

**Pangs of Migration and Confrontation with Hegemony in
Moshin Hamid's *Exit West***

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Abstract

This paper investigates the problems of migration and role of Western Hegemony in shaping Eastern ideology in migrated subjects. Migration, as a painful and political process, alters Eastern subjects to the level of dehumanization through various socio-economic forces i.e. media, education, cultural programs etc. In *Exit West*, the protagonist Saeed represents the pangs of migration and his inability to leave his own country. Saeed escapes from war but finds himself strangled further in one crisis after other. Saeed's journey explains the nowhere-ness of non-Hegemonic social entities who has no place to be called home. They are the 'other' who neither speak nor are spoken about.

Keywords: Moshin Hamid, *Exit West*, Hegemony, Migration, Alienation, Ideology, social entities, Other

Oxford Dictionary defines migration as the act or instance of migrating; a group of people migrating in a body. Migration is movement in order to settle down permanently or temporarily. Human migration is common and has been taking place since ages, by choice or situation. Whatever the reason is, migration leaves a person in spills, longing for their true self. It is challenging as when you cross the border, people on the other side stop seeing you as human. They do not understand that migration is not a choice but rather people are forced to leave their home countries. The native people fear the incoming strangers and forget that this can happen to anyone. West is getting too comfortable dehumanizing other humans, as the

suppressed are not able to live up to the standards set by West. Migration is the matter of surviving in the toughest conditions and fitting in any society. When people leave their home country and migrate, they become Hybrid; they now have two identities, the real self and the one that they have developed overtime in order to survive. In the whole process, people tend to forget who they are; unable to shed their real identity completely. Migration is a process which is also the reason of deterritorialization which is a reality of movement of flip side of complement. Deluze explains it as

Necessarily reterritorializes on its interior milieus. A given presumed fragment of embryo is deterritorialized when it changes thresholds or gradients but is assigned a new role by the new surroundings. Local movements are alterations. Cellular migration, stretching, invagination, folding are examples of this. Every voyage is intensive and occurs in relation to thresholds of intensity between which it evolves or that it crosses. (5)

There is an inner conflict which makes the life miserable as migrants leave their home in search of a bright future, but they even lose the past with uncertain present. Migrants live a painful life and often become hybrid. Hybridity is a term from post-colonial theory. It is the mixed culture and identity of migrant and their struggle to find their own roots. The main effect of migration is that a person is never able to leave his true identity, he tries his level best to imitate, but deep inside his real identity remains the same. This results in internal conflict and identity crisis.

Hegemony is control by one country, organization over other group by consent. It was coined by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. He investigated why the ruling class was so successful in establishing its own personal interests in society. There is powerful Western Hegemony; and Eastern Hegemony doesn't even exist. They rule other parts of world as it is technologically advanced. Developing countries look up to West for everything; they have made it clear that they are advanced in political, military and social fields. East follows West even in fashion. West generalizes things and does not give others a chance to prove their worth. It is not a geographical division; it is epistemological division. Mark Rupert explains

Hegemony arises from one state's productive pre-eminence in the global division of labor, and the commercial, financial and ultimately military-political powers which are seen to emerge from that structural predominance. (1)

He says that domination of one group over other contains military factors as well. Developing countries which are weak in comparison to developed countries fear attack and serve West. Ideology is something which tells about the world and their ideal concept of how to exist in this world. Karl Marx explains that idea and ideology are not independent but only a product of

materialistic thing. In his theory of ‘class struggle’, he explains that it is struggle that makes class. There are only two classes, haves and have-nots, capitalist and workers respectively. Have-nots provide labor and haves control the factors of production. He says capitalist are not in Harmony with human nature. “If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process”(14). The society is like a pyramid in which workers are in bottom and capitalist being the privileged one, take all the profits. Louis Althusser in his essay ‘ideology and Ideological state apparatus’, tells that term ‘ideology’ was invented by Cabanis, Destutt de Tracy and their friends but after fifty years, Marx came up with different ideology. Althusser says that according to Marx, ideology has its material existence only because it is practiced.

