



Partly Familiar, Partly Novel Too: Fantasy and Science Fiction in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*¹

Fantasía y ciencia ficción en *Exit West*, de Mohsin Hamid

MAXIMILIANO JIMÉNEZ

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Abstract

This article proposes a reading of Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017) that pays attention to the tropes and formulas of fantasy and science fiction used to frame an account of the so-called refugee crisis. Although the novel portrays situations rooted in the global concern regarding migrants, Hamid structures his story through associations with non-mimetic genres employing the trope of magical doors that provide escape to those desperate to flee their surroundings. I argue that replacing the hardships of travel with such a magical means of transport helps to relativize our perception of the situation in terms of science-fictional and fantasy scenarios. At the same time, the "unrealistic" depiction of the real sociopolitical problem leads to thematic reflections that are not grounded in the pity raised by the excessive attention paid to the dangers of migration, but that rather invite to a critical, positive engagement with the concept of hybridity, dramatized by Hamid in both the form and the content of his novel. Since what provides SF its generic cohesion is its use of ideology rather than specific structures or themes (Moreno, 2014), and since fantasy can be read underlying the political potential of its affective dimension (Clúa, 2017), the critical consideration of these two genres gives *Exit West* easy passage into a committed discussion about its context.

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Key words

Exit West, Mohsin Hamid, refugee crisis, science fiction, fantasy, genre fiction

Resumen

Este artículo propone una lectura de la novela *Exit West* (2017), de Mohsin Hamid, enfocada en los tropos y fórmulas de la fantasía y la ciencia ficción utilizadas para enmarcar una representación de la llamada “crisis de refugiados”. Aunque la novela presenta situaciones explícitamente ancladas en la preocupación general respecto a los migrantes, Hamid estructura su historia alrededor de asociaciones con géneros literarios no miméticos a partir del tropo de unas puertas mágicas que les permiten escaparse a quienes se encuentran desesperados por huir de sus entornos. Sugiero que la sustitución deliberada de las dificultades de la migración por dicho modo mágico de viaje ayuda a relativizar nuestra percepción de la situación en términos de escenarios ciencia ficcionales y de fantasía. Al mismo tiempo, la presentación “irreal” del problema sociopolítico real conduce a reflexiones temáticas que no parten de la lástima que genera la atención excesiva que se le da a los peligros de la migración, sino que invita a un involucramiento crítico positivo con el concepto de hibridación, dramatizado tanto en la forma como en el contenido de la novela de Hamid. Dado que lo que le otorga a la ciencia ficción su cohesión genérica es su uso de la ideología más que estructuras o temas específicos (Moreno, 2014), y que la fantasía puede leerse con énfasis en el potencial político y la afectación emocional que la define (Clúa, 2017), la consideración crítica de esos dos géneros le da a *Exit West* una posición privilegiada con respecto a las discusiones comprometidas con su contexto histórico.

Palabras Clave

Exit West, Mohsin Hamid, crisis migratoria, ciencia ficción, fantasía, géneros populares

Introduction

As it peaked in recent years, the so-called refugee crisis in Europe quickly became a matter of global concern due to the coverage that the goings and fates of the voyagers received in social media and the news. As Anne Barnard and Karam Shoumali affirm, it is the photograph of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, whose body washed up on a Turkish beach on 2 September 2015, “that appears to have galvanized public attention to a crisis that has been building for years” (2015: n.p.). The harshness of the images is enough justification for such a reaction. In a way, then, even if the high numbers of migrants are indeed historically unprecedented (Kingsley, 2016), what seems to lie at the core of today’s concern regarding the crisis are the affective responses to the perilous and tragic stories of those seeking refuge, rather than the statistical upheaval. According to a report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees,

refugees and migrants arriving in Italy have described surviving the deadly desert crossing from Niger [...] and the dangerous sea journey [...] Those crossing from Turkey to Greece or Bulgaria have described terrifying night journeys across the short stretch of sea to Greece [...] Many of those arriving in Spain reported hardships during their journeys such as crossing the sea in flimsy inflatable boats or suffering violence while trying to cross the fences at the land border. (UNHCR, 2017: 1-2)

While the emphasis on the physicality of displacement is apparent, it is important to point out that this is only part of the difficult stages these migrants must endure; nevertheless, the *quasi* epic elements involved in such narratives of endurance seem to work as the catalyzers bringing attention to the crisis. Astrid Erll (2017), for example, has observed how Patrick Kingsley’s *The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe’s Refugee Crisis* (2016) equates this massive migration and its dangers with the heroic adventures of Odysseus—a comparison which highlights the understanding

of refugees as the heroes of their voyages. Therefore, given that the hazardous nature of such journeys occupies a considerable portion of the imagery revolving around the refugee crisis, Mohsin Hamid's literary engagement with the situation stands out, in this context, precisely because of its portrayal of displacement and because of how he chooses to frame the physical movement of refugees.

