombings and music concerts (4).

By now, our assumptions about the novel have perhaps changed since that first paragraph. And perhaps, if we think about *Exit West* as a novel “not of or by, but for Americans,” then our assumptions about the world have changed, too. Like Hamid’s previous novels, *Exit West* is interested in triangulating not only the differences between west and east, between core and periphery, but also the similarities; and so what at first feels like disjuncture opens into a possibility for empathy.

*Moth Smoke* can also be seen as a work in which “America serves as the novel’s geopolitical *raison d’être* and as the object of its rhetorical design rather than as its generative

cultural ground.” Hamid’s first novel, it takes place in Lahore but was written while the author was studying in the United States, and the novel’s characters are frequently deployed as nodes in a schema that connects and disconnects the world of Lahore from that of the US. The novel’s protagonist Daru laments, with a tinge of envy, the difference in opportunities afforded to him—a middle-class Pakistani of modest origins, who stayed in his home country to study at the university there—and to his friends who left to study abroad in the US. At the same time, he is quick to delineate himself, as an educated and respectably employed man, to his less-well off countrymen. When Rickshaw guru (and Daru’s personal drug dealer) Murad Badshah speaks impudently to him, Daru silently complains, “I don’t like it when low class types forget their place and try to become too frank with you. But it’s my fault, I suppose: the price of being a nice guy” (44). Daru is often engaged in mental acts of self-positioning, of triangulating himself between his wealthy, foreign-educated friends such as Ozi, and those he sees as “beneath” him, such as Murad and Manucci, his servant. Despite his ego, and despite his conscious recognition of the injustice of Pakistan’s relationship to Western wealth, Daru has internalized a “ladder of civilization” way of thinking that places American education and wealth above that of his countrymen, and he struggles with his position therein. But the novel also contains a critique of this structural model. Mumtaz, after studying in New York and marrying Ozi there, finally gets sick of the notion of American primacy on the global stage: “I was frustrated by people who actually thought the world had a center, and that center was here [in New York]. ‘The world’s a sphere, everyone,’ I wanted to say. ‘The center of a sphere doesn’t lie on its surface’” (169).

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*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* utilizes a different sort of triangulation, a more intimate enactment of cognitive global mapping. The structure of the novel is comprised of an

international dialogue in the form of a literal dialogue: although much of the narrative consists of a straightforward recounting of Changez's experiences, the frame of the novel is a conversation between Changez—a Pakistani—and an unnamed American man. Jameson argues that any cognitive map must "emerge from the demands and constraints of the spatial perceptions of the individual," and it is within the framework of this narrative conversation that the novel centers on the individual as a locus within the map ("Modernism" 52). Over the course of the novel, the tone of this conversation gradually shifts from a friendly, welcoming encounter to one of implicit accusation and the intimation of hostility; but throughout, the contrast between Changez's revealing intimacy and the American's "inscrutable," suspicious demeanor places the reader (specifically the American reader) in a position of ambivalence about where his sympathies should lie (17).

The American is addressed in the second person, as "you," and his remarks are only implied by Changez's responses. This structure enacts a problematic reversal for the American reader. First of all, in the novel's central dialogue—which takes place in Lahore—the American is the foreigner. Furthermore, since his voice is represented only through Changez's replies, what may be misinterpretation (or deliberate manipulation) on Changez's part regarding the American's demeanor or intentions becomes solidified as fact. In the contemporary "us vs. them" narrative, the Western reader is accustomed to occupying the place of "us." But through Changez, he is forced to not only see the world through the eyes of "them," but to assume the silence of his American stand-in.

At the moment of Changez's revelation in Valparaiso, this dialectic spins out to cover the globe: "the empire" versus those "whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain" (*Reluctant* 152). For Changez, the latter now consists of not only Pakistan, but Juan-

Bautista's Chile, Iraq, and every other country and person living under the heel of the American empire. No longer are there "third" places, sitting safely on the sidelines of world events. This moment, taking place as it does within the narrative construct of Changez's conversation with the American, represents a coalescence of the novel's content and form. The revelation itself casts "us vs. them" globally; simultaneously, the conversation that recounts it collapses into the personal. "Us" becomes "me" (Changez) and "them" becomes "you" (the American).

