Inhabiting a Chaos-World: Refugee Transnational Identities in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017)

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Abstract　　This article explores Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017) combining principles pertaining to social geography, affect theory, and (post)migration studies with postcolonial theory. It aims to highlight how Hamid's use of magical realism triggers political, philosophical, and socio-emotional reflections by condensing in the story arc the intercultural and intersubjective processes that characterise the migratory experience and the postmigrant condition. Firstly, it investigates how *Exit West* incorporates magical realism to represent the psychoemotional dynamics of migration and to problematize the concept of cosmopolitanism; secondly, it discusses how the novel promotes a re-thinking of migration identities and experiences in terms of affective transnationality; thirdly, it points out how the refugee communities represented in the novel are manifestations of a chaos-world in which identity formation is shaped by sociocultural encounters, multilingualism, media use, and processes of affiliation.

Keywords　　Mohsin Hamid. Exit West. Refugee novel. Chaos-world. Multiplicity. Transnationalism.

Summary　　1 Introduction. – 2 The Magical Doors. – 3 Affective Transnationality. – 4 Hamid's Chaos-world. – 5 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

Exit West (2017) by Mohsin Hamid explores contemporary geopolitical and social events through the lens of a speculative narrative set in "a paradoxically globalized yet bordered world" (Naydan 2019, 435) where global economic integration is counterpointed by harsh migration policies. The novel was published in the aftermath of the European migrant and refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016, when wars, identity-based persecutions and repression in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen drove millions of people to leave their homes and seek refuge in Western countries through the Balkan and the Mediterranean routes. At that time, the massive pressure from immigrants and refugees resulted in a humanitarian crisis, while at the same time threatening the key instruments of border control in the European countries. This situation led to a rise in euroscepticism and anti-immigrant discourses in several countries such as the United Kingdom, Hungary, Greece, France, and Spain.

Exit West deals with the migration journeys of two refugees, Saeed and Nadia, and their encounters with other migrants and asylum seekers trying to enter Western countries in an era of global migration crisis. Saeed and Nadia are two young lovers who live in an unidentified city on the verge of a civil war between the government and an extremist group. As Hamid pointed out in various interviews (Hamid, Tepper 2017; Hamid, Brown 2018; Hamid, Preston 2018), his choice not to give a name to Saeed and Nadia's home city – despite admitting it resembles his home city Lahore – is due to two main reasons. First, it is driven by his emotional bond with Pakistan, and his will not to reduce his own country to a setting for a tragedy; secondly, it is part of an allegorical mode that speaks to humanity as a whole. On the contrary, having only two named characters "keeps the reader in touch with the emotional heart of the story" (Hamid, Brown 2018), which is also a key aspect of this article.

As the fighting between the radical militants and the city soldiers worsens, the couple hears rumours about the appearance of magical doors that can transport people anywhere in the world. Frightened by the escalation of the conflict, they meet with a man who secures them a safe passage out of the city via one of these mysterious portals. Once Saeed and Nadia have gone through it, they find themselves on the Greek island of Mykonos, where a large refugee camp has grown. After a few months in the camp, Saeed and Nadia no longer feel safe. Therefore, they pass through another door and emerge in London, where they start to live in a multicultural house and work in migrant labour housing sites. Distressed by unresolved tensions between the natives and the migrants, and by an increasing emotional

distance, they decide to try another door, which leads them to Marin County, in California.

The most relevant critical approaches to *Exit West* have focused on thematic clusters, formal features, and genre identification. Betsy L. Fisher has underlined how Hamid's novel reminds the reader of "the failures of modern asylum systems that prioritize border security over human rights" (Fisher 2019, 1134), using the novel as a starting point to dwell on contemporary politics of migration across the world. Some scholars have pointed out how Hamid used magical realism to represent the porosity of borders, to blur the distinction between the East and the West, and to challenge a monolithic idea of nation in a globalised world (Goyal 2020; Della Valle 2022; Bellin 2022). Others have offered a symbolical reading of the magical doors as thresholds having transformative powers that result in migrant characters' flexible and transnational identities (Sattar et. al. 2020; Della Valle 2022; Faiz et. al. 2023). Liliana Naydan (2019) and Michael Perfect (2019) have underscored how the novel suggests comparisons between the magical doors and digital technologies, while other critics have read it through the lens of world literature (Bilal 2020) or sci-fi dystopia (Jiménez 2020).