Published in March 2017, *Exit West* was quick in gaining readership and praise. Hamid, after all, is a renowned author whose previous three novels openly address the tensions between East and West, perhaps most clearly seen in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), a well-known touchstone of post-9/11 literature. That Hamid explicitly writes about the refugee situation in *Exit West* is, therefore, not surprising. Broadly speaking, this novel follows Saeed and Nadia, two lovers in an unnamed country on the verge of war who soon enough are forced to migrate and leave their pasts behind, only to encounter further difficulties and obstacles that test their lives, their love, and their identities. Yet, even though the novel presents quite verisimilar stories of characters that have to flee their surroundings because their lives are in danger—characters whom the narrator of the novel also refers to, on occasion, as *refugees*—the means of escape depicted in the novel are “magical” doors that deliberately establish a certain estrangement and narrative detachment from the real-life crisis. Coming from a writer who is very vocal about social commentary and who had not employed non-realistic elements in his previous fiction, such a plot device draws attention to itself. First, these doors are worth noticing critically because, with them, Hamid seems to bypass one of the most prevalent aspects of forced migration, almost as if deliberately countering the usual focus on the migrants' journeys. The Odyssean metaphor which Erll (2017) identifies is thus somewhat cancelled in this novel. Secondly, that this unreal element appears in an otherwise realistic depiction of the current state of affairs directly asks for an analysis of the novel in terms of its relationship with reality and of the effects of tinging real-life stories of survival with fantastic undertones.

In what follows I suggest that *Exit West* aims to present the discussions about the refugee crisis through the lens of a purposefully fictional story—a story that

is deeply rooted in the generic logic of fantasy and science fiction. The portals that drive the plot and that give the characters their means of escape are, after all, identifiable tropes of these genres, so here I propose that these magical doors activate associations with genre fiction that reframe and reshape our understanding of, and critical engagement with, the real-world situations that Hamid represents. I begin the analysis with the conceptualization of genre fiction to focus then on SF and fantasy as the two genres most predominantly related to *Exit West*. My close reading of the novel highlights the prominence of tropes and metaphors directly linked to these genres, of which the magical doors are perhaps the least relevant. Upon addressing how science-fictional dystopias and fantasy world-views are constructed in *Exit West*, I will explore how these genres intertwine to project an optimistic vision of the state of affairs, directly related to a broader notion of hybridity. Through this methodological process, it will be possible, towards the conclusion of this article, to provide a more punctual explanation of how *Exit West* can indeed be considered a hybrid between literary and genre fiction. Ultimately, I intend to pay attention to how the various tropes of non-mimetic genres employed by Hamid evince the political capacities of SF and fantasy and, by extension, invite to interpretations that directly develop from the familiarity with these genres.

Genre Fiction and Generic Competence

From the outset, considering that Hamid is an author who *belongs* to the field of literary fiction, his use of magical elements in *Exit West* evinces a dissonant—though not unusual—link between literary and genre fiction.² While this interaction might already suggest a certain kind of hybridity, it is important to bear in mind that general theories of genre usually account for an inherent “principle of contamination, a law

² To account for this divide between genre fiction and literary fiction, Ken Gelder (2004) adopts the term *field* from Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “field of cultural production” given the different socio-cultural aspects that are implicated in the production and consumption of both types of fiction—the highbrow and lowbrow, respectively (Gelder, 2004: 12–13). I will further elaborate on this divide in the last part of this article.

of impurity, a parasitical economy [...] a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set” (Derrida, 1980: 59). In other words, Hamid’s consolidation as a “literary *author*” rather than as a “genre-fiction *writer*” (Gelder, 2004: 14–15) makes it virtually impossible to see *Exit West* as a work of SF or fantasy, but Derrida’s idea of participation without belonging helps to establish that *Exit West*, while adopting and taking advantage of the formal elements of genre fiction, certainly ought to remain a piece of literary fiction. I highlight and dwell on this distinction not to suggest that Hamid’s work is above SF or fantasy in what would be a condescending attitude towards popular fiction; rather, I want to suggest that the generic hybridity in *Exit West* is not merely given by its inclusion of magical doors, which would be very simplistic. Instead, the conjuring up of these doors initiates a hermeneutical process that relies on the recognition of genres and their motifs, and, by extension, on the familiarity with genre fiction and its reading mechanisms. This is why here I suggest that the generic hybridity of *Exit West* is rooted in the fact that literary and genre fiction will “*necessarily* not be read or ‘processed’ in the same way” (Gelder, 2004: 12); that is to say, *Exit West* does allow a reading that develops from the ways in which SF and fantasy are read, *as if* it belonged to these genres.