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Medovoi's definition of 'world-system literature' as a work that "is not so much of or by, but rather *for* Americans" can be similarly applied to *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. The novel's framing structure (as well as its title) calls to mind a stereotypically American ethos: the self-help book is a tradition widely popularized, in its modern incarnation, by American speakers and authors such as Dale Carnegie and his book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Watts). As Medovoi writes of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, America serves as "the object of [the narrative's] rhetorical design" (646). In that novel, the rhetorical design (a Pakistani talking to an American) makes this explicit; in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, it is embedded instead in narrative subtleties and in the novel's implied global schema. Though America does not appear as a setting and plays little direct role in the action, the imperial history and cultural legacy of the Western world serves as a familiar reference point to highlight the alteriority, for the Western reader, of the novel's unnamed city.

Although *Rising Asia* is set entirely within a single city and its outlying countryside, a global system is immediately invoked. At the very beginning of the novel, after placing the protagonist in a prototypical third-world scene, the reference point immediately turns Westward: "Your anguish is the anguish of a boy whose chocolate has been thrown away, whose remote

controls are out of batteries, whose scooter is busted, whose new sneakers have been stolen. This is all the more remarkable since you've never in your life seen any of these things" (4). The First World immediately establishes its presence by asserting its absence. Later, "your" brother takes a bus to "the century-old, and hence in city historical terms neither recent nor ancient, European-designed commercial district" (29). This allusion to an imperialist presence of the past again establishes presence via absence, within the context of the city's (much longer) history. Later still, once "you" are well on the road to solidifying your bottled water empire, seeking a government contract, an official talks excitedly about the next phase of development: "When you enter phase ten, it'll be like you've entered another country. Another continent. Like you've gone to Europe. Or North America" (164).

Lamenting that "worldliness is not natural to the novel," Robbins opines that "most novels do not train our eyes to look very high or very low, or for that matter, very far away" (1). For the Western reader, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* accomplishes all of these. The protagonist rises from a young boy, "huddling, shivering, on the packed earth under your mother's cot" to become the founding owner of a bottled water empire, living in a gated mansion and surrounded by bodyguards—or, as Hamid writes, "from my-shit-just-sits-there-until-it-rains poverty to which-of-my-toilets-shall-I-use affluence" (4, 78). Both the primitive poverty of the novel's opening and the grandiose wealth of its apex exist beyond the margins of most Americans' experience. But the novel is also more than a simple rags-to-riches tale; the gaze of the novel sweeps beyond the narrow frame of the personal to expose larger forces at work. The protagonist, his personal relationships and growing business, remain in the center of the frame, but the lens slowly pulls back to reveal a city and country stumbling at half-gait towards modernization. On the bus home from work, "you" are stuck between the window and "an

overweight and therefore clearly prosperous vegetable farmer whose clan has recently made the first of a lucrative series of sales of their communal land to a refrigerator assembly plant looking to expand its warehouse space” (82). In the outskirts of the city, unplanned development has resulted in “a ribbon of convenience stores, auto garages, scrap-metal dealers, unregistered educational institutes, fly-by-night dental clinics, and mobile-phone top-up and repair points, all fronting warrens of housing perilously unresistant to earthquakes, or even, for that matter, torrential rain” (120). It is not only the geographical distance of this Lahore-like city that sends the Western reader sprawling out of the armchair of his First-World comfort zone. It is the expanse of the novel’s global view, cutting across demarcations of class and social status, where the commercial trappings of a distant world are glopped on like thick paint to disguise the weakness of the underlying structure.

The novel’s form further enables this expansive view: the second-person narration allows, even insists, on a certain intimacy, while the construct of the self-help book allows the narrative to step back from the immediate action to reveal a much broader, more complicated, fictional world. As “you” rush to the scene of destruction following a riot near your now quite successful bottling plant, the self-help writer (who, at the beginning of each chapter, announces himself as such) reminds you that

It was inevitable...that we would eventually find ourselves broaching the topic of violence. Becoming filthy rich requires a degree of unsqueamishness, whether in rising Asia or anywhere else. For wealth comes from capital, and capital comes from labor, and labor comes from equilibrium, from calories in chasing calories out, an inherent, in-built leanness, the leanness of biological machines that must be bent to your will with some force if you are to loosen your own financial belt and, sighingly, expand. (119)

In a double movement that turns simultaneously inward and outward, violence is expressed both as lived personal experience and theoretically, as a necessary component of capitalist growth. Later, as “you” sit down to a meeting with a government official in hopes of securing a permit to expand your business, the self-help writer observes that “if there were a cosmic list of things that unite us...then shining brightly on that list would be the fact that we exist in a financial universe that is subject to massive gravitational pulls from states” (139). Here again, the novel’s structural design enables a direct movement from interiority to alteriority, from intimate personal experience to a view of the larger framework of power and finance. Here, and throughout his novels, it is clear that Hamid’s macrocosmic concerns are as blatant as their titles suggest.