Despite focusing on the magical doors as symbols of unstable and permeable borders in an era of migration crisis, the above-mentioned approaches have not thoroughly examined Hamid's magical device in relation to the cosmopolitan imagination and the affective dimension of migration. Furthermore, literary criticism concerned with the characters' identity transitions has failed to analyse how such identities – i.e. relationship roles, religious identity, ethics, and sexual orientation – change in Saeed and Nadia's postmigrant conditions. Firstly, by using cosmopolitanism as a theoretical approach, this article investigates how *Exit West* problematises the notion of global citizenship by incorporating magical realism. It also explores the affective implications of the fantastic elements, highlighting how the characterisation of the magical doors reflects the emotional status of migrants and refugees appearing in the narrative. Drawing on concepts pertaining to affective geography and recent theorizations within the field of border studies, it highlights how Hamid represents *Exit West*'s multiple settings as affective borderscapes where migrant characters construct their transnational identities. Thirdly, Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation will be used to interpret Hamid's fictional world as a chaos-worlding in progress.

2 The Magical Doors

Written from the third-person omniscient point of view, *Exit West* combines realistic narration with elements pertaining to magical realism. The fantastic, "irreducible element" (Faris 2004, 7) peculiar to magical realism is represented by the magical doors, whose behaviour creates a sense of non-linear time and spatial disruption that reflects the fragmented nature of migration journeys while originating a hybrid narrative form that could be read as a transnational migrant novel. Kai Wiegant has coined the label "transnational migrant fiction" (Wiegant 2020, 206) to identify a literary genre characterised thematically by a focus on the transnational identity of migrant characters, and formally by a combination of styles and subjects from different cultures and literary traditions. Thematically, Hamid's novel is concerned with transnational migrant identities, while the magic element evokes the transcultural realms of allegory, fairytales, fantasy, and science fiction.

Through the device of the magical doors, Hamid poses a challenge to the parochialism of Western cosmopolitanism and its biased ideals of universality, transnationality, and global citizenship, unveiling how modern nation-states disregard the needs of "nonstatus migrants" (Nail 2015, 191) and asylum seekers. In fact, some of the doors to Western countries are guarded by men in uniform who prevent people from passing through them. From an allegorical perspective, the inaccessibility of these portals may symbolize migrants and asylum seekers' limited cosmopolitanism. Conversely, it can be read as a metaphor for the limits and contradictions of the Western "political imagination" (Glăveanu, de Saint Laurent 2015, 559) regarding migration and citizenship. Political imagination, developed by people engaged in social life, is both individual and collective; it is grounded in symbols, written arrangements, and institutions; it is concerned with political aims in relation to *otherness*, and involves processes of assimilation, exclusion, control, domination, emancipation, and so on. On a global scale, it could be named 'cosmopolitical imagination'. In the novel, the "major global crisis" (Hamid 2017, 83) epitomized by the doors unveils a crisis of the Western cosmopolitical imagination when it comes to implement the idea of global citizenship in new and puzzling relational scenarios not bound by geopolitical borders. Furthermore, the association of the notion of crisis with the migration phenomenon reminds us of Jane McAdam's conceptualization of "crisis migration" (McAdam 2014, 28). As McAdam points out, in an era of increasing migration flows, right-wing populist politicians supported by the media often conflate the notions of crisis and migration (44). Such a discursive blend implies that the movement of people is the crisis rather than the result of circumstances rooted in geopolitical imbalances, ecological violence and