For starters, genre fiction refers to texts that are, on the one hand, more widely consumed and discussed than literary fiction (Novell, 2014: n.p.) and are, on the other hand, *recognizable* as belonging to the category due to certain formal or thematic traits that interact and “play” with each other to pursue common themes and interests (Novell, 2008: 97). These characteristics imply a high degree of heteronomy and self-consciousness in the production and consumption of such products (Gelder, 2004: 13), since a cultural text of genre fiction *has to include* at least one recognizable characteristic that clearly marks it as belonging to and participating in a given genre (Novell, 2008: 100). To clarify further this idea and account for that inherent contamination which Derrida suggests, Noemí Novell brings these considerations together with Alastair Fowler’s theory of genre, in which “genres have to do with identifying and communicating rather

than with defining and classifying” (Fowler, 1982: 38), even if the latter are also functions of genre. Through the concept of the acquisition of generic competence, Fowler suggests that we learn to identify genres by noticing the similarities and differences that make up for those categories (1982: 44). In other words, the *identification* and *identifiability* of generic traits are crucial for Novell’s and Fowler’s conceptualizations of genre, whose ideas are essential for my reading of *Exit West*. To think of *genre* as a concept that communicates interpretations instead of only a means of categorization helps to realize that, when the magical doors activate associations with fantasy or science fiction, these genres might be saying something about how to read the novel, rather than trying to include the novel in said genres.

To say that the appearance of the magical doors in Hamid’s text links the novel to fantasy or SF relies on the acknowledgment of such devices as *common*—or rather, formulaic elements—in these genres. It is enough to think of works such as *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), or the *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007) to identify the trope of magical portals that lead to faraway marvelous places as a usual device in fantasy (Clúa, 2017: n.p.). Similarly, films like *Stargate* (1994), texts like Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion* (1989), or ongoing TV series like *The Ministry of Time* (*El ministerio del tiempo*, 2015–) and *Stranger Things* (2016–2017) have adapted the logics of portals into stories more closely associated with science fiction. The role of fantastic or scientifically-driven crossings into a “somewhere/somewhen else” is helpful for fantasy and SF because the worlds these genres tend to construct are meant to be alien and to have rules of their own: there is a strong sense of these spaces *not being* like our real world. By extension, whether the portals are justified “by reason” or the scientific method—as in science fiction—or by whichever supernatural element—as in fantasy—they are meant to make sense *within* their narrative worlds, and readers learn to accept such conceits as necessary for a given story to work. When it comes to *Exit West*, even if Hamid employs the notion of portals, a somewhere-else, and a world that is not like the real one (since the natural laws with which we are familiar make us acknowledge that the existence

of such portals is simply impossible), the world he projects remains very much in contact with our reality, which is when readers are asked to engage further and more in-depth with the notion of SF and fantasy.³

Forced Migration as Dystopia

While reading *Exit West*, what is very revealing is that, with the deliberate inclusion of these unexplained portals and through the generic competence outlined by Fowler, readers are alerted to—and in a way even made to expect—other unrealistic elements with which to make sense of the doors. The plot does not seem to satisfy these generic workings since the novel is not interested in explaining the reason behind the existence of these doors: they merely appear and both readers and characters have to accept that. The only information the novel provides as an explanation is that

The effect doors had on people altered as well [as one's relationship to windows]. Rumors had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country. Some people claimed to know people who knew people who had been through such doors. A normal door, they said, could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all. (Hamid, 2017: 72)

Nonetheless, even on a first reading of the novel—which ideally entails previous knowledge of the presence of these doors in the story, the portals being a salient aspect of *Exit West*'s “marketing campaign” and of the originality of the text—it

³ Determining whether the doors in *Exit West* are more closely related to fantasy or SF is off the point of this paper. Certainly, as China Miéville (2009) explains, “SF and fantasy are and must remain not only radically distinct but hierarchically related” (231), so my intention is not to suggest a blurring of the boundaries between these genres. Nevertheless, since the portals can be associated, in other texts, to either of the genres, here my reading approaches both possibilities regarding the narrative mechanisms of *Exit West*.

soon becomes clear that Hamid is perfectly aware of the generic expectations that the doors awaken, as his narrative discourse shows.⁴ In order to highlight but a few of the various narrative strategies and rhetorical devices that clearly feed on the familiarity with SF and fantasy, in this section I guide a reading of the science-fictional tropes that hint at a dystopian *understanding* of space, to move on then to the elements of the novel which drive the story towards a heart-warming happy ending more typical of fantasy. While this reading does not correspond to the structure of *Exit West*, as the traits of both genres intertwine throughout the novel, I separate them for the sake of clarity.