#### **4.2 Positioning the American Reader: The Function of Form in Hamid’s Novels**

It is one thing for a novel to achieve the “worldliness” described by Robbins—to provide for the reader a cognitive map of a global framework of capitalist superstructures—and quite another to position the reader in relation to that map. Imagine you are in a shopping mall, or an amusement park, or an airport. ‘Lost’ is not quite the right word for your current predicament—an illuminated sign tells you, as you pass through security, that your destination on Concourse C is to your left—but you’d like to find a bookstore before heading to your gate, and perhaps a food court. You locate a directory. The familiar words, in boldfaced bright-red all-caps, stand atop a boldfaced bright-red arrow: YOU ARE HERE. But *where* is *here*? You’ve gotten turned around on your search for the directory; it’s easy enough to see that Concourse C is on the opposite side of the map from the bookstore, and the food court is somewhere in between, but from your current location should you head left, or right, or straight ahead?

It may be easy enough, in an airport, to locate a couple of nearby reference points, gain your bearings, and trot happily off towards Hudson Booksellers. But locating yourself within the global forces of a capitalist superstructure is another matter entirely. For the American reader, Hamid's novels accomplish precisely that.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, it is clear that Hamid is concerned with positioning the reader, narratively and formally. It is a central feature of literature, of any kind of storytelling, that it allows us to vicariously experience a different reality. To read fiction is to inhabit two minds at once: that of the characters, and our own. But in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid's use of second-person narration collapses this duality. Instead of seeing the world of the novel as if from above, we find ourselves in it. We are no longer staring down at the boldfaced bright-red arrow, but standing directly on it.

The "you" of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is both specific and general: it is the particular American man to whom Changez addresses his narrative, and Americans in a broader sense. From the perspective of an American audience, the former is a stand-in for the reader; the latter *is* the reader. The experience of reading the novel is an oscillation between these two positions. The novel begins by hailing the reader: "Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you" (1). Two sentences in, I may be convinced that the narrator is speaking directly to me, the individual, particular reader—introducing himself by offering assistance, noticing that I may be startled by being addressed thusly. The opening paragraph then moves toward positioning the narrator ("Do not be frightened by my beard," "I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language") but leaves the characterization of the addressee sufficiently broad that I may continue to believe that I am the person being addressed. It is not until the following paragraph that the narrative's "you" is more clearly established. The narrator

observes “your suit, with its single vent, and your button down shirt...your hair, short-cropped, and your expansive chest—the chest, I would say, of a man who bench-presses regularly, and maxes out well above two-twenty-five.” And yet, I am still unable to completely dissociate myself from the narratee. It is not by his dress or size that Changez identifies him as an American, but by his “*bearing*”—something apparently inherent not in the man, but in his nationality, which I happen to share (2).

This conflation of the narrative’s “you” and the reader continues throughout the novel, taking various forms. Sometimes it is through Changez’s dialogue, such as in the opening paragraph. Other times, this conflation manifests formally: Changez notes apologetically that “Your ears must be exhausted” after listening to a particularly lengthy account of his trip to Manila, and this is followed almost immediately thereafter by a chapter break—a natural resting place for the reader (76). Whose ears are exhausted: the narratee’s or mine? Often it is playful, as when Changez wonders, “Did this conversation even happen, you ask? For that matter, did this so-called Juan-Bautista even exist? I assure you, sir: you can trust me. I am not in the habit of inventing untruths!” (152). Of course, fiction is the art of inventing untruths. In moments such as these, the book calls attention to the fact of its bookness, which hints at another presence: that of the author. We are reminded to consider that there are perhaps more parties to this conversation than Changez and his American interlocutor.