neocolonial oppression. Hamid narrativizes this detrimental ideological shift, which nullifies the idea of global citizenship and results in xenophobia. For example, in the London setting, a local newspaper refers to the area where refugees have settled as "the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation" (Hamid 2017, 126), while in a vignette set in Vienna, the nationalists view the doors as a threat because they challenge their idea of Austria as a stable and purist nation. Even the unnamed city where Nadia and Saeed once lived is described as "swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace" (Hamid 2017, 1). As Perfect observes, this characterisation provocatively associates the presence of refugees with potential sociopolitical conflicts (Perfect 2019, 190). The panic and related negative affects caused by the magical doors unveil "the impossibility of global citizenship" (Wood 2008, 22) in a world where migrants and asylum seekers are perceived as dangerous intruders, relegated to the margins of society, hampered in their attempts to build a better life, and stripped of their dignity.

The magical doors are identity thresholds that produce affective and emotional states when they are perceived and crossed. From their first appearance in the protagonists' consciousness, the magical doors elicit affects that characterise the pre-migration condition as a state of hesitancy. When rumours about the magical doors spread around the world, Saeed and Nadia begin to gaze at their everyday doors differently. In their eyes,

> each of their doors [...] became partially animate [...] an object with a subtle power to mock, to mock the desire of those who desired to go far away, whispering silently from its door frame that such dreams were the dreams of fools. (Hamid 2017, 70)

In this passage, the personification of the doors as mockers, and the identification of aspiring asylum seekers with fools expresses the protagonists' defensive pessimism, related to feelings of helplessness and resignation.

Regarding their appearance, the magical doors are described in vague terms as "darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness – the heart of darkness" (Hamid 2017, 6), "a portal of complete blackness" (27), or "a door black even in the dimness" (63). Michael Perfect suggests that the novel's emphasis on the darkness of the portals might be read as a metaphor for those traumas that are unrepresentable in fiction (Perfect 2019, 196). In his observations, Perfect draws on a traditional model of trauma that assumes the unrepresentability of suffering. Nevertheless, Hamid seems to focus less on the unspeakability of trauma than on the refugees and migrant' affects during the crossings, using powerful similitudes to express the characters' emotional status while passing through the portals.

For example, in the first chapter, the narrator puts into the foreground the affective memory of a black man emerging from a magical door in Sydney. The man passes through a closet doorway that is "the heart of darkness" (Hamid 2017, 6-7) and finds himself in a bedroom where a white woman is sleeping unaware of what is going on. The man's actions overlap with his memories:

> He wriggled with a great effort [...] as though pulling himself up against gravity, or against the rush of a monstruous tide. [...] He rallied himself [...] in desperate silence, the silence of a man struggling in an alley, on the ground, late at night, to free himself of hands clenched around his throat. [H]e was aware of the fragility of his body. (6-7)

The allusion to Conrad's novella in this passage has been grasped by several critics. Sheri-Marie Harrison, for example, observes that it evokes "the colonial baggage [...] with all its attendant assumptions and prejudices" (Harrison 2019, 592). Harrison does not dwell on such implications, but they are worth highlighting. The dark man comes out from a heart of darkness that seems to evoke the traumatic experience of slave ships and migrant boats – alluded to through the image of the monstruous tide – and the violence experienced by Indigenous people in (post)colonial countries. From a symbolical perspective, it also evokes the strategic amnesia developed by white Australians regarding the British colonisation, subjugation, and almost total annihilation of Australian Aboriginal people.

