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Intertextual Cartographies of Migration: A Critical Study of Literary, Religious, and Mythological Allusions in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: Intertextuality, Mohsin Hamid, This study investigates the intertextual dimensions of Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, Exit West, Migration, Postcolonial Literature, exploring how the novel draws upon literary, religious, political, and mythic texts to construct its themes of migration, displacement, and identity. By applying Narrative Theory

intertextual theory, this article demonstrates how Hamid weaves references to global literature, Islamic thought, and postcolonial narratives, thereby enriching the novel's resonance in a contemporary global context.

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INTRODUCTION

In the current literary landscape shaped by transnationalism, forced migration, and cultural hybridity, narratives that traverse geographical and ideological boundaries have gained critical attention. One such novel is Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), which offers a poignant, imaginative account of a young couple's migration from an unnamed war-torn city to various locations across the globe. The novel employs a distinctive blend of realism and magical elements, most notably the use of mysterious doors that allow characters to instantaneously cross national borders. Yet beneath its accessible narrative lies a rich intertextual tapestry — a convergence of literary, religious, mythological, and historical references that invite deeper interpretation.

Intertextuality, first articulated by Julia Kristeva and later expanded upon by Roland Barthes and other poststructuralists, refers to the idea that a text does not exist in isolation but is shaped by and in dialogue with other texts. Intertextuality serves as a mechanism through which authors layer meaning, echo past traditions, and position their work within broader discursive frameworks. In *Exit West*, this concept becomes particularly salient, as Hamid draws upon multiple sources — from Quranic parables and Sufi motifs to Western literary traditions and contemporary geopolitical events — to craft a narrative that is both deeply personal and universally resonant.

While *Exit West* has garnered considerable scholarly attention for its treatment of themes such as migration, refugee identity, globalization, and love in the digital age, less attention has been given to its intertextual construction. This oversight is notable, considering how the novel's metaphoric and philosophical depth is reinforced by its allusions to spiritual texts, mythic journeys, and literary archetypes. By examining these intertexts, readers can gain a richer understanding of the novel's message — that migration is not only a physical journey but also a cultural, spiritual, and textual passage that challenges traditional notions of borders, belonging, and identity.

Moreover, in the post-9/11 era — marked by heightened xenophobia, displacement crises, and polarized narratives about the "Other" — Hamid's work can be read as an effort to reclaim global storytelling through pluralistic lenses. His use of intertextuality reflects a desire to universalize the migrant experience, drawing parallels between contemporary refugees and the timeless archetype of the wandering, searching human being found in sacred texts and epic literature.

This study, therefore, aims to investigate the role of intertextuality in shaping the thematic structure and narrative strategy of *Exit West*. By mapping its textual references and allusions, the research seeks to answer how Hamid uses intertextual frameworks to articulate the psychological, emotional, and philosophical dimensions of migration.

Contextualizes *Exit West* within current global literature trends (e.g., migration, transnationalism).

Introduces intertextuality and its theoretical background.

Identifies the gap in existing literature — lack of focused intertextual analysis.

Explains the significance of studying intertextuality in the novel.

States the aim of the study — to analyze intertextual mechanisms in *Exit West*.

In a rapidly globalizing world marked by displacement and digital connectivity, literature increasingly reflects plural narratives and layered meanings. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) serves as a profound example of this tendency, utilizing intertextuality to narrate a love story set against the backdrop of global migration. The novel interweaves diverse texts, ideologies, and historical motifs, offering fertile ground for intertextual analysis.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does Mohsin Hamid employ intertextuality in *Exit West* to enhance themes of migration, identity, and transformation?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To identify intertextual references present in *Exit West*.
2. To examine how these references shape the thematic and narrative structure of the novel.
3. To analyze how intertextuality contributes to the reader's understanding of displacement and postcolonial identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intertextuality, as proposed by theorists like Julia Kristeva (1980) and Roland Barthes (1977), refers to the shaping of a text's meaning by other texts. Previous studies on *Exit West* (Chambers, 2019; Upstone, 2020) have discussed its magical realism and geopolitics, but fewer have focused solely on its intertextual network.