This conflation of narratee and reader gives rise to a certain discomfort. Although the American interlocutor becomes more clearly defined as an individual (or at least an individual of a certain type) over the course of the novel, the subtle implication persists that I, the reader, am being lumped in with Changez’s characterization of him. With his broad chest and cropped hair, toying with his unusual mobile phone and ogling the young women of the marketplace, the

American narratee is clearly quite different from me, and yet I worry that by virtue of being an American I might be perceived in a similar manner.

This sense of being stereotyped, as an American reader, is heightened by Changez's frequent concern with the possibility that *he* is being stereotyped. In the opening paragraph, he says "Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America" (1). Later, he says "Perhaps you have drawn certain conclusions from my appearance, my lustrous beard" and later still, "you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists" (76, 183). Here, another subjectival interplay is revealed. While the rhetorical framework of Changez's conversation with the American is written in the second person, a larger part of the narrative takes a more conventional form. Changez turns to the American at regular intervals, mostly preceding and immediately following chapter breaks, but in between, he provides a straightforward first-person narration of his background, his time in America, and his eventual return to Pakistan. And he is, by and large, a sympathetic character. The overwhelming tendency of the reader is to side with Changez, rather than his shifty, apprehensive interlocutor; but as an American reader, I am forced to identify with the American—not only because of our shared nationality, but because the novel does not allow me to shake the suspicion that the narrative's "you" is, at least in part, *me*. In this way, the novel capitalizes on a product of the conventional fictional form—the reader's sympathy with Changez—to heighten the disorienting effect of its unconventional narrative strategy.

The upshot of all this is that the American reader closes the pages of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* feeling accused of something. This is striking, since not once does Changez actually accuse his interlocutor of anything, even when, in the novel's final page, it is strongly suggested that the American is reaching into his jacket for a gun (184). And it is only late in the

novel that Changez explicitly acknowledges that the American narratee is party to the “empire” that Changez has disavowed. In this moment the American narratee, the American reader, and America as a whole are addressed as one: “...America was engaged only in posturing. You were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world” (168). We are the “average American,” convinced that “whatever [we] wanted was just what the human race wanted” (Said, Kiernan 286-287). Here, the novel’s “you” widens its net, and the American reader is implicated threefold: as an American national; as herself, a specific American reader; and by virtue of her interchangeability with the American narratee.

Hamid’s interest in putting the reader in conversation with the narrative by using second-person narration can also be seen in his first novel. Chapter One of *Moth Smoke* sets the scene, narrated by Daru in his jail cell. The second chapter, “Judgment (Before Intermission)” begins, “You sit behind a high desk, wearing a black robe and a white wig, tastefully powdered” (5). You, the reader, are the judge presiding over Daru’s trial. From this point on, the novel alternates between Daru’s narration (telling his version of events) with courtroom testimony from witnesses (such as Murad Badshah, Mumtaz, and Ozi) that address “you” while telling their version. The stories are inconsistent, filled with details that don’t quite add up, facts and counterfactuals and alternative facts. Daru is both sympathetic and despicable. Murad is affable and charming, but clearly corruptible. Mumtaz is eminently believable in her testimony, but with a clear history of deception. Ozi is credible, but his motives are highly suspicious. Who to believe? Likable characters, after all, aren’t always trustworthy ones.

Near the end of the novel, in a chapter titled “Judgment (After Intermission),” the prosecutor makes his closing statement. “You” are asked to make your decision, to render judgment:

There is a pregnant pause, and one by one the other actors in this drama turn to you. The audience awaits. The director bites his nails. Critics and producers will judge your decision.

Here comes your cue.

“Come on,” someone hisses from offstage. “What’s it to be? Guilty or not?” (258)

There are two levels on which this passage can be analyzed. The first lies in the way that the reader is structurally positioned in relation to the characters and the narrative, both as fictive judge—sitting at the head of the courtroom, gavel in hand, poised to deliver a guilty or not guilty verdict—and as a literal, literary judge. A work of fiction, by its very nature, places itself at the mercy of its reader: to suspend disbelief, or not; to sympathize with its characters, or not; to believe in the narrative that it unspools, or not. Regardless of critical reception, prizes awarded, or popular consensus, even the most highly esteemed work of literature is, in the end, subject to the judgment of the particular and individual reader who now holds the book in her hands.