The first chapter of the novel, which provides the vague context of the unnamed city where Saeed and Nadia meet and start dating, already includes certain passages that demand attention because they can easily be associated with science fiction. While reflecting on the material consequences of war in the city, the narrator comments that “[w]ar would soon erode the facade of [Saeed’s] building as though it had accelerated time itself, a day’s toll outpacing that of a decade” (Hamid, 2017: 11). A few pages later, the narrator describes a scene of stargazing in Saeed’s household, in which he and his parents “look up at objects whose light, often, had been emitted before any of these three viewers had been born—light from other centuries, only now reaching Earth. Saeed’s father called this time-travel” (2017: 15). Such metaphorical associations with time-travel and time-manipulation are

⁴ Generally speaking, the generic expectations of genre fiction (and of *Exit West*) antecede the reading of the texts. In Hamid’s novel, that much ought to be clear judging by the fact that the doors are the most peculiar characteristic of the story: one cannot summarize, review, or explain *Exit West* without mentioning the magical doors. The synopsis on the back cover of the edition by Riverhead Books says, for example, that the protagonists “begin to hear whispers about doors—doors that can whisk people far away, if perilously and for a price. [...] Leaving their homeland and their old lives behind, they find a door and step through...” The cover design of this same edition depicts what resembles a starry sky (a recurrent motif in the story), and as such it could suggest the outer space (another common element both in this novel and in SF). Similarly, the 2017 Italian translation of Hamid’s novel, published by Einaudi, depicts on its cover a beautiful and very suggestive illustration of wooden doors that open, one after the other, on a sandy landscape of dunes under the dreamy colors of the sky or a room. Such a surreal scenario appeals to a sense of wonder and magnificence not uncommon to fantasy stories.

certainly indeterminate enough to be gratuitous or coincidental. Nevertheless, they draw attention, on the one hand, to the narrator's own manipulation of time—given that the first quotation is one of the various instances of prolepsis in the novel—and, on the other, to the compatible exchangeability of science-fictional concepts and real-life facts: the physics surrounding the concept of light-years constitutes a somewhat literal time-travel. In this manner, the correspondence of some common tropes of SF and Hamid's narrative can be said to work rhetorically.

This initial transposition of science-fictional motifs and realistic, worldly experience is further hinted at through the detailed attention that the narrator pays to technology. Technological development and its influence on human life is a predominant topic in science fiction, as most of Philip K. Dick or William Gibson's work shows. In *Exit West*, several descriptions seem to engage directly with such themes. Take, for instance, the beginning of chapter three:

Nadia and Saeed were, back then, always in possession of their phones. In their phones were antennas, and these antennas sniffed out an invisible world, as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be. For many decades after independence a telephone line in their city had remained a rare thing [...] But now wands waved in the city's air, untethered and free, phones in the millions, and a number could be obtained in minutes, for a pittance. (Hamid, 2017: 39)

The mention of magic and what could suggest magic wands speaks for itself, though it falls out of the SF field. At the same time, by characterizing digital networks as “an invisible world” to which Saeed and Nadia can be transported, the narrator implies a sort of very innovative and out-of-the-ordinary idea (similar to what in science-fiction studies is termed the *novum*, following Darko Suvin's [1979] concept). Moreover, this paragraph also seems to reflect on the motif of technological development as a game-changer for society: while before it was

impossible to gain access to a telephone line, now Saeed and Nadia, all thanks to technology, can develop certain kinds of interaction despite the curfews in their city.