The magical doors also symbolise a fracture between the self before and the self after migration. They are "like a beginning and an end [...] like dying and being born" (Hamid 2017, 98). The conceptualization of migration as rebirth, which is a key concept in Hamid's novel, appears also in Naipaul's novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), and in an article on immigrant writing by Bharati Mukherjee, where she used the phrase "the messiness of a rebirth as an immigrant" (quoted in Maxey 2005, 183) to describe the suffering and energy required to adopt another country as homeland. In "La barque ouverte", which serves as a preamble to *Poétique de la relation* (1990), Édouard Glissant compares the deportation of African slaves across the Atlantic Ocean to the birth of a new humanity emerging from traces rhyzomatically rooted in different sociocultural systems (quoted in Lambert 2019, 116-18). Rivisiting Glissant's trope of birth in his essay "Le Migrant Nu: 'Le déporté sur des frontières'" (2005), Alexandre Alaric compares the experience of today's migrants to

> a second "coming to the world", a second hoped-for birth [...] and later to a "proto-genesis of self and the world". (quoted in Lambert 2019, 120)

Despite its being a human tragedy, the experience of migration can be seen as a new beginning involving identities in movement and giving rise to non-essentialist epistemologies and worldviews.

The figure of the migrant as a newborn is evoked in various parts of the novel. In the first chapter, a man emerges from a closet door in Sydney, "pushing, trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal" (Hamid 2017, 7). Also for Nadia and Saeed, the separation from the mother country is like coming out of a human mother's womb. While stepping through the door that will lead them to Mykonos,

> 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 […] trembling and too spent at first to stand. (98)

Nadia's primary purpose while crossing through the door is physical survival, as in the case of newborns displaying survival instincts like grasping and trembling. The "kind of extinguishing" she experiences is a metaphor for migrants' contingent and variable detachment from their original customs, habits, beliefs, values, ideas, meanings, social roles, and sentiments. It is an initiation, a first reconfiguration of identities that will undergo other changes in the ongoing process of errantry. The representation of Saeed and Nadia's migration as a twin birth may be read as a rhetorical device that prefigures a series of transformations that will occur in their relationship. In a matter of seconds, Nadia's identity suddenly shifts from that of a partner to that of a parental figure. Once Saeed has emerged on the other side, she starts to behave like a mother, cradling him as if he were a newborn seeking comfort and protection. Her caregiver attitude towards him reflects an early change in her relationship role, which will be followed by other readjustments involving her ethics of care and sexual orientation as the story develops.

The magical doors, which appear everywhere and bridge the gap between the West and the non-West, can also be seen as a mockery of geopolitical borders and ethnic nationalism. In his collection of essays *Discontent and its Civilizations*, Hamid pointed out that civilizations are "illusions: arbitrarily drawn constructs with porous, brittle, and overlapping borders" (Hamid 2015, 7). In *Exit West*, Hamid's philosophical and political reflections are given a narrative form through magical realism. Because of the ease of travel they offer, the magical doors represent the dissolution of the borders that keep people in and out of nation-states, and therefore bring into question "the concept of nationhood itself" (Perfect 2019, 192), as this passage overtly underscores:

> Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they had to play. (Hamid 2017, 155)

However, the novel is less focused on questioning the legitimacy and ethnicity of geopolitical spaces than on investigating the affective dimensions of borderscapes in an era marked by a "proliferation [and] heterogenization of borders" (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013, 3). If the contemporary world is characterised by the emergence of economic, technological, symbolic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries that transcend the geopolitical borders (vii), the emotional dimension of borderscapes should be taken into account as an integral part of the socio-spatial imagination. The next section focuses on the representation of affective borderscapes and affective transnationality in *Exit West*.

3 Affective Transnationality

According to Doreen Massey, in the contemporary world where various kinds of borders are incessantly erected, renegotiated or dismantled, border studies should focus on the relational and therefore affective dimension of border regimes (Massey 2005, 179). Hamid's novel seems to dwell on such issues to re-humanize the refugee figure and restore its agency in a transnational process of identity formation.

By taking on an emotion-focused – but not merely pathological – perspective in his characterization of Nadia and Saeed, Hamid sheds light on multiple emotions involved in their process of migration from the entrance phase to the extended migratory phase: displacement, fear, resignation, anger, anxiety, guilt, joy, and hope. The two refugees are represented less as "victims of the circumstances" (Albrecht 2016, 26) or of "*objective* social processes" (Breckner, Massari 2019, 4; emphasis in original) than active shapers of their existential transitions.