But this passage also alludes to a different sort of positioning, both of the reader and of the narrative itself, in its references to the world of theater. It refers to the “other actors” in this “drama,” to the director, to critics, to producers, to the hiss that comes from “offstage.” In his essay “Enduring Love of the Second Person,” Hamid himself notes that *Moth Smoke* utilizes “a realistic narrative—there is no magic, no aliens—but the frame of the trial that it uses isn’t realism. It is something else: make-believe, play, with ‘you’ given an active role” (*Discontent* 103). Hamid seems to be derisively calling attention to the melodrama of the scene, to the

absurdity of a judge in possession of only fractured narratives and half-truths passing judgment on a man's life. For the American reader, this elicits a certain self-consciousness about her position in the capitalist world system that the novel has situated her within. It is as if the novel is explicitly demanding that she pass judgment while simultaneously, slyly questioning her authority to do so. It is saying with its mouth "Pass judgment!" but saying with its eyes, "Who are you to judge?"

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*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* represents Hamid's most extensive use of second-person narration, and his most daring. While the novel's nominal structure is that of a self-help book, its form shares little in common with any self-help book we might recognize, which tend to utilize an expository first- or third-person perspective. Its rhetorical design formally positions the reader (quite literally) within its cognitive map: from the first pages, the protagonist is "you." As in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the reader is positioned both as himself—a reader of novels, an outside observer, a bystander—and as a participant in the action of the novel. But here, "you" take center stage, while the narrator serves a meta-narrative function as author of the book-within-the-book.

The narrative of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* both accommodates and complicates the reader's dual roles by setting the action in a far distant, Lahore-like city, but providing familiar touchstones for the Western reader (such as the stolen sneakers and busted scooter which "you've never in your life seen.") (4). The narrative exists in both worlds at once, and as such allows the reader to do the same. Furthermore, by addressing me as "you," the narrative carries me seamlessly from my actual identity as an American reader into the experience of a poor but ambitious boy in a distant country.

The “you” of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is more foreign to the American reader than the “you” of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, but also more intimate. The reader is forced to occupy multiple roles simultaneously: that of a poor boy in “rising Asia” who aspires to great status and wealth, and that of an American reader whose life is far removed from the world of the novel. But since “you” are the protagonist, there is no identity schism, no division of loyalty (as with *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where the reader both sympathizes and stands accused). Here, rather than discomfort, the experience is something like empathy.

But there is another strand to be teased out. “You” occupy not only the role of narrative subject, of protagonist, but also that of an eager solicitor of the narrator’s wisdom. “You” are the reader of a self-help book. Similarly, the writer is not simply Mohsin Hamid, telling a story. The “writer” is also a part of the narrative, offering wisdom and advice to the reader’s fictional stand-in. Whereas *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* makes occasional reference to its own bookness, in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, these references serve as the novel’s essential framework. These allusions to bookness often refer to both the particular narrative of the novel and to novels in general. At the beginning of the second chapter, the narrator remarks:

It’s remarkable how many books fall into the category of self-help. Why, for example, do you persist in reading that much-praised, breathtakingly boring foreign novel, slogging through page after page after please-make-it-stop page of tar-slow prose and blush-inducing formal conceit, if not out of an impulse to understand distant lands that because of globalization are increasingly affecting life in your own? What is this impulse of yours, at its core, if not a desire for self-help? (19)

This passage can be read as the coalescence of interiority and alteriority on two levels. First, it is a moment in which the reader and his protagonist-as-fictional-stand-in are conflated: it addresses

both the poor Asian boy seeking advice on how to get filthy rich, and the reader of Hamid's book, slogging through "page after page...of blush-inducing formal conceit." Second, it alludes to both the interior world of the narrative (which positions itself as a self-help book) and to literature more broadly—all novels can be seen, the narrator claims, as self-help books. Further meditations on the nature of self-help books (and of books in general) appear elsewhere in the novel. For example, the narrator observes:

To be effective, a self-help book requires two things. First, the help it suggests should be helpful. Obviously. And second, without which the first is impossible, the self it's trying to help should have some idea of what help is needed. For our collaboration to work, in other words, you must know yourself well enough to understand what you want and where you want to go. Self-help books are two-way streets, after all. Relationships. (77)

Again, the characterization of the self-help book as a relationship can be seen as a metaphor for fiction—particularly the sort of fiction that Hamid is interested in creating. When read in tandem with the earlier passage that equates reading a "breathhtakingly boring foreign novel" with a desire for self-help, this clearly demonstrates Hamid's concern with positioning the reader in relation to the narrative. Novels, like self-help books, are a "two-way street," a means of engagement between the narrative and the reader. The reader is more than just a hypothetical entity; he is not merely implied, but in fact exists, and is addressed as such.

