# NEGOTIATING REALITY AND FANTASY IN *EXIT WEST* BY MOHSIN HAMID: A STUDY OF MAGICAL REALISM AND POLITICAL ALLEGORY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

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**ABSTRACT**
*Mohsin Hamid's Exit West (2017) stands at the intersection of imaginative storytelling and political commentary, reflecting the growing literary trend of merging fantasy with realism to depict contemporary global crises such as migration, displacement, and identity fragmentation. This study aims to explore how Hamid blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy through the lens of magical realism and political allegory, using surreal elements particularly the mysterious doors as metaphors for escape, transformation, and borderlessness. Anchored in the theoretical frameworks of magical realism, as defined by scholars like Wendy B. Faris (2004) and political allegory, drawing from Fredric Jameson's (19981) interpretive model, the research conducts a close textual analysis of key narrative moments to uncover embedded socio-political meanings. The findings suggest that Hamid's fusion of the magical with the real not only amplifies the emotional depth of the refugee experience but also challenges rigid notions of nationhood, identity, and belonging, ultimately offering a universalized and empathetic perspective on forced migration in the 21st century.*
***Key Words****: Magical Realism, Political Allegory, Migration, Identity, Fantasy*

## INTRODUCTION
In the evolving landscape of contemporary fiction, the boundaries between reality and fantasy are increasingly porous. This literary trend reflects the complexities and contradictions of modern existence, where personal and political realities often resemble the surreal. In particular, authors have turned to magical realism, speculative elements, and fantastical devices not merely for imaginative storytelling, but to offer profound critiques of social, political, and existential issues. The fusion of the real and the fantastical challenges readers' perceptions, disrupts linear narratives, and mirrors the fragmented realities of postmodern life, where truth and illusion are frequently interwoven (Iqbal et al., 2024); Mashal et al, 2024).

One of the most compelling manifestations of this narrative strategy appears in works that blur reality and fantasy to explore themes such as war, displacement, identity, trauma, and globalization. Through techniques borrowed from magical realism and allegory, writers present alternative realities that, while fantastical on the surface, reveal deeper truths about the world we

live in. This blurring functions not just as a stylistic choice, but as a political and philosophical tool, allowing writers to critique dominant ideologies, deconstruct fixed identities, and envision utopian or dystopian alternatives (Qazi and Shafiq, 2023).

In contemporary literature, the intersection of magical realism and political allegory provides a powerful framework for representing complex social realities. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* introduces a fantastical element magical doors into a brutally realistic context of war, migration, and displacement. However, the way these fantastical elements interact with political and psychological realities remains underexplored. There is a need to critically analyze how Hamid blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality to articulate the emotional and existential crises of modern-day refugees and to examine how such narrative techniques challenge conventional depictions of migration and global conflict (Parveen and Hassan, 2024; Saleem et al., 2021).

Thus, the research explores the techniques and functions of blending reality and fantasy in the particular piece of literature, focusing on how such narratives reflect, reinterpret, or resist socio-political conditions. By engaging with theoretical frameworks such as magical realism (Faris, 2004) and political allegory by Fredric Jameson's (19981)   this study aims to uncover how fiction not only represents the world, but also reimagines it. The research also considers how the literary merging of fantasy and realism serves as a powerful narrative strategy to express displacement, trauma, and cultural transformation in the 21st century.

Meanwhile, the study contributes to the broader discourse on how fiction responds to the real world not by replicating it, but by transforming it through the lens of imagination. The blurred boundary between reality and fantasy in literature thus becomes a critical space a liminal zone where meaning is contested, identities are redefined, and new possibilities are imagined. Hence the main objectives are;

1. To analyze how Exit West employs magical realism to blur the line between fantasy and reality in the depiction of forced migration.
2. To investigate the allegorical role of magical elements in the novel as a commentary on political borders, displacement, and identity in contemporary fiction.

