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Exit West (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Exit West. Mohsin Hamid. New York: Riverhead, 2017. ISBN978-0735212176. 231 pp. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Associate Professor of English, Dordt College.

Coexist: It's a favorite bumper sticker in America. It's also a slogan that angers some people, connoting relativism and enshrining tolerance as paramount virtue. Replace the "C" with the Muslim Crescent, the "X" with a Star of David, and the "T" with a Cross, and the word becomes a call for the major Western religions to get along.

But as major world religions fragment into extremist groups, as businessmen-politicians attempt to solidify boundaries to control their interests, and as tremendous global forces continue to mix all people groups, we're going to have to get a lot better at listening to each other, unless we're ready for a kind of radical ghettoized tribalism.

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* is a great place to start listening.

Exit West, named one of the Ten Best Books of 2017 by the *New York Times Book Review*, is a novel that's very much got "the West" and religion on its mind. In fact, I've never read a book where the Near East has met West quite like this one. *Exit West* follows the story of Saeed and Nadia, a couple falling in love in an unnamed city about to be torn apart by civil war.

Although I've begun with the book's ideas, *Exit West* is a must-read for its beautiful, deceptively simple prose. Consider the opening paragraph:

In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her. His name was Saeed and her name was Nadia, and he had a beard, not a full beard, more a studiously maintained stubble, and she was always clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch in a flowing black robe. Back then, people continued to enjoy the luxury of wearing more or less what they wanted to wear, clothing and hair wise, within certain bounds of course, and so these choices meant something. (3)

From the outset, *Exit West* challenges one's assumptions. When I read "Saeed" and even "black robe," what was conjured in my mind was the vague, complicated term "Muslim," which the passage almost immediately undercuts. With the description of his carefully tended beard, I added "hipster" to Saeed's character description. With the additional information that Nadia has stopped praying, left her domineering father's protection and therefore been disowned and cut off from her family but continues to wear the robe "[s]o men don't f-- with me," I had to add "modern" to Nadia's.

This is to say nothing of the point of view. Apparently, the story is being told from some point in the future, looking back on these people from a world we recognize, from which the simple choice to wear a black robe has been removed. It's the first of several important changes to the world that we think we recognize in the book.

Saeed and Nadia indeed prove to be a modern couple. On their most memorable date before their city falls into chaos, Nadia obtains psychedelic mushrooms that they consume in her flat, where Saeed has snuck in by donning a black robe.

But then war does indeed intervene. The entire first act of *Exit West* is about Saeed and Nadia falling in love in the war-torn world of news headlines—seemingly in Syria or its equivalent. The war pushes their relationship along, but it also causes Saeed's religious beliefs to cement. When Saeed's mother is killed gruesomely by a stray bullet, Nadia moves in with his family, posing as a distant cousin; but out of deference to Saeed's growing faith, the couple wait to consummate their relationship while still finding creative ways to fulfill each other sexually.

Eventually, Saeed and Nadia decide they must leave their city, and they do so through one of the "mysterious doors" that, if we've been paying attention throughout the book, have been opening up all over the world in little side stories or cutaways that pepper the main narrative. When Saeed and Nadia finally leave through one of these doors, it's

described abstractly as a rebirth: “It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and being born,” we’re told, “and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it, and she felt cold and bruised and damp as she lay on the floor of the room at the other side” (104).

Once Saeed and Nadia have made this first mysterious exit, they find themselves in a refugee camp in Mykonos, Greece, where the lines of the world between tourist, native, and refugee become crystal-clear for them. Able to pose as tourists for a day or two, they are soon driven off the beach as refugees and must find another door to some place more permanent.

Strangely, the next door that Saeed and Nadia exit through deposits them in London, in an unoccupied, lavish private residence with “a view of the night sky and furnishings so expensive and well made that Saeed and Nadia thought they were in a hotel” (121). These mysterious doors are opening “all over London,” mixing the world’s people groups—both ethnicities and nationalities and, even more significantly, rich and poor—as they’ve never been mixed. “It seemed the more empty a space in the city the more it attracted squatters,” the narrator tells us, “with unoccupied mansions in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea particularly hard hit, their absentee owners often discovering the bad news too late to intervene” (129).

In London, it becomes clear that *Exit West* has left the ground, leaving refugee realism behind for something more visionary. Hamid’s sentences do the work of transporting us or, rather, scraping away the surface to take us down to a new reality. The first time Nadia bathes in London, we’re told “she thought her body looked like the body of an animal, a savage.” Though she’s clearly in someone else’s house, she cannot help but indulge in her bath, and as she turns on the marvelous first-world convenience of hot water, we’re made to feel just what that convenience means in a war-torn world:

[S]he turned it up as high as she could stand, the heat going all the way into her bones, chilled from months of outdoor cold, and the bathroom filled up with steam like a forest in the mountains, scented with pine and lavender from the soaps she had found, a kind of heaven, with towels so plush and fine that when she at last emerged she felt like a princess using them, or at least like the daughter

of a dictator who was willing to kill without mercy in order for his children to pamper themselves with cotton such as this, to feel this exquisite sensation on their naked stomachs and thighs, towels that felt as if they had never been used before and might never be used again. (125)

Exit West challenges the boundaries of the world we think we know—both of modern nation-states and of their upper classes—by injecting displaced people into the spacious living quarters of the rich in a way that makes us reconsider the politics of space.