In Hamid's novel, locations accessible by migrants and refugees can be investigated as relational and "affective borderscapes" (Tsoni 2019, 17). Ioanna W. Tsoni coined this expression to identify

> sites of affective and emotional investment, where fear, hope, longing, desire, despair, indignation, disorientation, death or rebirth converge and are implicated in various ordinary and exceptional encounters between migrants, citizens, humanitarian volunteers, state agents, and the dispersed material traces of both state power, and the undocumented migration apparatus. (17)

Exit West's multiple settings can be read as affective borderscapes where political and military actors, the media, and dominant social groups construct concepts such as safety, citizenship, and otherness through the cultivation and mobilisation of emotional dispositions. From this perspective, Hamid's magical doors are interpretable as

thresholds between different affective borderscapes in which Nadia and Saeed experience different degrees of marginalisation. For example, Mykonos is a place pervaded by boredom and fear of an endless captivity; uniformed guards prevent the undesiderables from accessing portals to Western countries, while residents on the outskirts of the old town are willing to get in touch with migrants and refugees. In the chapters set in London, the affective dispositions of the legitimate city dwellers and the various ranks of urban undesirables are made more explicit. The large-scale operation to "reclaim Britain for Britain" (Hamid 2017, 132) evokes the historical context of the Brexit Referendum, when the Leave supporters expressed concerns over immigration as a potential danger to European values. While migrants and refugees are engaged mostly in the struggle for food supply,

> the nativist extremists were forming their own legions, with a wink and a nod from the authorities, and the social media chatter was of a coming night of shattered glass. (132)

The rise of nativist mobs, and the reference to the historical "night of the broken glass" reflect hyperbolically Western countries' application of affective counterincentives – i.e. the mobilisation of anger and irrational fear – in the implementation of migration politics. The rise of violence in the city produces changes among the migrant community as well, leading its members to reassemble themselves

> in suits and runs of their own kind, like with like, or rather superficially like with superficially like, all the hearts together, all the clubs together, all the Sudanese, all the Hondurans. (143)

What is described in this fragment is a socio-affective reconfiguration of the London migrant community through processes of affiliation, with new social groups being formed according to arbitrary parameters such as fan loyalty, likeness, emotional similarity, and ethnic affinity.

Within this context, Hamid investigates Nadia and Saeed's emotional transnationality. Chien-Juh Gu coined the expression "emotional transnationality" to identify

> the emotions experienced when immigrants [...] search for behavioral guidance and a foundation of moral judgements from the cultural norms of both their sending and receiving societies. (quoted in Albrecht 2016, 29)

Emotional transnationality, identifiable as a negotiation of "feeling rules and patterns of interpretation" (31) rooted in different sociocultural contexts, is the core of the postmigrant condition. It is a state

determined by a "dialectic of belonging and unbelonging [resulting in] split subjectivities" (Bromley 2017, 36), namely fragmented identities that are incessantly under construction under the influence of both past and contemporary beliefs and value systems. Saeed and Nadia's affective transnationality is the way they re-think their identities, emotional ties and ethics while moving from one place to another. In Mykonos, Saeed suffers feelings of guilt over leaving his family, while Nadia takes comfort in "playing house" (Hamid 2017, 102) as she did with her sister as a child. While Saeed's painful memories reflect his view of home and traditional family as an inseparable pair, Nadia's memories unveil how her idea of home lies in the reproduction of emotional ties constructed through sisterhood. As Saeed and Nadia's individual relationships to their mother country change, their perceptions of other migrants from their own country, of themselves, and of each other change as well. Traumatic memories, connections with fellow countrymen, new locations and encounters affect their identities, sense of belonging, and future expectations. When a lot of Nigerian families come to reside in Nadia and Saeed's house in London, she begins to take part in their regular meetings. The narrator informs the reader about the character's affective condition during the councils:

> They represented something new in her mind, the birth of something new, and she found these people who were both like and unlike those she had known in her city, familiar and unfamiliar, she found them interesting, and she found their seeming acceptance of her, or at least tolerance of her, rewarding, an achievement in a way. (145)

Nadia's emotional attitudes reflect aspects of affective transnationality that sociologists of migration identify as strategies of "affective displacement" (Wise, Velayutham 2017, 126). Such displacement manifests itself when migrant people who experienced trauma re-orient themselves "from the source of that pain toward another collectivity" (126) within which they can empathise with other subjects, mend their divided selves, and adjust their ethics. Previously unable to take part in the community life of her war-torn city, and later a victim of marginalization and racism within the host country, Nadia gradually re-orients her affective dispositions. At first, comparing "[t]he fury of those nativists advocating wholesale slaughter [to] the fury of the militants in her own city" (Hamid 2017, 156), she believes that young refugees' violent behaviour is justified. However, after hearing the Nigerian elders promote "non-violence [and] civility" (151), she realizes there is "wisdom" (152) in their words and becomes unsure what to think. Not only does Nadia's split subjectivity emerge in her rethinking her ethics of violence, but it is also visible in her

dressing habits, as she keeps wearing the black robes she wore in her home city as a tool for keeping men at a distance. As for Saeed, he is the only man from his country in the house, and his condition

> touched upon something basic, something tribal, and evoked tension and a sort of suppressed fear. (146)

The absence of a men's group in the domestic sphere undermines Saeed's sense of masculinity, since his notion of masculinity is built around classic patriarchal definitions of the man as manager of the household and provider for its needs. When a tough Nigerian woman blocks Saeed's path in the house, he feels "emasculated" (147). The woman's behaviour upends his sense of traditional gender roles as his native culture propagates them, so he sits on his bed with his heart racing and wanting "to shout and to huddle in a corner" (148), unable to fix his split self. Saeed is uncomfortably divided among the traditionalism of his past and the relative progressivism he witnesses in his present. Moreover, in a dark London where refugees are in a constant "state of siege" (147), he feels threatened by the government forces and by potentially dangerous migrants. He finds comfort only in the company of people from his country, encouraged by "familiar languages and accents and the familiar smell of cooking" (148). His decision to pray with them, while painfully thinking of his father,

> made him feel part of something, not just something spiritual, but something human, part of his group. (148)

Saeed's feelings and attitudes reflect aspects of affective transnationality that sociologists of migration identify as strategies of "affective intensification" (Wise, Velayutham 2017, 122). Examples of strategic intensification include

> the cooking and consumption of certain evocative foods [...], and life-cycle and religious rituals replicated from the homeland. (123)

As Saeed and Nadia discuss the possibility of moving from the Nigerian house to a different house occupied exclusively by natives of their home country, Nadia expresses a change of perspective in her conceptualization of *sameness* and *strangeness*. Pointing out that they have left their home country for a new beginning elsewhere, she states that her fellow countrymen in London are not like her, that they are "strangers" (150). Nadia and Saeed's diverging ideas make them begin to see each other differently, and result in their physical and emotional separation. After their discussion, Saeed opts against bridging "the tiny distance it would have taken to kiss" (153). When Saeed is informed of his father's passing away, he "doesn't know how

to mourn, how to express his remorse" (Hamid 2017, 170). His reaction is to work hard in the building site where he found employment, displaying another affective strategy peculiar to emotional transnationality and migration guilt that consists in the body doing work to increase affective engagement with the homeland (Wise, Velayutham 2017, 122).

Saeed and Nadia's emotional distance intensifies when their diverging attitudes to rituals around death are unveiled. Realising that Saeed does not want her to pray with him for his father, Nadia feels "unwelcome. Or perhaps unengaged. Or perhaps both" (171). Her feelings unveiling how *welcome* is a socioemotional process that concerns not only the immigration policies within a host society, but more complex and layered networks of interpersonal affective interactions. Hoping that they will be able to make their relationship work again, Saeed and Nadia pass through another door that teleports them to Marin, in California. However, once settled there, Nadia starts a homosexual relationship with the cook of a food cooperative, while Saeed falls in love with the daughter of a local preacher. Saeed's new partner is one of the leaders of a regional assembly promoting justice and human rights.