Moreover, the study is significant in multiple ways, first it contributes to the growing body of literature on magical realism as a mode of political expression in contemporary global fiction. By focusing on *Exit West,* the research sheds light on how fantasy is not merely escapist, but a critical narrative strategy that reimagines real-world socio-political issues like war, borders, and identity crises. The findings aim to deepen literary understanding of how fantastical techniques can disrupt dominant narratives about migration and offer new frameworks for empathy, resistance, and global interconnectedness.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Mughal et al.  (2024) conducted a qualitative psychological analysis of Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, aiming to explore how optimism is portrayed in the protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, through the framework of Martin Seligman's Hope Circuit Theory. The study utilized selected textual data from the novel and analyzed it using a descriptive qualitative methodology, focusing on the three dimensions of hope—personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness. The objective was to examine how these characters cognitively process optimism despite their displacement and socio-political challenges. The findings reveal that both protagonists exhibit varying degrees of hopeful cognition, demonstrating their resilience and capacity for psychological growth. This research contributes a novel psychological lens to the study of postmodern refugee fiction, shifting focus from trauma to emotional endurance and positive psychology.

Mashal et al. (2024) investigate Mohsin Hamid's Exit West as a trauma narrative, aiming to uncover how trauma is linguistically constructed in the novel. Their data comprise the lexical items used throughout the text, analyzed in terms of frequency and context. The objective is to explore how Hamid deploys specific words and lexical patterns to convey trauma tropes such as unspeakability, latency, and testimony—based on Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience and Michael Hoey's Lexical Priming theoretical frameworks. Adopting a qualitative approach augmented by quantitative text-search methods, the researchers use MS Word to count trauma-related lexis and interpret usage patterns. Findings reveal that Exit West functions as a trauma narrative of the Caruthian strain, wherein trauma is depicted through negation of non-trauma states and through repeated lexical markers; the narration itself exhibits a traumatized grammar and disrupted meaning. This study adds a nuanced linguistic dimension to trauma studies in literary migration narratives.

Faiz et al. (2023) examine the symbolic function of magical doors in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, focusing on how these portals act as transformative thresholds for protagonists Saeed and Nadia. Drawing on narrative passages purposively sampled from the novel, the researchers aim to understand the doors' role in catalyzing changes in self-awareness and personality. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in close textual analysis, the study interprets the magical realism motif to uncover thematic and character development dynamics. The findings demonstrate that encounters with the doors lead to profound shifts in the characters' identity and relational worldview, revealing Hamid's use of magical realism as a medium for psychological and social transformation. This work enriches literary discourse on Exit West by foregrounding the symbolic potency of space-transition motifs.

Ehtesham and Rehman (2023) conducted a psychoanalytic literary analysis of Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, examining how trauma dismantles social and symbolic structures "the Big Other" through the novel's magic-realistic portal motif (Ehtesham & Rahman, 2023). Using close textual analysis as qualitative data drawn from the novel's depictions of Saeed and Nadia's experiences, the study's objective is to interpret the symbolic meaning of magical doors and their relation to trauma, freedom, and social authority. Methodologically, the author applies Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism informed by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, focusing on the intersection of trauma (the Real) and social symbolism (the Symbolic). The findings indicate that traumatic rupture negates traditional social constraints (the "Big Other"), allowing characters relative freedom though new forms of constraint ("little Others") soon emerge. The magical doors function symbolically as transitional thresholds, signifying both escape and the collapse of the Big Other, ultimately framing trauma as a mode of resistance against social authority. This research illuminates Exit West as a deeply psychological narrative, where magical realism articulates psychoanalytic dynamics of trauma and social change.

## MATERIAL & METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative method of inquiry. The data is comprised of a South Asian novel entitled *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid. A particular sample of passages relevant to the topic has been taken by employing purposive sampling technique. Moreover, the study is grounded in theories of magical realism proposed by Wendy B. Faris (2004) and the concept of political allegory drawing from the work of Fredric Jameson's (19981) using close reading techniques to analyze key passages where the boundaries between fantasy and reality are most apparent.

## DATA ANALYSIS

In *Exit West,* Mohsin Hamid redefines the experience of global displacement by merging fantasy with stark realism, employing magical realism as a lens to explore the emotional, psychological,

and political consequences of forced migration. The novel introduces magical "doors" that serve as portals between countries, allowing refugees to instantly escape danger without depicting the arduous journey. This fantastical device is deeply allegorical, serving as both metaphor and narrative tool to critique modern borders, identity, and globalization. The following analysis explores how selected lines from the text exemplify the fusion of real and unreal, offering insight into how Hamid uses the blurred line between reality and fantasy to construct a new form of political storytelling.