Moreover, by explicitly positioning the narrator as a writer of a self-help book, the novel allows him to speak to the reader directly, as "you." Two readerly identities—the reader of the novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* on one hand, and the reader of an actual self-help book on how to get rich on the other—combine and separate like mercury. The two-way street

begins to look more like a four-lane highway: author conflated with narrator, and reader with protagonist.

In *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, the use of second-person narration calls attention to the fact of the reader, and implicates him in the trajectory of the novel. In *Moth Smoke*, it is as if *I* am the judge presiding over Daru's fate; in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, it is as if *I* am Changez's American interlocutor; in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, it is as if *I* am an ambitious young Pakistani hoping to change my fortunes with the advice from a self-help book. At the same time, the novels call explicit attention to the fact that *I* am not these characters: *I* am a reader of fictional works about them. Likewise, each of these novels allude to the fact of the writer, the creator of the fictional worlds in which the "two-way street" of engagement takes place. In defiance of Barthes, the author is not dead; the reader is not merely implied. Both exist in an actual reality, and have agreed to meet here in this fictional world, which serves as the medium of their engagement.

As such, these novels demonstrate their concern with complicating traditional fictional forms, where the reader observes the action from afar. They each utilize conventional plot structures and modes of characterization, but this is in the service of drawing the reader in to the world of the narrative, only to remind him that a world exists outside of it. It is not simply a momentary breakdown of the fourth wall. These three novels force the reader to consider his place in a narrative world that serves as "situational representation...to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (Jameson 51).

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*Exit West* departs from this second-person narrative strategy, yet it manages to implicate the reader in a different way. Narrated in a straightforward third-person omniscient and utilizing

the plot device of the system of doors, the novel seems to have more in common formally with the South American magical realists than with Hamid's previous novels. Yet it is inextricably linked to *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* when considered on Medovoi's terms: its "geopolitical *raison d'être*" is the same. Like his previous novels, Hamid's latest is a forthright example of world-system literature.

Leaving aside questions of authorial intention, a certain logic can be inferred in the arc of storytelling employed by Hamid over these four novels. *Moth Smoke* positions the reader as a figurative judge within the narrative, and a literal judge of the literary work. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* speaks to the American reader explicitly, in the guise of its unnamed American narratee. *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* speaks to the American reader by deliberately excluding her from the narrative, placing the story within an entirely foreign setting, albeit one that is riddled with familiar references and allusions. But *Exit West* is neither a direct address nor an exclusion. Rather, it seeks to create distance—to imbue the story with alteriority—for the sake of drawing the American reader nearer. It describes delineations and borders only to interrogate them, to permeate them.

This breakdown of borders and of alteriority are enacted over the course of *Exit West*. The novel's protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, exit ever westward: to Mykonos, to London, finally landing in Northern California. They are never entirely at home in any of these places, even their unnamed country of origin, but it is in America that they settle. Once there, Hamid notes, on page 197, that nativeness is "a relative matter." But can we then call them "Americans?" If not Americans, then what? Why is Saeed and Nadia's country unnamed, while the core-country locales they move through are specified? Is it meant to be a stand-in for the world periphery as a whole? Is it an implicit derision to the American reader: even if I told you the name, you

wouldn't know anything about it anyway? Or is it a deliberate attempt to force the American reader to lose her bearings, so that the familiar locales that come later may be seen with different eyes?

As Nadia and Saeed travel through the system of doors, seeking no particular direction except for one of refuge and safety, they find themselves travelling west not only in a geographical sense, but in a world-system sense: each doorway they pass through brings them closer to the hegemonic core. From their peripheral origins they pass through doorways first to Greece (a well-known weak spot of EU border control), then to the United Kingdom (the prior world hegemon), and finally to the United States (the current twilight hegemon). As they travel further and further from their origins, they are also traveling—from the American reader's perspective—closer to home. What begins as alteriority for the American reader, tempered with notes of familiarity, becomes a gesture of hospitality in Derrida's sense: a welcoming of the Other. A homecoming.

