

# Doors and Divergent Paths: Escape from War Zone to Liminality in the Surreal Space of *Exit West*

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## Abstract

In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid constructs a unique geography of exile through mysterious doors that connect spaces of war with spaces of surreal. Framed by the juxtaposition of these spaces, this paper focuses on protagonist Saeed's escape path traversing these doors. It analyzes how his trajectory—from the blood-soaked battlegrounds to the ordered utopia of the West—constitutes a liminal experience. The violence endemic to the war-torn space stands in sharp opposition to the alienation pervading the surreal space. Functioning simultaneously as a physical passageway and a psychological fissure, the door both enables a privileged escape and remains an unhealable symbol of trauma. By deconstructing the duality of the door and the paradoxical nature of the exile path, this paper critiques the Western-centric myth of salvation inherent in traditional exile narratives. It elucidates how Hamid employs spatial politics to rewrite the global refugee epic.

## Keywords

Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*, Liminality, Magic realism, Exile, Magic doors

## Introduction

Mohsin Hamid's novels, through the innovative deployment of the core motif of doors, expand the narrative boundaries of magical realism and construct a distinctive paradigm of liminal writing. Unlike the geographically rooted magical elements in Latin American magical realism traditions, Hamid directly implants surreal elements into a globalized context. Doors—whether bedroom doors or elevator doors—maintain their mundane material qualities while simultaneously manifesting surreal characteristics.

This dual encoding of material reality not only perpetuates magical realism's aesthetic principle of "treating the marvelous as mundane" (*Prólogo El Reino de Este Mundo* 437) but also transcends traditional geographical constraints.

In canonical magical realist works - such as the levitation scene in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Borges' *The Book of Sand* - the surreal elements are typically anchored in specific cultural contexts, forming self-contained symbolic systems. Hamid's doors, however, ruptured this geographical insularity, enabling the war in Kabul and London's migrant crisis to resonate on the same narrative plane.

When refugees traverse these liminal passages, they neither completely sever ties with their homeland's traumatic memories nor fully assimilate into the new social order. This perpetual state of transition creates a unique liminal space—neither pure physical reality nor complete magical fantasy, but rather an interstitial zone where both interpenetrate.

Doors cease to function as static regional symbols, instead of becoming magical metaphors for human mobility in the globalized era [1].

## Paths of Exile

In *Exit West*, the trajectory of exile is far from a conventional geographical migration route; rather, it is imbued with rich magical realism and profound symbolic significance, constituting a pivotal element in the heterogeneous construction of liminal space. Hamid deconstructs the linear narrative of refugee migration through the juxtaposition of traditional exile paths and magical doors, transforming geographical displacement into a liminal experience that reveals the complex psychological world and existential conditions of displaced individuals [2].

The war destroys Saeed and Nadia's hometown, forcing them to seek out the mystery door to exile for safety. In the novel, their hometown is portrayed as a bustling city not yet ravaged by full-scale war: "it boasts towering buildings, lush parks, cafés, burger joints, and Chinese restaurants, yet religious norms forbid public displays of affection between unrelated men and women". As the war intensifies, "the home she had forsaken looked deserted. When she visited again it was gone, unrecognizable, the building crushed by the force of a bomb that weighed as much as a compact automobile"; moreover, "the executions moved in waves, bodies hanging from streetlamps and billboards like a form of festive seasonal decoration". The city transforms from home to battlefield, which reflects the liminal state of survival. The rumor of the door appears as the war rages, and the traditional path of exile, such as land or sea, is replaced by a magical passageway, foreshadowing a reversal of spatial logic. Fortunately, they escape through the magical door, embarking on their prolonged exile filled with both joy and suffering.

After traversing the magical door, the protagonists Saeed and Nadia enter a fantastical journey through interwoven, multidimensional spaces. Saeed and Nadia's journey westward through the magical door, seeking refuge in three destinations: the Greek island of Mykonos, London in England, and finally Marin County in California's San Francisco Bay Area. These three cities are not only geographical coordinates, but also different forms of liminal space, corresponding to the dialectical processes of deconstruction, transition and reconstruction of exiled identities [3].