Perhaps, though, one of the most salient and meaningful episodes that deal with the literalizing of science-fictional tropes is found in chapter five. As in many other instances, the narrator presents the crossing of some of the people that venture through the magical doors, going from their conflictive surroundings to an ideally better place. This specific case is that of a family who reaches Dubai, and the focalization here is worthy of attention. After narrating how the four people emerge from a door inside a pedestal floor, the narrator says:

On a security camera the family could be seen blinking in the sterile artificial light [...] though the feed lacked audio input it was of sufficient resolution that lip-reading software could identify their language as Tamil [...] After a brief interlude the family was picked up again by a second camera [...] they were at that moment simultaneously captured on three exterior surveillance feeds [...] they could be seen at multiple angles [...] A small quadcopter drone was hovering fifty meters above them now, too quiet to be heard, and relaying its feed to a central monitoring station [...] the family was also visible in the camera feeds of various tourists' selfie-taking mobile phones [...] they were intercepted and led away, apparently bewildered, or overawed, for they held hands and did not resist or scatter or run. (Hamid, 2017: 91-93)

Technology once again plays an important role in this scene, and while this is not an extrapolation of the capacities and reaches of current devices—like what the SF series *Black Mirror* (2011–2017) does—in this episode Hamid constructs a paranoid space of surveillance and persecution. The association with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is almost natural. In this manner, *Exit West* seems to be activating associations with the dystopian spaces recognizable in some works of science fiction. Hardly can it be argued that the society Hamid presents *is* dystopic, but the mere allusion to such a literary topic brings the dystopian

implications to the fore. The fact that this is done via a realistic portrayal of the current global situation raises important considerations. Hamid's depiction of forced migration seems to be suggesting that the refugee crisis is already, indeed, a sort of real-life dystopia if viewed through this lens.

To bring it all together and project the fictional world towards the future, which is perhaps one of the most well-known narrative strategies of SF, simplistically described as "futuristic," Hamid explores the geopolitical outcomes of what the unstoppable crossing of portals entails. By chapter nine, once Saeed and Nadia have managed to flee their country and end up in London after a brief period in Greece, the high numbers of people coming back and forth everywhere in the world constitute new settlements:

In the formerly protected greenbelt around London a ring of new cities was being built, cities that would be able to accommodate more people again than London itself. This development was called the London Halo, one of innumerable human halos and satellites and constellations springing up in the country and in the world. (Hamid, 2017: 169)

The space that Hamid constructs in the second half of his novel, then, comes closer in spirit to those depicted in works like Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) or Neil Blomkamp's *Elysium* (2013), both films clearly framed as SF not only because of their dystopic, futuristic aspects, but also because of their direct engagement with social criticism from a geopolitical perspective. The use of halos, satellites, and constellations as tropes to describe the expansion of immigrant settlements is therefore not gratuitous. Coherently, the characters in *Exit West* become aware that "they were remodeling the Earth itself" (2017: 178), and "[f]or many, adjustment to this new world was difficult indeed" (2017: 173). Time taxes for migrants "who had been there for decades" (2017: 170) and "new cities" (2017: 188) start to be officially established, given the fact that, as much as they try, governments cannot stop the flow of migration that the doors allow. The real-

life tensions and violent conflicts that the presence of immigrants unfortunately carries with it is clearly present in Hamid’s “dystopic” rendering of a world of forced migration, but once time passes and things begin to set, “Saeed and Nadia have the sense that overall, for most people, in Britain at least, existence went on in tolerable safety” (2017: 170).

Wonder and Perception

Saeed and Nadia eventually have to learn to come to terms with this new world in which, upon their stepping through a portal, they became literal and metaphorical aliens—another recognizable trope of SF which in many cases does stand for the notion of the Other. Yet, as explained above, *Exit West* presents an optimistic take on the events it narrates; in a way, though, SF lacks the heart-warming potentiality of storytelling, given that, from my perspective, the most effective and affective reactions to SF, because of their discomfort, spring from the grim, mind-blowing evincing of menace.⁵ Hamid’s weaving of fantasy tropes with his depictions of space, therefore, requires observation, since it is through the affective potentialities of fantasy that *Exit West* manages to depart from the pessimistic moods of science fiction.

In chapter seven, after Nadia and Saeed cross a door that takes them away from Mykonos, the narration works very much in the fashion of a fantasy text. They emerge in an abandoned mansion and observe

⁵ Consider, for example, *Black Mirror*, which has been regarded as a groundbreaking, relevant instance of contemporary SF. During its first three seasons (2011–2016) the series adopted a quite pessimistic take on our interaction with every-day technologies, with just one episode (the celebrated “San Junipero”) providing a somewhat heart-warming tone and denouement. Yet for its fourth and fifth seasons, the overall tone seems to have shifted to a more hopeful one; in these episodes, if things do not end up well, at least there exists some room for justice to be served and criminals punished. The fact that most of the episodes in season four and five simply develop from the innovative ideas that had been established in previous seasons for the telling of new stories, marks not only that *Black Mirror*’s thematic and formal innovation might have reached an end, but also that the series’ capacity to surprise and discomfort has been “used up.”