His taking part in the assembly, which has a "moral authority [and is also] substantial" (219) reflects an emotional strategy identified by Wise and Velayutham (2017) as "moral intensity" (123), which consists in participating in transnational social movements, religious organizations, and solidarities.

4 Hamid's Chaos-world

The various cultural and affective borderscapes represented in *Exit West* can be read as fictional manifestations of the Glissantian chaos-world, that is,

> the shock, the intertwining, the repulsions, attractions, complicities, oppositions and conflicts between the cultures of peoples in the contemporary world-totality. (Glissant 2020, 54)

From this perspective, the unpredictable destinations of the magical doors reflect "the unforeseeable meanders of Relation" (Glissant 1997, 20), in a world-totality defined by errantry and superimpositions of cultural and emotional "sediments" (33) that shape individual and collective identities. The superimposition of sediments results in *creolization*, that is,

> a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open. (34)

In *Exit West*, the news describes nations as "dissolving and collapsing entit[ies]" (Della Valle 2022, 5) also on an ethnic level, as

> the nation was like a person [...] whose skin appeared to be dissolving as they swam in a soup full of other people whose skins were likewise dissolving. (Hamid 2017, 155-6)

This characterisation of nations reminds the reader of *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (1996), where Glissant underlines how the chaos-world is not "a melting pot, a mush, a mish-mash" (2020, 64) of cultures, but a cultural diversity that is subject to contingent clashes, readjustments, and harmonisation. The soup mentioned in the above passage is a metaphor for the way Western cultures often perceive creolization as standardisation, and therefore as a threat to cultural identity. Challenging essentialist discourses, Hamid offers a representation of the world as a chaos-world in which differences encounter without cancelling each other. Moreover, he thematises the Glissantian process of creolization, which implies "multilingualism and [...] the incredible explosion of cultures" (Glissant 1997, 34). While a "symphony of languages" (112) resounds throughout Glissant's chaos-world, Nadia perceives "a cacophony that was the languages of the world" (Hamid 2017, 100) upon her arrival in Mykonos. 'Cacophony' is a conceptual tool developed by postcolonial theorist Jody A. Byrd to describe the competing voices struggling for legitimacy and recognition across multiple axes of colonial domination. It

> focuses not only vertically on the interactions between the colonizer and colonized, but horizontally between different minority oppressions within settler and arrivant landscapes on the baseline between racialization and conquest. (Byrd 2011, 31).

Far from carrying a negative connotation, Hamid's use of the term 'cacophony' seems to identify the struggling phases of Glissant's process of cultural creolization, which involves linguistic hybridization. This hybridity is described in Chapter 7. In their Nigerian House in London, Nadia realizes that

> Nigerians spoke different tongues among themselves, and belonged to different religions. Together in their group they conversed in a language that was built in part from English, but not solely from English. (Hamid 2017, 144)

In this passage, Hamid alludes to the concept of linguistic creolization, that is, the formation of what Glissant defines a "baroque chorus" (Glissant 1997, 119) characterised by the multiplicity, fluidity and permeability of languages.

Also in his description of Marin County, the narrator focuses on multifaceted encounters between cultures and people. In Marin, cultural creolization results in a new kind of jazz music and

all kinds of ensembles, human with humans, humans with electronics, dark skin with light skin [...] and even people who wore masks. (Hamid 2017, 216)

What Hamid represents through these images of linguistic, cultural, and artistic *métissage* is a "multiplicity of identity and community" (Mandaville 2001, 172) originating from contacts among cultures. In *Exit West*, as we have already underlined, identities are "constructed out of a number of constituent parts" (Nelson 2006, 297) that are reminiscent of Glissant's sediments. In the description of Marin, the narrative voice focuses on the county's hybrid ethnocultural identity by fragmenting any essentialist conception of nativeness. The narrator highlights how contemporary America features various kinds of natives ranging from Indigenous people to "those with light skin who looked most like the natives of Britain" (196) and descendants "from the human beings who had been brought from Africa [...] as slaves" (197). This third layer is characterized as a stratum of soil that perhaps made possible all future transplanted soils (197).