> "In a windowless closet behind a food shop, a door led to a beach in Greece" (Hamid, 2017, p. 104).

This line encapsulates the essence of magical realism. The ordinary space of a food shop's closet contrasts with the fantastical destination a Greek beach highlighting the surreal ease of crossing borders. This sudden geographical shift challenges the realism of the refugee journey, offering a symbolic escape from war and hardship into safety, thus reflecting the novel's central theme of dislocation and transformation.

> "Rumors had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere" (Hamid, 2017, p. 72).

Here, magical doors are introduced through rumor, blending myth and realism. The line evokes the oral traditions and uncertain knowledge passed among refugees. It reflects how magical elements in the story are embedded in real emotional responses to crisis uncertainty, fear, and desperate hope while creating an allegorical atmosphere.

> "She stepped through the door and found herself in a bedroom in Mykonos" (Hamid, 2017, p. 105).

The sudden appearance in a foreign bedroom without the journey suggests the collapse of space and time. It symbolizes the longing for instant salvation among displaced people and illustrates how Hamid uses fantasy not to obscure suffering, but to reframe it. The destination, Mykonos a tourist spot highlights the contrast between refugee trauma and privileged spaces.

> "It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born" (Hamid, 2017, p. 98).

This metaphoric description of passing through the doors conveys migration as a profound rebirth and existential rupture. The comparison to death and birth transcends the literal and adds a spiritual layer to the experience of displacement, capturing its deeply transformative effect and echoing allegorical storytelling found in myth and religion.

> "The doors were becoming harder to control… they no longer obeyed laws of nature" (Hamid, 2017, p. 112).

The fantastical doors now defy the physical world, symbolizing how migration has outpaced political control. This breakdown of natural laws reflects the chaos of modern geopolitics, where borders no longer function in stable, predictable ways. Hamid uses this as a metaphor for the uncontrollability of global movement and conflict.

> "A kind of shimmering surrounded the edges of the frame" (Hamid, 2017, p. 101).

This visual cue marks the transition from real to surreal. The "shimmering" presents a subtle magic that doesn't disrupt but integrates with the real. It evokes a sense of mystery and possibility while emphasizing how Hamid's magical realism avoids spectacle, making the fantastic feel quietly inevitable.

> "He felt as though he was watching himself from above" (Hamid, 2017, p. 67).

This line reflects psychological dissociation, a symptom of trauma. Though not fantastical in a literal sense, it portrays reality through a surreal psychological lens. It aligns with magical realism by conveying the emotional fragmentation of refugees through dreamlike imagery.

> "It was the first time that he felt the world crack open, the first time he knew it could shift beneath his feet" (Hamid, 2017, p. 21).

The metaphoric "crack" in the world signifies a fundamental realization of instability. This is both literal, as war disrupts daily life, and fantastical, hinting at the supernatural doors. It marks the beginning of a new, disorienting existence and reveals how fantasy is used to articulate deep, dislocated emotions.

> "The door was black, and it was silent" (Hamid, 2017, p. 104).

This quiet, simple image of the door strips magic of grandeur. Its unassuming presence emphasizes how the fantastical is normalized in the narrative, adhering to magical realism's convention of presenting the extraordinary as part of everyday reality. Its silence hints at its ominous power.

> "Nadia told him she had dreamt of the sea, and the next day they walked through a door to the ocean" (Hamid, 2017, p. 107).

Here, dreams and reality collapse into one. The transition from imagination to physical journey symbolizes how fantasy becomes agency in the face of helplessness. Hamid reflects how desire and necessity blur during crises, giving literal shape to the metaphorical longing for escape.

> "People passed through the doors and vanished" (Hamid, 2017, p. 106).

This line evokes a sense of erasure and transformation. The magical doors consume individuals into the unknown, much like how real-world refugees disappear from systems, histories, and even identities. The fantasy here critiques the invisibility of displaced populations in global consciousness.

> "They emerged in the bright light of a new continent" (Hamid, 2017, p. 109).