Saeed and Nadia pass through the first door to Mykonos. "They emerged in a bathroom, and found themselves between two low buildings, perceiving a sound like a shell held to their ears and feeling a cold breeze on their faces and smelling brine in the air and they looked and saw a stretch of sand and low gray waves coming in". Mykonos, a great draw for tourists in the summer, it also has a large influx of immigrants of all colors and shades of skin, so that immigrant camps are everywhere, and Saeed and Nadia live in one of these camps. The refugee camp is like a makeshift bazaar, full of transactions and struggles for survival, "The camp was in some ways like a trading post in an old-time gold rush, and much was for sale or barter, from sweaters to mobile phones to

antibiotics to, quietly, sex and drugs", making the two feel depressed and uncomfortable. Although the island's old town is elegant and beautiful, with white buildings with blue windows, scattered along the tawny hills that pour down to the sea, Saeed and Nadia are forbidden to enter the old town at night because of their immigration status, and even during the day, their access to it is impeded, so they can only look out from the outskirts of the old town, where they can see the little windmills, the round churches, and the vibrant greenery. The island serves as a transition zone between geography and politics, country of origin or destination-where the identity of migrants hangs in the liminal space [4].

Nadia's tourist mentality to explore the island versus Saeed's refugee mentality to stay in the camp exemplifies the difference in liminal experiences. Nadia intentionally reconstructs the experience of exile from the perspective of a tourist, transforming the plight of refugee camps into an aesthetic observation of exotic landscapes. "Nadia had the idea that they should explore the island as if they were tourists". They decided that Mykonos was indeed a beautiful place, and they could understand why people might come here. By positioning oneself as a tourist rather than a refugee, she reconfigures the spatial significance of exile: beaches and cliffs are no longer geographical markers of distress, but aesthetic landscapes. This performative gesture of "as if" is essentially a resistance to the passive identity of the refugee, just as the antagonistic identity she constructs through the motorbike and the black robe.

In sharp contrast is Saeed's anxious refugee mentality: He is stressful about the multilingual environment around him, his blind trust in smugglers exposes his desire for a stable path, and the metaphor of a failed fishing trip reveals the utter failure of his attempts to re-establish order through the traditionally male role as the supplier reveals the utter failure of his attempts to re-establish order through traditional male roles in the liminal space [5]. This differentiation not only confirms Turner's theory on the difference of liminal experiences, but also, through gendered spatial practices-Nadia's mobility and Saeed's immobility-it also deconstructs the singular image of the sufferer in traditional exile narratives, demonstrating the profound exploration of the complex subjectivity of the exile in Hamid's magical realist writing.

Through the door, Saeed and Nadia migrate to London, only to discover that the city is not the paradise of freedom they imagine, but a modern concentration camp where spatial disciplines squeeze the exiles to the periphery. Hamid reveals the dual strategies of receiving countries towards migrants: ostensible humanitarian accommodation and substantive spatial segregation. London is constructed as a post-colonial liminal space full of tension. It is both a promised land where the protagonist seeks refuge and a site of new forms of exclusion.

In the novel, London is home to millions of immigrants from all over the world who speak a myriad of languages, including Nigerians, Somalis, people born on the border between Burma and Thailand, Sudanese, and Hondurans. They share mansions in Kensington with other migrants, forming temporary communities [6]. Similar immigrant colonies have sprung up across London, which the media have called “black holes in the fabric of the nation”. They notice that the city of London had been divided by government officials into two types of areas, a bright London where residents could “dine in elegant restaurants, ride in shiny black cabs, at least go to the office to work, go to the stores to buy things, and travel wherever they wanted” and a dark London where “rubbish was piled up, no one cleaned up, the Tube was closed, and loud trains were running”. In the liminal space of London, the dominant society consolidates its identity by other exiles. As illegal immigrants, Saeed and Nadia’s life in London is not as pleasant as they thought it would be, despite being in one of the most progressive cities in the world, where only violent xenophobia and ruthless deportation await them.