that they were in a city, with a row of white buildings opposite, each perfectly painted and maintained and implausibly like the next, and in front of each of these buildings [...] were trees, cherry trees, with buds and a few white blossoms, as though it had snowed recently and the snow had caught in the boughs and leaves, all along the street, in tree after tree after tree, and they stood and stared at this, for it seemed almost unreal [...] only then did they realize that they were in a house of some kind, surely a palace, with rooms upon rooms and marvels upon marvels, and taps that gushed water that was like spring water and was white with bubbles and felt soft, yes soft, to the touch. (2017: 121–122)

By confronting a dystopian image of refugees being persecuted through everyday technology and the marvelous appreciation of an average London environment with no unreal qualities, *Exit West* evinces how relative such perceptions are.

Compare the protagonists' first glimpse of London with, for example, Harry Potter's first peep into a magical place—Diagon Alley—the *Harry Potter* series being a crucial referent of contemporary fantasy literature if only because of its massive consumption:

[Hagrid] grinned at Harry's amazement. They stepped through the archway. Harry looked quickly over his shoulder and saw the archway shrink instantly back into solid wall.

The sun shone brightly on a stack of cauldrons outside the nearest shop. *Cauldrons—All Sizes—Copper, Brass, Pewter, Silver—Self-Stirring—Collapsible* said a sign hanging over them. [...] Harry wished he had about eight more eyes. He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street, trying to look at everything at once: shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping. (Rowling, 2017: 77)

Noticeably, the particulars of both narrations highlight the amazement of those taking in their new surroundings, listing objects, qualities, and impressions—even

when these elements do not constitute in themselves inexistent objects (houses, trees, cauldrons, shops, people). For the protagonists of *Exit West*, even the beach in Mykonos to which they first arrive “seemed miraculous” (2017: 105), so the wonders they experience in a London mansion are certainly the “stuff of a thousand fantasies” (2017: 139). Such descriptions are almost imperative when fantasy characters cross portals into other worlds, and for Nadia and Saeed, the novel seems to suggest, this is *literally* the case. As Isabel Clúa (2017) puts it, fantasy does not simply aim to offer a violation of what we understand to be real but is rather interested in “offering an alternative to the real world” (Rabkin quoted in Clúa, 2017: n.p.). Therefore, when encountering the portrayals of narrative space through the eyes and wonder of the characters, readers accept the marvelous quality of the fictional world and, particularly in the case of *Exit West*, they can realize that though London is certainly not a literal fantasy scenario, for the refugees it certainly represents a dream world.

Referring then to the prominent role of perception and point of view when regarding the marvelous potentiality of reality, it is interesting to look at the episode in which Saeed and Nadia, still in their homeland during the early stages of their romance, consume psychedelic mushrooms.

[Saeed] had concluded that by some quirk of biology or psychology he was simply, and unfortunately, resistant to whatever it was that mushrooms were supposed to do.

So he was unprepared for the feeling of awe that came over him, the wonder with which he then regarded his own skin, and the lemon tree in its clay pot on Nadia’s terrace, as tall as he was, and rooted in its soil, which was in turn rooted in the clay of the pot, which rested upon the brick of the terrace, which was like the mountaintop of this building, which was growing from the earth itself, and from this earthy mountain the lemon tree was reaching up, up, in a gesture so beautiful that Saeed was filled with love, and reminded of his parents, for whom he suddenly felt such gratitude, and a desire for peace,

that peace should come for them all, for everyone, for everything, for we are so fragile, and so beautiful, and surely conflicts could be healed if others had experiences like this, and then he regarded Nadia and saw that she was regarding him and her eyes were like worlds. (2017: 46-47)

This dramatization of a literal shift in perception can be easily linked to the wonderful appreciation of a newfound land, and Hamid's emphasis on the earthly dimensions of space, with its mountaintops and vast landscapes, confronted with the darkness of wars and conflicts lurking in this marvelous space, reminds us of the general focus of stories like the ones set in Tolkien's Middle-earth or, more recently, Martin's Westeros. The run-on sentence with which the narrator conveys Saeed's fantastic concatenation of ideas, leading to his desire for peace and his gratitude, emphasizes the cohesion of this "new world" that Saeed is now witnessing and learning to love, and the fact that it all comes down to a literally altered perception, resonates with what Clúa (2017) emphasizes in her theorization of fantasy: it is all about presenting new ways of understanding our actual world.