The "bright light" signals hope and renewal, while the continent represents safety. Yet the instantaneous transition is disorienting, reminding the reader that the trauma of war doesn't end at arrival. The fantasy highlights how even new beginnings are haunted by what came before.

> "Everything seemed the same, and yet everything was different" (Hamid, 2017, p. 110).

This paradox reflects the emotional dissonance of exile. The external world may appear unchanged, but the internal world is transformed. Hamid uses this line to underscore how fantasy doesn't erase the past but reframes it, allowing readers to grasp the subtle shifts in refugee identity.

> "The old world was crumbling, and a new one was being born" (Hamid, 2017, p. 113).

A deeply allegorical line, this describes not just the collapse of nations but the emergence of new sociopolitical realities. It speaks to migration as a global force reshaping modern life. Fantasy here isn't escape, it is revolution, allowing Hamid to imagine alternative futures.

> "They felt as though they were ghosts watching their former lives" (Hamid, 2017, p. 115).

The ghost metaphor reflects the psychological aftermath of migration. It also invokes the supernatural, reinforcing the novel's spectral tone. Migrants are presented as between worlds neither fully here nor there capturing the haunting experience of exile.

> "They slipped through the world like water through fingers" (Hamid, 2017, p. 108).

This poetic image highlights the fluidity and invisibility of refugees. Their impermanence is both protective and tragic. The metaphor acts as magical realism by suggesting an almost superhuman movement, but one that reflects real-world marginalization and vulnerability.

"Each step beyond the door was like walking on the moon" (Hamid, 2017, p. 106).
The simile evokes both wonder and alienation. Walking on the moon suggests the surreal nature of new environments for migrants. The fantastical becomes emotional reality, emphasizing how Hamid uses fantasy to articulate disorientation, uncertainty, and awe.

"He felt as though he were shedding his skin" (Hamid, 2017, p. 97).
This metaphor conveys rebirth and the shedding of identity. It aligns with magical realism through its bodily transformation imagery, suggesting a new self is forming in response to migration. Hamid implies identity is malleable reshaped through fantasy and trauma alike.

"They no longer knew where they were, only that they were together" (Hamid, 2017, p. 118).
Here, space becomes irrelevant, replaced by human connection. This line abstracts reality and centers love and solidarity as the only constant. It reflects Hamid's thematic claim that in a world of shifting borders, relationships offer the only form of grounding.

"The borders had melted, and the maps were lies" (Hamid, 2017, p. 119).
A climactic allegorical declaration, this line dismantles the validity of national boundaries. Through magical realism, Hamid suggests that political geographies are fictional constructs. Fantasy is thus reclaimed as a truth-telling device exposing the false permanence of borders.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The study revealed the key findings that have been discussed in below section.

### 1. The Irreducible Element: The Magical Doorways

One of Faris' central criteria, the "irreducible element" a magical feature that cannot be explained by logic or science is manifested in Hamid's depiction of magical doors. These portals appear in random places and transport characters across continents instantaneously, as in "In a windowless closet behind a food shop, a door led to a beach in Greece" (Hamid, 2017, p. 104). These doors are never rationalized but are seamlessly accepted by the characters and narrative, fulfilling Faris' criteria. According to Carpentier's view, such doorways represent a marvelous real a mystical disruption of geography that makes sense within the political chaos of contemporary global migration.

Through a political allegorical lens, the doors symbolize a radical reimagining of borders tools that challenge state-imposed immigration laws. They allegorize mobility as resistance, with characters bypassing bureaucratic hurdles and colonial structures that define national identities.

### 2. The Phenomenal World and Realistic Detailing

Faris also highlights how magical realism remains deeply grounded in the phenomenal world the everyday setting into which the magical is inserted. In *Exit West,* the cities of Aleppo, London, Mykonos, and San Diego are described with realism and historical specificity. War-torn streets, checkpoints, and refugee encampments create a factual background. The insertion of magical doors within such spaces heightens the emotional realism of displacement, making the reader question the distinction between imaginative escape and political reality.

Politically, the novel critiques the bureaucratic absurdity of borders. By inserting magical phenomena into geopolitically volatile zones, Hamid offers a subtle yet powerful allegory for how arbitrary and fragile these state boundaries are when placed against the magnitude of human suffering and desire for freedom.

