


Chapter 11

Forced Migration and the Empowering Potential of Exile in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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ABSTRACT

Hamid's Exit West and Hosseini's The Kite Runner present an exquisitely artistic snapshot of forced migration and its corollary border crossings. In both narratives, the characters inhabit a world in which they are fettered by forces beyond their control. Forced out of their homeland, the protagonists scrape their way to exile in quest not only of a safe haven, but also of a new beginning. While diverse academic studies equate displacement with alienation and uprootedness, this chapter gestures toward the beyond and investigates the empowering dimension of exile. Exit West foregrounds the surreal, yet evocative, mechanism of magical doors, symbolizing the fluidity of borders. Conversely, Hosseini's metaphorical reference to The Kite Runner as 'a true story' confers a realistic touch on a fictional landscape where identity reconstruction is set against the backdrop of mobility. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach inspired by Postcolonial and Diaspora studies, the study examines how both texts explore the transformative power of exile.

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INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century's unprecedented surge in forced migration has significantly altered individual and collective identities. Migration studies have long been concerned with themes of loss, alienation, and uprootedness, dwelling more on the adverse impacts of mobility. By the early 1980s, refugee and forced migration issues had acquired salience due to the protracted situation of refugees in many parts of the world such as "South-East Asia, Pakistan and Iran, the Horn of Africa, Southern Africa, and Mexico," and as a result of the increasing numbers of those seeking asylum in Europe and North America (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014, p.2).

Mobility has always been a contentious and debatable topic among academics. Recent literary representations of displacement, for instance, problematize exile, and characterize it as a potential site of agency, transformation, and empowerment. Nail (2015) revisits such concepts as "the nomad" and recontextualizes them in contemporary migration studies, contesting Hegel (1840) and Toynbee's (1934) exclusion of nomadism from the written history of the state. Hamid's (2017) *Exit West* and Hosseini's (2003) *The Kite Runner* lend credence to Nail's (2015) re-theorization of mobility as they transcend the view that forced migration is always tantamount to the turbulent experience of alienation and loss, rethinking its significance beyond the conventional tropes of victimhood and dislocation. This chapter proposes a critical reflection on both texts to reconceptualize exile not as a purely disempowering experience, but as a space of possible growth, mobility, and identity reconstruction. To develop this statement, these questions are addressed: 1) How do *Exit West* and *The Kite Runner* reimagine exile outside the confines of conventional narratives of displacement? 2) How do the characters cope with the turbulence of forced migration and turn it into an eye-opening and empowering experience? 3) How does Hamid's (2017) surrealistic storytelling compare with Hosseini's (2003) realistic account in characterizing exile as an ambivalent yet potentially empowering experience?

The main purpose of this study is to interrogate the dominant representation of exile in terms of dislocation and rootlessness by demonstrating how both novels negotiate the possibility of agency within displacement. The chapter seeks to contribute to existing academic research on migration studies by highlighting the indeterminacy of exile and the undecidability of its meaning. It is an interdisciplinary endeavor which draws critical insights from postcolonial, diaspora and migration studies. The analysis initiates a dialogue with the critical perspectives and conceptual formulations drawn from these disciplines in order to critically engage with the notions of home, identity, and belonging. Through a close reading of the literary text, the study juxtaposes Hamid (2017) and Hosseini's (2003) narratives, and reflects on their treatment of exile outside the ambit of loss and fragmentation. The speculative elements in *Exit West*, including its magical doors, are handled as

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