These transplanted soils signal different phases in the creolization process, which Hamid counterposes to the ideology of nativism.

A final observation should be made in relation to the role played by technology in objectifying migrants and refugees. In a vignette in Chapter 5, a migrant family with dark skin is teleported to Dubai, where its members are captured first on the feeds of surveillance devices, and then on the camera feeds of tourists' smartphones, where they appear as "four disparate individuals" (88). In this example, digital devices contribute to encoding and producing information "[whose] veracity remains elusive" (Naydan 2019, 444), obliterating the empathy that could be aroused by the image of a whole migrant family. In Glissant's chaos-world, technology, media, and social networks are identified as "flash agents [that] are in tune with the implicit violence of contacts between cultures [dictating] fashion and common place" (Glissant 1997, 166). In *Exit West*, flash agents are represented as concealed controlling instances that turn subjects into objects, virtualising and dehumanising migrants and refugees. Imagining a chaos-world in which human beings have access not only to networks of information, but also to instantaneous travel across the globe, *Exit West* encourages the reader to consider the ways in which ideas of *sameness and otherness* are shaped by sociocultural encounters and flash agents.

5   Conclusion

In *Exit West* (2017), Mohsin Hamid uses magical realism to address relevant issues pertaining to cosmopolitics and to dwell on the cultural, affective and identity dynamics of the migratory process in the contemporary world. The magical doors that appear in the novel are a polysemic narrative device that builds a cultural and ideological bridge between literary traditions and critical thinking on migration and postmigration. As a literary *topos*, magical portals belong to the realms of fairy tales, fantasy, and fantastic fiction, where the movement of characters from one place to another often involves identity formation, liberation from oppressive forces, and reconfigurations of earlier morals, principles, and ideologies. In *Exit West*, the two protagonists Nadia and Saeed use the magical doors to flee war, persecution, and manifold existential limits. Each time they find themselves in a new geographical and sociocultural context they are called upon to negotiate their beliefs and transnational identities. On a metaphorical level, Hamid's magical doors function as a symbolic tool for emphasising the critical points in the cosmopolitan project and the limits of the cosmopolitical imagination in an era of global migration. Causing a disjunction between the concept of nation and its ethnic, cultural, and linguistic components, they problematise the notions of native, migrant, asylum seeker, community, and home. Furthermore, their teleporting powers collapse the temporal dimension of border crossing, resulting in a narrative that focuses on the characters' psychological and socioemotional condition during, before, and after the migratory experience. The magical doors, whose physical characterisation evokes historical trauma and postcolonial affects, are thresholds that open on material, social, and emotional landscapes.

In *Exit West*, the narrative settings close to the portals are represented as affective borderscapes where residents, migrants, and refugees experience emotional states that influence their identity formation and sociocultural hybridisation. As emerges in several interviews, Hamid himself is conscious of his being a hybrid person born from and projected towards multiplicity. His novel may be read as a "personal project" (Hamid, Travers 2018) that aims at creating a fictional space where people like him can recognise themselves and be given agency and a voice to express their inner conditions and developing Selves. Through the stories of Saeed and Nadia, the author represents the refugee consciousness as a diasporic one, "point[ing] to present (and future) myths and realities" (Nelson 2006, 314). In the fourth section of this article, I underlined how these myths and realities may be read as a Glissantian chaos-world under construction, where the positive shock of new encounters breaks down ideological boundaries and promotes the right to search for a better future anywhere in the world.

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