So, ideology is a matter of the lived relation between men and their world. This relation that only appears as “conscious” on condition that it is unconscious, in the same way only seems to be simple on condition that it is complex, that it is not a simple relation but a relation between them and their condition of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an imaginary, “lived” relation”. (233)

Ideology turns human as a social subject. Human is put in the subject position, under an illusion that whatever they are doing are doing it by their own wish or freewill. Althusser takes the Marxist ‘theory of state’ to another level and clears the difference between repressive and ideological state. Repressive state works by violence and ideological state works on the basis of ideology. The haves and have-nots are also divided on the basis of male and female. Males play the role of capitalist, being the more superior ones, depriving females from economic benefits and want things at less price and expectations. Haves exert their power over have-nots and become oppressor. Cultural Hegemony is the domination of the society from ruling class, who mold the culture of the society so that they can impose their views on the other. They make fake social constructs that are only for the benefit of ruling class. Ruling class becomes the oppressor and the weak becomes oppressed. Hegemony consists of two things, one is that powerful call imposes its interest on other, second is it consists of economic leadership. The ideology and belief of dominant class are reflected on the oppressed class. They try to showcase everything pleasant so that the suppressed people follow it and automatically their ideology becomes an established fact that everyone follows.

In *Exit West*, the protagonist Saeed and Nadia deal with the problems of migration and displacement. They are living in an unnamed city on the verge of civil war. As the title suggests, the word exit depicts the desperate need for migration. Hamid focuses on Saeed and Nadia trying to explain the similarities between readers and his characters. He forces us to think that what would happen if one day, out of nowhere our own life was unexpectedly interrupted and taken

over by war. Saeed and Nadia, like everyone else in their city perform their day to day activities in fear “in the city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war” (Hamid, West 1)

Living in a place that is constantly on the verge of war is frightening but slowly people get habitual of such situation as well. The daily routine of people still goes on despite the fear of death. Saeed and Nadia met in a class when people did not even prefer to go out. The rich people migrated easily but the middle class and poor had no choice but to stay and wait for a favorable situation. Saeed’s father felt that “he had made a mistake with his career” (Hamid, West 49) as if he had enough money, he could send his son away from all this and at least his son could live his life in peace. The conversations people had mainly focused on “conspiracy theories, the status of the fighting, and the country” (Hamid, West 50). People stopped showing up at offices and it was assumed they might have escaped to some other country. When situation became worse, people took anything they could and just tried to become invisible. There was a feeling of isolation, “Nadia and Saeed, and countless others, felt marooned and alone and much more afraid” (Hamid, West 55). Fear of death was constant in people. People vanished in those days and it was not sure, whether they were alive or not. Saeed stopped functioning after the death of her mother, in a blast when she was in their ancestral car. It also shows that people were not safe anywhere, they could be killed anytime, and this shows how brutal everything was. Nadia started living with Saeed and his father after the death of Saeed’s mother. She felt connected to them and started feeling as a Family member. Their relationship was growing constantly when rumors started to circulate about doors that could take anywhere but out of this mess, to places far away “well removed from the death trap of a country” (Hamid, West 69). According to Walter L. Admson:

Hegemony for instance, is sometimes compared with domination; in this case the reference is to the process of gaining legitimate consent within the functional universe of civil society, as opposed to simply holding it together through a monopoly on the means of violence. (10)

He explains that hegemony is related to domination. Developed countries suppress the developing country and try to show their power by controlling weak. When Saeed herd about doors, he thought that how is it possible to disguise and appear magically in such country that will never accept them. Most of the people did not believe these rumors but others started to look at their own door differently. Every morning, Saeed and Nadia checked doors of their home as they now gazed differently towards their own doors. The growing danger was felt by Saeed, “Saeed desperately wanted to leave his city, in a sense he always had, but in his imagination, he had thought he would leave it only temporarily” (Hamid, West 89). He liked to travel but he wanted to settle in his own country and now leaving his country once and for all and being aware

of the fact that he might not come back ever again, knowing that leaving would mean scattering of his family and friends circle, and realization of this fact made him extremity sad.

