



ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

Exit the Big Other: “Disintegration of the Big Other” Through the Unsymbolizability of Trauma in Exit West

Muhammad Ehtesham¹, Atteq ur Rahman^{2*}

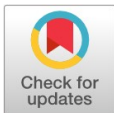
¹ Institute of Management Sciences, Peshawar, Pakistan

² Islamia College Peshawar, Peshawar, Pakistan

Abstract— This research investigates the cause of the “demise of the big Other” after the experience of trauma and the symbolic meaning of the elements of magic realism in Exit West. Saeed and Nadia, and countless such victims of conflict, pass through magical doors to escape their predicament. This paper explores the symbolic meaning of passage through such doors and comments on the freedom afforded by the seeming failure of social rules in the wake of traumatizing conflict as well as the elements of unfreedom on the other end that await those who escape. This study undertakes Psychoanalytic Criticism of the primary text, chiefly relying on the findings of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Zizek in order to explain the mysterious collapse of socio-cultural regulations. Saeed and Nadia, in Mohsin Hamid’s Exit West, are involved in a secret relationship because the big Other of social rules in the novel has no place for such a human connection. However, this big Other, as social authority which provides Symbolic Efficiency, collapses following each traumatic encounter, primarily the killing of Saeed’s mother, allowing Nadia to live with Saeed. The big Other’s prohibition is arrested because of the very nature of trauma: the big Other is the domain of language whereas trauma is a manifestation of the Real, beyond language. Ergo, the big Other is subverted by trauma. Saeed and Nadia pass through magical doors into a realm where their regional social conventions are nullified. These doors represent trauma and open into spaces of relative freedom. In these spaces, the big Other invades again, represented by little Others in various modalities; nevertheless, remnants of freedom still exist. Besides bringing to light and interpreting trauma in a renowned work of literature, a new mode of resistance to social rules is discovered.

Index Terms— Trauma, Big Other, The Real, The Symbolic, Freedom, Resistance, Violence

Received: 2023; **Accepted:** 2023; **Published:** 31 May 2023



Introduction

Background of the Study

This paper is a Lacanian-Zizekian commentary on the traumatic experience in Mohsin Hamid’s 2017 novel, Exit West. The novel follows Saeed and Nadia, its protagonists, through the trials of living in a conflict-wrecked unnamed city and their eventual escape through the realm of the magical real, i.e., through magical doors. The said characters attempt to escape the conflict and oppression at the hands of an unnamed entity/group that resembles a violent extremist group, who are dubbed as the “militants” (Hamid, 2017, p. 30). Nadia and Saeed leave their hometown through the mentioned doors and end up first in the island of Mykonos in Greece, then in a palace in London, and finally the Bay Area in the US.

*Email: atteq_h@hotmail.com

There are certain aspects of *Exit West* (2017) that invite research. The first striking feature of the novel is the intervention of Magic Realism. Magic Realism, as a sub-genre, takes the form of “impossible” and “strange” occurrences that “disrupt” an otherwise realist narrative, for which the likes of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie are famed (Gray, 1994, p. 167). The symbolic implications of employing the technique of Magic Realism are intriguing and invite a decryption. Since magic realism is a category of fiction that features disruptions in the day-to-day realist reality, these researchers have called it an “intervention.” Interventions stand out and require investigation. Moreover, *Exit West* (2017) features migrations taking place all over the globe. Oppression, violence and trauma are experienced by people both where they are migrating from and where they are migrating to. Therefore, there is a need to analyze and interpret the nature and consequences of this oppression, violence and trauma. Furthermore, obvious questions of identity and race are raised by narratives that revolve around migration.

This paper provides an interpretative answer to the question of the employment of magic realism. Secondly, it offers a description and analysis of the oppression, violence and trauma suffered by the characters. Thirdly, it provides an in-depth interpretation of why oppressive social rules and socio-cultural prohibitions collapse following violence and trauma. Lastly, this research highlights a certain niche of liberty and the freedom to build new communities discovered by characters as a result of the downfall of oppressive social structures.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research posits that the characters Saeed and Nadia are in a secret relationship disallowed by conventional morality under the rules prescribed by the big Other. The big Other is the domain of conventions and social laws for the Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek (Myers, 2003, p. 49). Moreover, it is the domain of “language and law” for the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (Evans, 1996, p. 203). Simply put, the big Other is employed to mean not only the edifice of social rules that exist within a society, but the whole fabric of social life, including language. However, following Saeed’s mother’s killing, Nadia is somehow enabled within the social structure to reside under the same roof with Saeed and his father, as opposed to social dictates. This research investigates the cause of this “demise of the big Other” (Myers, 2003, p. 55). Numerous victims exit their homelands through magical doors. This paper explores the symbolic meaning of passage through such doors and comments on the freedom afforded by the seeming failure of social rules in the wake of traumatizing conflict, besides analyzing elements of unfreedom on the other end that await those who escape.