In exile in London, Saeed and Nadia’s liminal identities begin to diverge. Saeed’s liminal identity exhibits an inward conservative flow. During his exile in London, he gradually becomes attracted to the religious community of his fellow immigrants and tries to counteract the anxiety of dissipating his identity by returning to his traditions [7]. The novel describes that “He was moved by the words of the man with the white-marked beard advocating a banding together of migrants along religious principles”. This reliance on the religious community fixes his identity within the framework of the Muslims of the homeland.

Contrasting with that of Saeed is the fluidity of Nadia’s

identity. Her liminal identity exhibits an outward expansiveness that manifests in the rejection of any fixed identity labels. Even in London, she still insists on wearing her black robes, but gives a whole new meaning to the symbol: “She still wore her black robes not for religion, but to signal her refusal to be defined”. This reinterpretation of the black robe symbolizes her active control of the liminal state.

The relationship between the two men itself becomes an excellent metaphor for liminality. Despite sharing the journey of exile, their differences in values ultimately lead to a spiritual estrangement. The novel describes, “They slept on the narrow cot without touching”. Despite their physical proximity, there is a long way off mentally.

Marin, a small city bordering the Pacific Ocean in the San Francisco Bay area of the United States, home to Silicon Valley, is the third destination for Saeed and Nadia after traveling a third of the way across the globe. With the global wave of immigration, they leave London for Marin, one of the new Halo cities for immigrants. “It was here that Saeed and Nadia found themselves in those warmer months, in one of the worker camps, laboring away, using their labor to fight for their place in the city”. It is a city where there is no clear distinction between immigrants and natives, where the two men believe there will be a promising future, and where there is a combination or mixture of “people and people, people and electronics, dark skin and light skin, shiny metal and matte plastic”. Ironically, the relationship between the two of them, built up as lovers from the city of their birth, gradually degenerates into that of friends and passers-by, until they finally break up and go their separate ways. Enhanced by the policy of forty meters and a pipe and the exchange of labor for residency, the manual work adapts them physically but gradually alienates them mentally. When Saeed learns of his father’s death, his religious leanings diverge from Nadia’s secular views, and the long immigration experience changes each other’s perspectives, and the love fades. As the days gradually get better, Saeed and Nadia, who have been through dark times together, now look at each other differently, and their relationship is not what it used to be. By analyzing the liminal writing of the path of exile in *Exit West*, it is evident that Hamid has constructed a field of identity transition full of contradictory tensions by

means of magical realism. Saeed and Nadia's experience of exile not only presents the displacement of geographic space, but also profoundly reveals the complex mobility of the immigrants in the dimensions of cultural identity, religious beliefs and gender concepts, etc. Saeed's conservative identity contrasts sharply with Nadia's subjective consciousness of mobility, and their differences ultimately lead to the paradoxical situation of shared exile but spiritual alienation.

### **Magic doors**

In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid constructs a unique liminal space through the surreal imagery of the door, which not only connects the physical war-torn city with the destination of exile, but also becomes a symbolic passageway in the process of the refugees' identity transformation. The appearance of the door breaks the boundary between reality and magic, so that exile is no longer restricted by the traditional geographical limitations but becomes an instantaneous and unpredictable spatial transition [8]. This setting not only embodies the narrative characteristics of magical realism but also profoundly reveals the mobility and uncertainty of migrants in the era of globalization and the political metaphors behind them.

The door has a dual attribute, a suture between reality and magic. The door is both a concrete physical passage and an abstract symbol in the novel. It appears abruptly in everyday spaces, such as bathrooms, basements, and abandoned buildings, and exists in the form of a rectangle of complete darkness, which is both illogical and the only hope for refugees to escape. For example, the door through which Nadia and Saeed first cross is in an abandoned clinic on the Greek island of Mykonos, which appears without warning but becomes the key to their journey to London. This setting blurs the boundaries between the real and the surreal, making the door the central vehicle of the magical realist narrative.