He decided to give it a shot, to travel through one of the magical doors, he gave money to an agent and tells this news to his father, but as a surprise his father refuses to leave. He says he is unable to leave their house as it has uncountable memories in it; it reminds him of Saeed's mother and that past offered him much more than future. Saeed tries to convince him but he in turn takes a promise from Nadia that she will stay with Saeed and support him in this tough time. Saeed was well aware of the fact that when they leave, his father "might be at mercy of strangers, subsistent on handouts, caged in pens like vermin" (Hamid, West 90). Nadia was comfortable with all types of movements in life as compared to Saeed; he was much more drawn towards nostalgia. Saeed knew that he will not be able to come back while his father was alive and thinking that this might be the last night he spends with his father, he was bowed down. He knew leaving him alone will kill him, "but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (Hamid, West 94). They went through the door and reached a refugee camp and saw "hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colours and hues" (Hamid, West 100). Everyone in the camp was foreign to each other, so in one way no one was.

Hamid talks about real problems of migration; he explains how people have to live in tents without money despite having their own homes, using barter system to get goods and even basic necessities of life. Setting up temporary homes is painful but to Nadia, it felt like playing house, like she uses to do when she was a small child. Once Saeed met an old friend, it was "like two leaves blown from the same tree by a hurricane landing on top of each other far away"(Hamid, West 109). It made Saeed happy and somewhat satisfied to see a familiar face. The desperation to get out from camp could be seen, not only because they did not want to live there; but the fear to get trapped there forever. Saeed and Nadia then went through another door which took them to London. They started living there and "unlike Nadia, he felt in part guilty that they and their fellow residents were occupying a home that was not their own, and guilty also at the visible deterioration brought on by their presence" (Hamid, West 129).

Saeed realized that they were illegally interrupting someone's life; doing the same thing that was done to them. He was the only resident of the house who objected when people started taking items of house in their possession. Riots began in their part of London, "Saeed and Nadia had to make a decision: whether to stay or to go" (Hamid, West 132). It is difficult for them to decide what to do next, whether to stay or look for a new place. In this whole process of migration, Saeed and Nadia were drifting apart. The stress of work resulted in ignorance of each other's feelings. "They began to wander separately during the day, and this separation came as a relief to them" (Hamid, West 138). The only feeling of closeness in all these months was when

they talked about future, it distracted them from reality. They knew that going back to their birth country was impossible and other countries must be facing native backlash. “Nadia and Saeed, who had run from war already, and did not know where next to run, and so were waiting, waiting like so many others” (Hamid, West 134). They could sense the calm, but it was calm before the storm. They faced Native backlash and Hamid explains that migration is painful either way, for natives and for migrants. Through Saeed and Nadia, he explains how we will feel if our homes were invaded and some strangers suddenly claimed their right on our property. Accepting strangers is not something we have learned or accept; but if someone by force enters our house, we have to leave it as man is nothing without power. Jonathan Joseph states,

It argues that the position of the ruling group is not automatically given, but rather that it requires the ruling group to attain consent to its leadership through the complex construction of political projects and social alliances. (1)

He argues that a group needs to stay in power with the help of political groups. Politics of a country is directly related to its position in the rest of the world. Nadia became popular among other residents of the house as she was young and was active participant in meetings. She was among the elders who helped in solving the issues people had; it was like their own small political group which needs to solve problems and make decisions on other’s behalf. Saeed was not concerned with it “because here in this house he was the only man from his country, and those sizing him up were from another country, and there were far more of them, and he was alone” (Hamid, West 146). Alicke and Govaun state,

The generality of their view is extended by their consistent findings of inferiority biases, that is, the tendency for members of disliked groups to be evaluated less favorably than the group as a whole. (97)

They explain that it is impossible for a person to survive in a group if they feel as less privileged one. A person needs to feel he has a position and exists in a particular group. It is difficult to feel attached to such group where your ideas don’t matter.

Hamid uses doors to show that borders cannot control or stop illegal immigrants. He focuses on Saeed and Nadia as characters to make readers realize that this is what happens when life is suddenly taken over by war. He feels that doors should not be closed for migrants as anyone can be migrant one day. “And advocated a banding together of migrants along religious principles, cutting across division of race or language or nation, for what did those divisions matter now in a world full of doors, the only division that mattered now were between those who sought the right of passage and those who deny them passage, and in such a world the religion of righteous must defend those who sought passages” (Hamid, West 152).