And, of course, this mixing elicits a “nativist” reaction within the developed world. The area of London where Saeed and Nadia live is referred to as “the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation” (125), and an armed force lays siege to the area. Ironically, it’s the most vocal anti-immigrant nativists that are most recognizable to Nadia: “The fury of those nativists advocating wholesale slaughter was what struck Nadia most, and it struck her because it seemed so familiar, so much like the fury of the militants in her own city” (159). The angry people of the world, it seems, have plenty in common.

Eventually, after a standoff, something hideous happens: “a rumor spread that over two hundred migrants had been incinerated when the cinema burned down,” which brings a new determination to resolve the situation peacefully (163). The wealthy nations find the will and the resources to build megacities to house these millions. Saeed himself becomes employed in this great construction. In exchange for his labor, he is promised “40 meters and a pipe”—a place to live and a pipe to connect to “all the utilities of modernity” (170). The connection to American ideals of free soil and, more to the racial point of *Exit West*, “forty acres and a mule,” are unmistakable, though the context is much changed.

Something also changes in the love relationship of Saeed and Nadia in this new London. In an attempt to save their relationship, Saeed and Nadia “exit west” again, leaving the hard work and new factions of new London for Marin, California, where they live in a tin shanty high up in the hills above San Francisco.

Marin is another place entirely, a mixture of the best in cultures. Saeed and Nadia find the place

stimulating for its American qualities. They once again smoke dope together in hopes of rekindling their romantic feeling, but we know this story well enough to know how it's going to end. Exiting west does not solve relationship problems. It just postpones them.

As the couple's relationship falls apart, Saeed's religious feeling grows deeper if more general. Nadia finds Saeed's return to religion troubling, a move back toward all that endangered her. For Saeed, however, prayer becomes more and more open. By the time they reach Marin, we're told that

[Saeed] prayed fundamentally as a gesture of love for what had gone and would go and could be loved in no other way. When he prayed he touched his parents, who could not otherwise be touched, and he touched a feeling that we are all children who lose our parents, all of us, every man and woman and boy and girl, and we too will all be lost by those who come after us and love us, and this unites all humanity, unites every human being, the temporary nature of our being-ness. (203)

In Marin, our fears come true about Saeed and Nadia: their love is not salvageable. Saeed falls in love with the daughter of a black—perhaps a black Muslim—preacher. Nadia, meanwhile, falls for a woman, a cook from the cooperative that is the center of their existence in Marin. “A spoilage had begun to manifest in their relationship,” we're told, and so the two choose to separate, and when Nadia leaves, in drizzle, “her raw face was wet and alive” (215).

The ending of *Exit West* left me with many profound questions. As Saeed and Nadia separate, they seem to be following a cultural imperative to find themselves, to follow their own individuality into meaning. It feels sad and hollow, even decimating. But then one questions one's own presuppositions, for example, about whether romance or even “love” really should be the foundation of human

relationships.

The book complicates the sadness of the ending by cutting away to “a maid in an emptying village who could not ... imagine leaving” through the doors, and so she does not (223). Maybe this unnamed character is actually the hero of the book, the one who doesn't follow the narrative of self-fulfillment, who resists the “exit west”?

What, then, is an “exit west”? Is it, like the American frontier, always a promise of something a little farther and more fulfilling that leaves us somehow more hollow? Or is it the future that is already here, as boundaries between religion and culture and race and even gender breakdown? Is it the inevitable—progress? Or, as we all “exit west,” is something being lost?

In the final chapter, Saeed and Nadia reconnect in the old country after many years, and Nadia asks Saeed if he ever saw the stars from the deserts of Chile, a dream that he had first shared in the early days of their love. Saeed nods and says “it was a sight worth seeing in this life” and that he would take her: “and then they rose and embraced and parted and did not know, then, if that evening would ever come” (231). It's a haunting ending that speaks of unavoidable isolation, perhaps, or perhaps of how, avoidably, so many of our choices toward self-fulfillment lead to such a place.

Whichever way you read it, there is much at stake in *Exit West*: peace, love, deep and profound commitments, cultural and religious traditions, the idea that any given place can be a home. *Exit West* is achingly human, and I guess that's what makes me think of the word “coexist.” With the passing of Billy Graham, with the rise of Donald Trump, with Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria, with the continued escape into and rabid individualism of the West, perhaps coexistence is what we must hope for: that we could live deeply and well alongside each other, in simple coexistence, in simple peace—in peace which is never that simple.