At the same time, the door functions beyond the geographical barriers of traditional migration narratives, such as border checks and stowaway boats, and it makes exile an instantaneous and uncontrollable spatial transition. While in the real world, migrants often must go through long journeys and heavy barriers, the door in the novel directly dissolves this process, making the refugee's identity transition more abrupt and full of unknowns. This setting not only enhances the magic of

the narrative but also metaphorically illustrates the unpredictability of migratory flows in the age of globalization [9].

The liminality of the door is reflected in the physical and psychological experience of travelling through it. As the characters pass through the door, they experience a transitional state of being lost, which corresponds closely to what anthropologist Victor Turner's anti-structure, which states "the liminal phase is not only a transition, but also a reverse testing ground for social structures, exposing and mitigating structural contradictions through anti-structure" (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* 36). According to Turner, the liminal stage is an intermediate state in which an individual transitions from one social identity to another, and is characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty and a temporary suspension of identity. The sense of suffocation, vertigo and rebirth that Nadia and Saeed feel when crossing the gate is the very embodiment of this liminal experience.

Furthermore, the randomness of the door reinforces the refugees' sense of out-of-control for the future. They cannot predict whether the other end of the door is safe or dangerous, just as the reality of refugees cannot guarantee their fate after exile. In the novel, when Saeed and Nadia first hear about the existence of the door, the door is described as an unpredictable passage that could lead anywhere and could even be controlled by militants. This uncertainty makes them hesitate about whether to escape through the door: "The doors were everywhere but finding one the militants had not yet found, a door not yet guarded, that was the trick and might take a while". Moreover, the door is irreversible. Once pass through, one can't look back, this irreversibility deepens their uncertainty about the future.

The door, as a liminal passage, increases the irreversibility of the survival dilemma of the liminal individual in the liminal space. Saeed and Nadia flee through the door to London, but the irreversibility of the door makes them deeply aware that their identities, their relatives and even their past were completely broken. This separation is not only reflected in geographical location but also aggravates their loneliness psychologically and emotionally. Although the door provides an opportunity to escape, it also means a permanent farewell. Saeed's father refuses to go with them and chooses to stay in his hometown to accompany

his deceased wife's grave, while Saeed and Nadia know that once they leave, they will never be able to go back: "No one returning through a door who is known to have fled their rule is allowed to live". In London, Saeed learns that his father dies of pneumonia and that he cannot even attend a funeral or memorial service. This physical isolation makes his sense of loneliness even more profound: "Saeed did not know how to mourn, how to express his remorse, from so great a distance". The death of his father not only symbolizes the complete breakdown of the family but also means that Saeed lost the last emotional bond with his hometown. In London, they are neither regarded as true British nor can they return to their original identities. The door separated them from their original social structure, but did not integrate into the new world, "They were neither here nor there, no longer from their homeland but not yet of their new one".

This suspension of identity makes them psychologically drifting, aggravating the feeling of loneliness. Exile life in London is full of hostility, they are isolated in dark London, in stark contrast to the natives, "In dark London, rubbish accrued, uncollected, and underground stations were sealed", this physical isolation symbolizes that they are marginalized by society, further deepening the sense of alienation. Under the pressure of exile, Saeed and Nadia grow estranged, gradually moving in separate directions: Saeed tries to find a sense of belonging through religious and fellow citizens, but finds himself neither fully identified with the radicals nor integrated into London society; while Nadia is more independent and refuses to be defined by any group, but feels lonelier because of this.

Eventually, their relationship gradually collapsed due to the loneliness in liminal space, "They no longer touched each other when they lay in bed, not in that way". The door gives Saeed and Nadia a chance to survive but also makes them lose their hometown forever. They are no longer people from their hometowns, but they cannot truly become part of the new world. This double break kept them in their exile life in London and ultimately affected their relationship and personal identity [10].