Fantasy is therefore present in *Exit West* not in the form of magical doors, which again would be too simplistic and could be disregarded as a formal whim easily explained with the somewhat vague notion of magical realism, which I would not associate with Hamid's novel. Instead, the methodological understanding of fantasy's interests and processes—its focus on positive emotions and the elation brought by the "affective sense of the impossible" (Wolf quoted in Clúa, 2017)—brought about through a redirection of perception, injects Hamid's story with precisely this idea that a new world is possible merely if we learn to shift our conceptions of reality. The genre, thus, also signifies beyond its narrative tropes because it can even be taken as a metaphorical dramatization of a change in perception that we can enact here and now. After all, following from the episode with the psychedelic mushrooms, "Saeed's perspective had returned, hours later, not to normal, for he suspected it was possible he might never think of normal in the same way again, but to something closer to what it had been before they had

eaten these shrooms” (2017: 47). The logic of fantasy, when read under this light, can come to be equated with these very mushrooms, for they certainly let readers into a different vision of reality, via fictional characters who perceive their diverse surroundings with awe and wonder.

Partly Familiar, Partly Novel Too

The ending of the novel further elaborates on the fantasy or science-fictional critical implications of Hamid’s world. As it is customary with fantasy, there is space for hope and a better world:

the apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic, which is to say that while the changes were jarring they were not the end, and life went on, and people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with, and plausible desirable futures began to emerge, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now, and the result was something not unlike relief. (2017: 217)

Exit West projects its denouement into the future, fifty years after Saeed and Nadia fled their country, settled somewhere else, and parted ways to lead independent lives. It seems that the doors remained, and thus the thematic explorations of a new world, with a new kind of society and a new kind of humanity, agree with the typical interest of SF and the desirable “impossibilities” of fantasy. When Nadia goes back to the city of her birth, “the city she found herself in was not a heaven but it was not a hell, and it was familiar but also unfamiliar” (2017: 229). This is certainly no utopia, no magic kingdom. But neither is it a dystopia—not anymore.

In this world, the irrelevance and uselessness of geopolitical borders have led to the virtual disappearance of any sort of frontier. Through the novel, this is presented as a gradual process that finally culminates in a place where “passersby did now pause to look at this old woman in her black robe or this old man with his

stubble” (2017: 230). Even the religious aspect that is predominant for the cultural identity of Muslim countries, like the one in which Nadia and Saeed met, finds itself reformed in a world of magical doors. Saeed’s ultimate connection with religion, once he becomes an alien in London, is directly linked to his displacement: “It seemed to Nadia that the farther 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” (2017: 187). Such a disparity between each character’s assimilation of their alienation eventually makes them take different paths, yet it seems that the inevitability of these changes catches up with Saeed. Having settled in the city of Marin, in California, a place largely composed by migrants where “there were almost no natives, these people having died out or been exterminated long ago” (2017: 197), Saeed meets a preacher whose “wife had come from the same country as Saeed, and so the preacher knew some of Saeed’s language, and his approach to religion was partly familiar to Saeed, while at the same time partly novel, too” (2017: 199). That one aspect which, according to Nadia’s impression, connected Saeed to his hometown starts therefore to evolve and constitute a religious practice that, while perhaps exclusive to Marin, nevertheless satisfies Saeed’s spiritual needs.

In turn, Nadia remains receptive to the various mixtures that take place not only in Marin’s daily life but also in the constitution of her identity. In Marin, Nadia meets a woman whose eyes “seemed an almost inhuman blue, or rather a blue that Nadia had not previously thought of as human” (Hamid 2017: 218), which addresses the ability to shift one’s perceptions and conceptions of the world. Moreover, this woman, a cook,

was, of course, an expert in food, and over the coming weeks and months she introduced Nadia to all sorts of old cuisines, and to new cuisines that were being born, for many of the world’s foods were coming together and being reformed in Marin, and the place was a taster’s paradise, and the rationing that was under way meant you were always a little hungry, and therefore

primed to savor what you got, and Nadia had never before delighted in tasting as she did in the company of the cook, who reminded her a bit of a cowboy, and who made love, when they made love, with a steady hand and a sure eye and a mouth that did little but did it so very well. (2017: 218–219)

Once again, through the stylistic use of Hamid’s long sentences, the cohesion of this idea puts together the combination and hybridity of “new cuisines” with the newly found dimensions of Nadia’s sexuality. In this respect, “the strength of her response no longer surprised her” (Hamid 2017: 200).