### 3. Unsettling Doubts and Reader Engagement

Another of Faris' features is the presence of unsettling doubts the narrative neither fully explains nor denies the magical, creating a space of interpretive ambiguity. The line, "It was

said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born" (Hamid, 2017, p. 98), suggests a metaphorical and possibly spiritual rebirth, but the narrative does not confirm its mystical nature. The reader is left to question whether the doors are literal or symbolic, thus engaging with the text in a doubly conscious manner, as Faris describes.

From an allegorical standpoint, this ambiguity reflects the psychological state of migrants who often experience existential rebirth and rupture, caught between their past identities and the uncertainty of their future. The magical event thus doubles as a metaphor for identity transformation and the loss of rootedness.

## 4. Merging of Worlds: Juxtaposition of Real and Magical

Hamid achieves a seamless merging of the real and the fantastical, which Faris identifies as central to magical realism. The narrative doesn't distinguish clearly between the two. For example, "They no longer knew where they were, only that they were together" (Hamid, 2017, p. 118) suggests a loss of spatial certainty, a fusion of internal (emotional) and external (geographical) realities. The magical doors collapse physical distances and allow for human connection beyond cultural or national barriers.

Under political allegory, this merging reflects a post-national world, challenging the Westphalian idea of nation-states. The novel envisions a global society where emotional truth rather than geography or legality defines belonging. The "new world" that Hamid gestures toward is a radical allegory of unity, diversity, and borderlessness.

## 5. Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity

Faris' final marker is the disruption of time, space, and identity. Time in Exit West is compressed; entire migrations happen in moments. Spatial geography is rendered fluid "Each step beyond the door was like walking on the moon" (Hamid, 2017, p. 106). This not only disorients characters but also the reader, reflecting the psychological effects of war and migration. The fantasy elements mimic the disintegration of linear time experienced by people in crisis, aligning with Carpentier's marvelous real, where cultural and historical truths exceed rational order.

The disruption of identity is further symbolized in: "He felt as though he were shedding his skin" (Hamid, 2017, p. 97). This line signifies the erasure of old self-conceptions and the formation of new hybrid identities. Politically, this aligns with the postcolonial allegory of deconstructing fixed national and ethnic identities, revealing how migratory subjects reinvent themselves in response to exclusionary nationalist narratives.

## 6. Maps as Illusions: Allegory of National Myth

"The borders had melted, and the maps were lies" (Hamid, 2017, p. 119) is perhaps the most explicit political allegory in the novel. This line allegorically condemns the artificiality of nationhood and the imperial fictions behind cartography. The magical removal of borders does not merely solve a plot problem—it challenges readers to rethink the foundational myths of global order, citizenship, and control.

Through the magical lens, Hamid critiques the global refugee crisis, showing how existing geopolitical structures fail to serve humanity. His fiction becomes a blueprint for a more ethical, empathetic future an act of literary resistance cloaked in wonder.

Under Faris' and Carpentier's magical realist theories, *Exit West* qualifies as a profound contemporary example of magical realism. Hamid's doors are not just portals; they are magical instruments of political critique. The novel merges the fantastical with the real not for escapism, but to expose, complicate, and reimagine the experience of forced migration. Through magical realism and political allegory, Hamid dismantles traditional notions of

border, identity, and belonging, proposing instead a narrative of transformation, unity, and human resilience in the face of global disintegration.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid through the dual lenses of magical realism and political allegory, highlighting how the narrative negotiates the boundaries between reality and fantasy to address contemporary socio-political concerns. Hamid's integration of fantastical portals into a realist framework does not serve as mere escapism but as a symbolic mechanism to universalize the refugee experience, dislocate geographical boundaries, and foreground the fluidity of human identity in a globalized yet fractured world. The analysis demonstrates that magical realism in *Exit West* functions as a narrative strategy to destabilize rigid dichotomies; home/foreign, self/other, safety/danger while the political allegory critiques the rising tide of nationalism, xenophobia, and displacement in the 21st century. By blending the intimate with the geopolitical, Hamid not only redefines the refugee narrative but also invites readers to interrogate the moral responsibilities of individuals and nations in an interconnected global society.

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