Besides, as a supernatural passageway, the door is both a symbol of hope and a harbinger of danger in liminal space. They provide people in war, poverty or oppression with the possibility of escape, but at the same time push

them toward new uncertainty and violence. These doors are not simple transmission devices, but metaphors of the immigration dilemma in the era of globalization-behind opportunities to cross geographical boundaries, more complex risks are often hidden. On the one hand, the door provides the possibility of changing one's destiny for those trapped in despair. In the novel, the Tamil family entered Dubai's luxury residential area through the door, and although eventually discovered and expelled by security personnel, that moment of contact allowed them to see a completely different world. Similarly, a mother in Tijuana, Mexico, picked up her daughter from an orphanage through the door, making up for the flaws of being forced to separate due to economic immigration.

These fragments show that the door can break down physical and social barriers and provide a brief but precious respite for marginalized people. On the other hand, the door is that it may push people to deeper crises. An African man in Sydney struggled to climb out of the black hole in his wardrobe, facing a strange and heavily guarded Western family. His choice to escape silently rather than confrontation or plundering suggests his fear of unknown circumstances-the other end of the door may be more dangerous than the world he flees from. In London, Nigerian immigrants occupied local mansions through doors and enjoyed asylum for a short time but soon faced a military clearance. The emergence of the door does not change the power structure but instead makes them the target of state violence. This contradiction reveals the real dilemma of immigration: even if they cross geographical boundaries, they may still be rejected or even suppressed by a new social order.

In *Exit West*, the door is not only a tool for plot advancement, but also a core narrative strategy used by Hamid to construct liminal space. By analyzing the narrative function of the door, one can gain a deeper understanding of how it creates a liminal state that is neither here nor there, which is not only embodied in spatial transitions, but also permeates multiple dimensions such as temporal experience, identity and collective memory. Victor Turner defines liminality as "the intermediate stage in the rites of transition" (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* 43), characterized by ambiguity, temporality, and anti-structure. In the novel, each appearance of the door creates a typical liminal zone: "They stand in front of the

door, and the darkness is so complete that it seems that even time stops. After one step, they are already half outside the world". This instantaneous shift in space not only breaks geographical continuity but also suspends linear time. Now of travelling through the door, the characters are in a kind of spatial and temporal vacuum; they have neither left the point of origin nor arrived at their destination. This experience perfectly reproduces what Turner calls the liminal individual, who has lost their original identity but has not yet acquired a new one.

### Conclusion

This paper offers an in-depth analysis of how the work depicts the protagonists' flight against the backdrop of raging warfare. By constructing intricate paths of exile and introducing surreal spaces represented by mysterious doors, the novel reveals the protagonists' escape journey alongside profound struggles with survival, identity, and spiritual crisis, while uncovering the liminal choices inherent in this spatial narrative. The exile paths are not clear or safe passages but rather uncertain, perilous, and forked roads fraught with ambiguity and danger. Symbolizing the protagonists' struggle for survival in extreme circumstances, each step involves life-or-death decisions marked by contingency, coercion, and immense psychological pressure. The winding, repetitive, and circuitous nature of these paths vividly reflects the fugitive's inner turmoil, fear, and quest for an unknown fate. Beyond mere physical trajectories, they serve as core spatial images mirroring the brutality of war, individual fragility, and the will to survive. The recurring motif of mysterious doors often appears abruptly at critical junctures or dead ends along these escape routes. Both the doors and the spaces beyond them bear strong elements of magical realism: they may lead to depths of memory, subconscious illusions, symbolic realms, or purely irrational dimensions. Therefore, the doors and forked paths are not merely spatial images but also the key to deciphering the core themes of *Exit West*: flight amid war, the dilemmas of survival, the liminal crossings of the spirit, and the contingency of fate.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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