Beyond the aspects of identity and spirituality that Nadia and Saeed embody, Marin is presented as the perfect place for creative development.

Some were calling this a new jazz age, and one could walk around Marin and see all kinds of ensembles, humans with humans, humans with electronics, dark skin with light skin with gleaming metal with matte plastic, computerized music and unamplified music and even people who wore masks or hid themselves from view. (2017: 217–218)

Through these examples, *Exit West* is an affirmation of “‘the borders’ of culture insurgent and interstitial existence” (Bhabha 1994: 26). Homi K. Bhabha’s explorations of cultural identity as an ongoing process of negotiation and intersections, amounting to his more general concept of *hybridity*, are easy to spot lurking in the construction of Hamid’s “post-apocalyptic” society (Hamid 2017: 217). That the genres of fantasy and SF can provide creative ways in which to present such performative aspects of culture and society highlights the usefulness of considering, critically and artistically, different perceptions and worldviews. “The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation” (Bhabha 1994: 10). The way Hamid recurs to the capacities of genre fiction to literalize the need for shifting perceptions of our immediate reality

interacts very fittingly with a broader, contemporary understanding of culture, identity, and politics.

The discussion can thus be directed to the actual generic hybridity of *Exit West* as a work not only committed with its literary nature but also with its capacity to address directly sociopolitical issues commonly reserved for “lowbrow” art manifestations. Although it is commonplace to consider the separation between the fields of genre and literary fiction concerning their apparent correspondence with highbrow and lowbrow cultural productions, such dichotomies gain analytical relevance when the different thematic interests that each field develops are confronted or brought together. Günter Leypoldt’s recent exploration of what he refers to as the “turn to genre” in the literary production of the last few decades is a perfect example of the usefulness of this approach. He specifically pays attention to “the asymmetries involved when credentialed novelists with literary ambitions cross over into genre fiction territory” (2018: n.p.):

The distinction between “light entertainment” and “serious literature” is [...] not only about differing practice spaces (reading for pleasure vs. reading for strong valued allegory); it also concerns institutionalized status differences—some readers’ moral-aesthetic binaries have greater weight in the public sphere and its taste-making institutions than others. (Leypoldt, 2018: n.p.)

Yet, although *Exit West* would fit in this category of literary texts that recur to elements of genre fiction, Hamid’s use of the magical doors, as I have shown, departs from Leypoldt’s study cases—Junot Diaz’s *Oscar Wao* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*—in that *Exit West* is actually concerned with the “materialist vision” of SF (Moreno, 2017: n.p.) and the affective dimensions of fantasy (Clúa, 2017), rather than with a “grit aesthetic.” As Leypoldt explains, “[a] grit aesthetic can revitalize conventional literary practice if its use of materials formerly stigmatized as inartistic or low produces a powerful sense of new direction among its tastemaking practitioners” (2018: n.p.). Hamid, though, relegates the very

existence of the magical doors to the background. Their function, rather than to revitalize the idea of teleportation, for example, is to make readers *think* about genre fiction not only so that the rest of the tropes and motifs he employs gain significance as dystopic or utopic elements, but also so that the real-world crisis be seen from a different perspective—from a perspective that relies on our awareness and understanding of what drives the terrible worlds of science fiction, and the happiness to which we all aspire with fantasy.

In a review of *The New Odyssey*, Maya Jasanoff says that books like Kingley’s “start to do for the refugees what British abolitionists did for the slave trade. They mobilise eyewitness testimony to promote empathy, and through empathy, better policy” (2016: n.p.). Perhaps that much is true in terms, once again, of the affect and concern that such non-fictional accounts of the situation raise. Nevertheless, when it comes to eliciting critical reflections and communicating perspectives that can help us see the world and its events from a different angle, maybe fiction is in a better position to do so. Genre fiction, particularly, has the advantage of reaching more readers than any other type of literature. In playing with the precepts of fantasy and science fiction, Hamid is not only appealing to a broader readership of people already *concerned* with the crisis; he is, at the same time, elaborating on topics of change, adaptation, and the global significance of these massive migrations. By not centering his book on the almost clichéd—though not unimportant—attention to the empathy raised by the refugees’ voyages, the author seems to be more interested in proposing reflections about the situation than merely raising concern. Although it would be important to elaborate further on whether *Exit West* comes closer to a blurring of the fields of literary and genre fiction—although such an ambition would be unnecessary, from my perspective—at least it is clear that working consciously with the notion of genres, literary authors have the capacity to create possible imaginative realities that are—paradoxically—rooted in events that matter.

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