Literature Review

Exit West is a 2017 novel. Hence, it is very new to the world of research, consequently, these researchers could not find any research work specifically foregrounding the element of trauma in the novel. In fact, even besides researchers, not many people have, thus far, talked about the technicalities of trauma apropos *Exit West* (2017). However, the previous section of this research laid out some areas of research that *Exit West* (2017) has a tendency of inviting. One such area that scholars such as Mir (2018), Perfect (2019) and Carter (2021) have looked into is the representation of a refugee crisis in the novel and the representation of migrants who arrive foreign shores as refugees. Obviously, Sadiq, Saleem and Javaid (2020) look into the issues of power and migration. Scholarship, like Fisher (2018), has also looked into the issue from the perspective of new settlements and asylum. Indeed, since the novel features global migrations, researchers like Naydan (2019) have written about globalization, among other things, in their work. Knudsen and Rahbek (2021) employ the concept of a “shared humanity” in their dissection of globalization in Hamid’s work. Interestingly, Bilal (2020) sees the novel as a “world novel.” Some scholars have analyzed the entanglement of history and geography in the novel as well (Sadaf, 2021). Like the current work, researchers such as Popescu and Jahamah (2020) have delved into aspects such as state terrorism and resistance. Whenever we encounter issues of migration, postcolonial scholarship always presents its say in it. In the same vein, Lagji (2018) looks into *Exit West* (2017) from a postcolonial lens. As regards narrative technique, Fielder (2020) explores “stowaway stories and mythological realism” in *Exit West* (2017). This work posits that the magical doors in the work represent passage through trauma. Intriguingly, scholars have provided their own interpretations of the significance of the doors. Chambers and Chambers (2019) draw a parallel between the magical doors and digital technology.

Viewing the available literature in the specific niche of this research paper, Amal Zaman (2017), remarks on Aleksandar Hamon’s idea of trauma as an element that upsets the normal and is an “antidote to normalization” (as cited in Zaman, 2017). This is considered as the “upside of trauma” that is to be borne in mind when one encounters the novel. Nevertheless, Zaman’s review does not elaborate on how the traumatic counters normalization apropos *Exit West* (2017). This paper elaborates on how social norms are fractured by traumatic experiences.

For Veena Venugopal (2017), Hamid employs magical doors in order not to “limit” his book to the grueling struggle of migrating as a refugee. This move helps Hamid to highlight “post-journey trauma” as far as the portrayal of the idea that arriving from a war torn location is not a “happy ending” is concerned. However, the present work focuses heavily on pre-journey trauma underscored by the narrative. Moreover, close to what Venugopal claims, in this paper the passage through magical doors is precisely symbolic of trauma, and the cause of post-migration unhappiness is the “return of the big Other” where social oppression—compromised by trauma—returns after migration (as explained in section 4. of this paper).

Larson (2017) claims, in his review, that migration as a traumatizing event causes the breakdown of even the “strongest relationships”:

such as Nadia and Saeed's. Moreover, since western cities are surrounded by smaller cities of migrants, people inevitably begin to mingle, "realigning themselves with different peoples, but the trauma of the transformation is anything but seamless". This paper, as mentioned earlier, considers the escape through the magical doors a symbol of passing through trauma. Moreover, the fact that people begin to "realign themselves with different peoples" is a possibility afforded by the freedom that is left behind in the wake of trauma.

In all of the works reviewed above, nowhere are the theoretical technicalities of the psychoanalytic category of trauma been discussed nor has the same been connected to freedom, such as in this paper. This is the particular area within which this paper functions.

Methodology

As far as research on literary texts is concerned, a great chunk of research is carried out by the application of certain modalities and ways of reading. These authors have looked at *Exit West* and tried to answer questions that arose during the reading. For instance, the researchers attempted to answer why magic realism has been employed or why social rules suddenly lost their operation.

Moreover, this paper is literary theory in praxis. One of the ways in which Lacanian Psychoanalytic Criticism is described is that critics see the text in light of broader Lacanian concepts and "orientations" (Barry). This paper views the text of *Exit West* in light of Lacan's theory of trauma and his concepts such as "the big Other", "the Symbolic Order", "the Real" and so on. Besides Lacan, Slavoj Žižek's (who is a renowned Lacanian) conception of the big Other and his understanding of "the disintegration of the big Other" are also employed. Hence, the methodology could be seen as Psychoanalytic Criticism or Lacanian Criticism.