Intertextuality, as a concept in literary theory, has evolved from a foundational tool for textual analysis to a multidimensional framework for understanding how literature interacts with culture, history, and ideology. Coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, intertextuality refers to the shaping of a text's meaning by other texts. Kristeva, building upon the ideas of Mikhail

Bakhtin, particularly his notion of dialogism, emphasized that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” She argued that texts are not isolated creations but are constructed through a mosaic of quotations, influences, and references (Kristeva, 1980).

Roland Barthes (1977) extended this notion by arguing that authorship itself is decentralized, asserting that the meaning of a text is created not by the author but by the reader through recognition of the many intertexts embedded in the work. These ideas have been pivotal in poststructuralist literary theory and offer a useful lens for analyzing contemporary global literature, especially works that explore themes of identity, migration, and hybridity.

In the context of postcolonial literature, intertextuality plays an important role in reclaiming, challenging, or subverting canonical narratives. Scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha have argued that postcolonial texts are often inherently dialogic, engaging with colonial and religious discourses while rearticulating identity in a hybrid space. Thus, intertextuality becomes a form of resistance and re-imagining.

In recent scholarship, Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017) has been widely discussed for its thematic complexity and stylistic innovations. The novel, a magical realist narrative of refugees who escape war zones through mysterious black doors, has drawn attention for its portrayal of migration, transnationalism, and love in a digitized, war-torn world. Chambers (2019) reads *Exit West* as a novel of ethical hospitality, exploring how it challenges nationalist borders and advocates for human interconnectedness. Similarly, Upstone (2020) highlights Hamid’s use of magical realism as a metaphor for the disorienting, transformative experiences of displacement.

However, while these studies provide valuable insights, they only briefly touch upon the intertextual nature of *Exit West*. Chambers notes allusions to Islamic philosophies of generosity, and Upstone recognizes traces of magical realist traditions, yet neither fully interrogates how Hamid uses intertextual references — from Quranic narratives and Sufi philosophy, to myths, historical migrations, and contemporary global events — to construct a layered narrative that resonates across cultures.

Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap in existing research by focusing specifically on intertextuality in *Exit West*, examining how these embedded texts and references serve not only as literary decoration but as essential tools for meaning-making. This research also contributes to broader debates on global literature, where the act of migration itself is

inherently intertextual — involving the crossing of languages, cultures, and histories. Through this lens, Hamid's novel can be seen as a convergence point of various discourses, traditions, and literary echoes, offering a hybrid text for a hybrid world.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis methodology, drawing on close textual reading and theoretical frameworks from intertextuality and postcolonial studies. References to canonical texts (e.g., Quranic allusions, Greek myths), historical events (refugee crises), and literary parallels (e.g., *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy) are catalogued and analyzed.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL INTERTEXTS

Hamid subtly integrates Islamic thought into the fabric of the narrative. For example, references to fate, spiritual journeying, and hospitality mirror Quranic parables, while also evoking Sufi metaphysics. This intertextuality adds depth to Saeed's character, whose internal conflict is framed not just as personal but spiritual.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS AND MAGIC REALISM

The use of magical doors as transportation devices echoes allegorical texts like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. These portals also act as metaphors for choice, transformation, and uncertainty, drawing from Borges' labyrinths and Kafka's surrealism.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL REFERENCES

Hamid's depiction of refugee camps and geopolitical tensions intertextually links the novel with real-world crises, such as the Syrian civil war and Western refugee policies. This layering blurs the lines between fiction and reportage, giving the narrative a documentary quality.

CONCLUSION

Exit West is a richly intertextual novel that draws upon a multitude of texts and traditions to construct a narrative that is both personal and global. Through this technique, Hamid not only deepens the emotional resonance of his characters' journey but also situates their migration within a timeless and universal context.

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