This coming together of east and west, of periphery and core, of foreigner and native, of the American reader's self and the Other, culminates in a short but telling passage of *Exit West*. It is distilled into one crucial sentence, where the novel's third-person narration is suspended, however briefly; and it takes place within a narrative detour from Nadia and Saeed's story, one of the novel's many such detours into the wider world of global movement through the system of doors. It comes in the final twenty-five pages of the novel, and this detour concerns an American woman, a grandmother, who has lived in the same home in Palo Alto for her entire life:

Her parents had brought her to this house when she was born...and through this time she had never moved, traveled, yes, but never moved, and yet it seemed the world had moved, and she barely recognized the town that existed outside her property...Every

year someone was moving out and someone was moving in, and now all these doors from who knows where were opening, and all sorts of strange people were around...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)

To an American reader, this passage can be read as a subversion of the nativist hysteria that has been embodied and emboldened by the Trump presidency. It acknowledges the bewilderment that accompanies the subjective experience of a world defined by borders, and by the breaking down of those borders. It traces the movement from an inherited, unquestioned sense of 'home' writ small, to an understanding and acceptance of the world writ large: "Everyone migrates...because we can't help it."

The line that ends this passage, this narrative detour, represents a crucial moment in the novel, and one that ties its "geopolitical *raison d'être*" and its affective modality to Hamid's previous works. It reads, simply: "We are all migrants through time" (209).

This sentence stands alone, its own paragraph, closing a chapter, followed by half a page of blank space and a page turn for the reader to contemplate its significance. It is the literary equivalent of a mic drop. Perhaps to the casual reader, or even to the close reader, this line may seem a bit overly dramatic, even melodramatic. But its position within the text, and its abrupt transition from third-person to first-person plural clearly indicates a reframing of the reader in relation to the narrative. Like *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, this passage implicates the reader. But this time—unlike those previous novels—it includes her. It is not "you" or "I" or "they," but *we*. We are all mere subjects to a changing world, one that we are powerless to predict or control. But our subjectivity is rooted in a place, and it is rooted in our presence; and meaning can be rendered from our understanding of

place and presence. What is crucial, Hamid's work seems to imply, is how we understand our relative position within a global schema. Or, to put it another way: the efficacy of our cognitive maps.

## 5. Conclusion

Mohsin Hamid's novels are part of a growing body of literature that seeks to comprehend and illuminate the imperial economic forces that structure the world system, and our lives. They are at once intimately personal, concerned with the quotidian yet vastly influential forces of love, of family, of jobs, of heritage, of hopes and aspirations; and at the same time, they are mindful, reflective, and yes, critical of the vast superstructures that shape our world. It is perhaps the unique power of art, and particularly of literature, to serve this double function. Reading Hamid's novels, we as readers can assume a double identity: we are ourselves, and can recognize our own world in the worlds of his fiction. The middle-class banker of modest but sufficient means whose life is upended by an ill-advised affair and a slow descent from recreational drug use to outright abuse and dependency (*Moth Smoke*). The eager over-achiever desperate to prove his value and worth to the elite who run the system, a system that he ultimately rejects altogether (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*). The poor boy with big dreams who actually succeeds in achieving those dreams, only to realize that the dream is not really what he wanted to begin with, not at all (*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*). The young man or young woman trying to carve out a place in the world, but learning that it is the world that dictates your place in it, and not the other way round (*Exit West*).

But Hamid's work also challenges us, as American readers, to close the pages of his novels and look at our reality with new eyes. Hamid challenges our comfortable position as conforming actors within an imperial hierarchy, within a capitalist world system; he asks us to see the world through the lens of the foreigner, the immigrant, the refugee.

In Hamid's novels, it is not just that we, as readers, are being 'hailed.' It is not merely an acknowledgment of our existence. When we are addressed as "you," when we are included in the

narrative as “we,” we are being told who or what we are: a reader, or an American, a part of the “empire” or one sympathetic to those who suffer at the hands of it. It is an uncomfortable position, sometimes, to be addressed as such. We are forced to consider ourselves as active participants, rather than passive observers, of an interconnected imperial network. But in order to triangulate ourselves in something as complicated as a “superstructure of capitalist forces”—or even in a world as small as our own homes—this outside perspective is essential. With these four novels, Mohsin Hamid answers Robbins’s call for “better maps, more complex and more reliable global positioning systems,” and does him one better. He has fashioned a map of a globalized world that shows the reader: you are here.

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