Furthermore, while applying theory to text, this paper frequently extends applications of theory and finds novel applications. For instance, where Lacan himself sees trauma as beyond the symbolic order, these authors see trauma as a force that is not only beyond trauma but one that begins to erode the manifestations of the symbolic order such as social regulations and structures.

Research Objectives

This paper revolves around the following core objectives. It attempts

- 1) To explain the use of the elements of magic realism in the narrative,
- 2) To explore the relationship between trauma and social rules,
- 3) To offer reasons behind the disintegration of social rules through trauma, and
- 4) To shed light on the personal and social consequences of traumatic experiences.

Significance of the Study

This research is an addition to scholarly work on narratives that feature trauma. The central contributions of this paper could be seen as psychological insight, building on theory and a novel application of theory. Following Lacan, trauma is first seen as an experience that is located outside the symbolic order and the big Other. This research discovers the fact operational in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017): trauma could also be seen as a force that resists and causes the demise of some of the manifestations of the symbolic order such as the big Other of social rules and prohibitions. This point is derivative of Žižek's "disintegration of the big Other" and is a new application of the concept where the big Other collapses not because it is no longer believed—as in Žižek—but as a function of trauma itself.

The "Demise Of The Big Other" Post-trauma

To commence, the socio-cultural atmosphere of the characters is introduced. The story follows the characters of Saeed and Nadia and their relationship in an unnamed city. Their social conditions are formed both by pre-existing norms and the conservatism imposed by the occupation of militants. It is fairly obvious that the big Other "the communal network of social institutions, customs and laws" (Myers, 2003, p. 49) neither recognizes their relationship, nor allows it. The covert Nadia-Saeed relationship, like so many others in conservative societies, relies heavily on mobile phone communication. During their first rendezvous in a Chinese restaurant, they speak "quietly, cautious not to attract the attention of nearby diners". Young people such as Saeed and Nadia could meet in the day in "parks, and campuses, and restaurants, cafés" but could not meet at night (Hamid, 2017, p. 20). Nadia lives alone in an apartment, which is unusual—not to mention difficult—for a single woman in such a society. To invite a man over to her apartment is termed "tricky" (Hamid, 2017, p. 20). The first time she invites Saeed over, she goes up to her apartment without him and throws down a bag containing one of her robes and her apartment key. Saeed is instructed to hide in a "darkened alley" and disguise himself as a woman before coming up for the tryst in her apartment (Hamid, 2017, p. 22). Through such manoeuvres, they are able to continue their relationship as the militants and the state engage in violent conflict for control of the city. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that Nadia wears a robe not for religious

reasons but as a form of “self-protection” (Hamid, 2017, p. 19), which is indicative of the perceived level of restraint on personal freedom in the society she breathes in.

It is not that men and women are unable to be together in public. A married couple such as Saeed’s parents could spend time in cafés (Hamid, 2017, p. 14). However, a married couple is that which enjoys Symbolic Efficiency. Symbolic Efficiency, in Zizek, is that element which renders a fact operative only if it is recognized by the big Other (Myers, 2003, p. 50). This means that for something to be rendered true, it has to be considered true by either the larger social structure or authority. Marriage gives couples that particular certificate of recognition from the big Other. The Nadia-Saeed relationship, however, does not enjoy this ratification—being out of wedlock. In fact, as the militants’ control over the city increases, unmarried couples are punished by death (Hamid, 2017, p. 54).

Eventually, as the conflict between the state and the militants escalates, they could no longer meet out in public and only met at Nadia’s place. This, too, obviously becomes more and more risky. All the more dangerous is a single woman living alone. Hence, Saeed asks Nadia to move in with him and take up his room. Since this could have never presented itself as an option, Saeed would “explain things to his parents” but they would have to be “chaste” and live in separate rooms. This could be nothing short of “bizarre” in their social conditions, for Nadia, but her consideration of the idea is cut short by the death of Saeed’s mother due to a “stray heavy caliber round” that goes through their car’s windshield (Hamid, 2017, p. 47). To offer aid and comfort, Nadia arrives at their place on the day of the funeral and never returns to her own apartment. When people visit their place, as is customary following an acquaintance or relative’s death, they somehow cannot inquire about Nadia’s place there or her relationship to Saeed and his father (except through their glances), since “it was not the sort of occasion to ask” such a thing” (Hamid, 2017, p. 50). Hence, she is somehow enabled by the particularity of the situation to walk around their home serving the guests. Henceforth, she stays with them, no questions asked, calling Saeed’s father, “father” and the latter likewise calls her “daughter” (Hamid, 2017, p. 50). In normal circumstances, Saeed’s father’s relationship with Nadia would not have been recognized or allowed, let alone Saeed’s relationship with Nadia. For her to live with the father and son would have been unthinkable, but for Saeed’s mother’s tragic death, which somehow mysteriously causes the demise of socio-cultural prohibitions. The trauma of the death of Saeed’s mother causes the demise of the big Other, insofar as its social prohibition is eroded. The “disintegration/demise of the big Other”, in Slavoj Zizek, is a concept that describes the condition of the postmodern realization of the big Other as a lie. This obviously, affords freedom (Myers, 2003, p. 49). Zizek’s concept has been appropriated here to describe another *modus operandi* of such a demise: the disintegration of the big Other that is followed by trauma.