When people migrate, they rise above any physical discrimination and come together as human beings. They have no other option other than acceptance of things as they are. The violence grew in their part of London, and Nadia “wondered whether she and Saeed had done anything by moving, whether the faces and buildings had changed but the basic reality of their predicament had not” (Hamid, West 156). The problems were not ending for Saeed and Nadia, they were in doubts that whether their condition upgraded or degraded by moving; are there any changes or not. This is something that happens when people migrate; they murder their past and risk everything for an uncertain future. There is no biological difference between people, the difference is socially constructed.

The distance between Saeed and Nadia was growing day by day. They did not communicate with each other. It also symbolizes their relations with their home country. “they put their lack of conversation down to exhaustion, for by the end of the day they were usually so tired they could barely speak, and phones themselves have the innate power of distancing one from one’s physical surroundings” (Hamid, West 185). Phones which were used by them to connect in the past were now being used to distract their mind and to avoid any conversation. They started off well with constant connection but all the problems and traveling separated them. Migration had adverse effect on them. Saeed still had strong feelings about his birth country, he was unable to forget. The more he tried to distance himself, nostalgia hit him even harder. “The further they moved from the city of their birth, through space and through time, the more he sought to strengthen his connection to it, tying ropes to the air of an era that for her was unambiguously gone” (Hamid, West 187). He could not take himself out from his country as it was a part of his identity. For Nadia, it was just the same, she did not felt any change “she continued to wear her black robes, and it grated on him a bit, for she did not pray and she avoided speaking their language, and she avoided their people, and sometimes he wanted to shout, well take it off then” (Hamid, West 187). He was affected by Nadia’s choices but believed he still loved her. He wanted to feel for Nadia but “the possible death of his ideal self who had once loved his women so well were like a single death that only hard work and prayers might allow him to withstand” (Hamid, West 188). He felt immense sorrow for the loss he faced, the death of his mother, father and his inner self, all because of war and migration. For Saeed, prayers are a ritual that connected him to his childhood and all his past memories. “When he prayed, he touched his parents, who could not otherwise be touched” (Hamid, West 201).

It was more emotional for him rather than spiritual. Everyone migrates at one point in his life. 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” (Hamid, West 209). There is constant movement in everyone’s life; it can be in any form. Nadia moved out and started to live away from Saeed. She knew that their relationship has lost its meaning. She continued to wear her black robe to

disguise her identity, to fit in society. “Her black robe was thought by many to be off-putting, or self-segregating, or in any case vaguely menacing” (Hamid, West 214). When she moved out, she was judged because of her robe. People have certain perceptions related to physical appearance of a person which are not true. There are n numbers of problems related to Migration such as Alienation, cultural antagonism, inferiority complex, internal conflicts, language problems, identity crisis, and so on. Homi K Bhabha observes:

For at the same time as the question of cultural difference emerges in the colonial text, discourses of civility were defining the doubling moment of the emergence of western modernity lies not only in the origins of the idea of civility, but in this history of colonial moment. (32)

This means that being western and modern is different things. A person should not be judged on the basis of his physical appearance. West portrays itself as progressive and modern, but in reality, it is not. Living a life without illusions and following truth is the real meaning of being modern.

Saeed and Nadia settled in their new lives, with their new partners and new city. The contact became weak as the contact between them and their birth country. Saeed and Nadia represent two different types of persons, one who is desperate to go back to his country and other wanted to travel and live free without looking back to her past experiences. “half a century later Nadia returned for the first time to the city of her birth, where the fires she had witnessed in her youth had burned themselves out long ago, the lives of cities being far more persistent and more gently cyclical than those of people, and the city she found herself in was not a heaven but it was not a hell, and it was familiar but also unfamiliar” (Hamid, West 227)

She felt a familiar unfamiliarity in the city of her birth place, she knew the place but there was something different there; it was not the best, but it was also not worse. She did not feel any connection as it was not the same place it was before she migrated. She felt so much has changed since then that she cannot even feel it’s the same place. Migration disrupts life in every sphere, and it can never be the same again.

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