Moreover, in times such as those in *Exit West* (2017), violent states of affairs seem like dreams until they are made “evisceratingly real” once a relative or an acquaintance is affected. That person, for Nadia, is her cousin who was blown to pieces in an explosion. Although she is not on talking terms with her relatives, she had planned to visit the grave alone; nevertheless, she ends up taking Saeed with her (Hamid, 2017, p. 24). This event is marked by evidence of trauma since she informs Saeed of the effect of her cousin’s death on her “through her silences” (Hamid, 2017, p. 24). When she does speak to Saeed after visiting the grave, she circumvents the topic and speaks about something else (Hamid, 2017, p. 24). The marker of trauma is a lack of symbolization (as explained in section 3.), a resistance to verbalize. She puts her hand on the grave without saying anything, or offering a prayer (Hamid, 2017, 24). Granted, this is characteristic of her; nevertheless, the whole event is underscored by a lack of speech which indicates trauma. Consequently, this traumatic event causes the “disintegration of the big Other”, insofar as contrary to social expectations, she goes to the grave neither with relatives nor alone but with her boyfriend, within a relationship uncertified by the big Other. This is also why, after Nadia is groped at the bank and sexually assaulted, she attempts to make Saeed have sex with her, not because she particularly wants to, “but because she wanted to cauterize the incident from outside the bank in her memory” (Hamid, 2017, p. 42). Whatever the psychological reason behind this, she overtly tries to do precisely the opposite of what is expected of her by the big Other of conventional morality: to rebel and have sex with her boyfriend. This is the consequence of the collapse of social prohibitions that logically follows traumatic experience.

The Unsymbolizability of Trauma

The question, obviously, is why. How does trauma make it possible for the big Other of social prohibitions to suffer a demise? Jacques Lacan frequently employs three orders, in order to explain the psyche, psychological functions and the growth of human beings from childhood to adulthood. These three orders are famously known as the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Two of the three Psychoanalytic Orders, the Symbolic and the Real are especially relevant here. The Symbolic is the domain of “structure”, of “Law” and is obviously the “linguistic dimension” (Evans, 1996, p. 203). Lacan especially uses the Symbolic order to denote social regulations, which is akin to his concept of the big Other. He also means to place the language system and the phenomenon of symbolization under the ambit of the Symbolic. Jacques Lacan’s order of the Real is that which is “beyond the symbolic” and “outside language” (Evans, 1996, p. 162). The Real is the domain of the unconscious and those unspeakable realities of human life. In post 1964 Lacan, the French psychoanalyst begins to associate his concept of the Real with trauma. Trauma is that “inassimilable” element that blocks “the process of signification.” Lacan’s basic insight, building on Freud, is that trauma is Real since it is “unsymbolizable”, and the Real fails to be “completely absorbed into the symbolic, into social reality” (Homer, 2005, p. 83). “The traumatic event is the encounter with the real, extrinsic to signification” (Evans, 1996, p.

25). Hence, when Nadia is groped by someone at the bank, in a crowd, attempting “to penetrate her with his finger”, she is shocked to the extent that she neither shouts nor speaks. In front of Saeed, she trembles, but cannot speak (Hamid, 2017, p. 41). It is worth noting that on this occasion as well, the big Other is resisted (after the trauma of sexual assault), since she does not offer Saeed a robe when she finds him outside her apartment, which she normally does in order to evade the punishment of the big Other. She no longer cares about socio-cultural prohibitions post-trauma.

Lacan equates the big Other with his Symbolic order, with “language and the law.” The big Other is the place where “speech is constituted” (Evans, 1996, p. 136). Lacan’s “law” is “the fundamental principles which underlie all social relations” (Evans, 1996, p. 101). Since, trauma is that which is Real the “unsymbolizable” it is, then, opposed to the big Other. In Lacanian Psychoanalysis, it is in the theoretical exposition of trauma itself that presents it as that which resists symbolization and the domain of the big Other. This is why even the city where Nadia and Saeed reside and eventually escape is never named throughout the course of the narrative, since it is the locale of traumatizing conflict and cannot be symbolized.

In *Exit West* (2017), trauma is that radical element which dissolves the big Other’s socio-cultural norms. In the wake of the traumatic event of Saeed’s mother’s death, the cultural norm that required separation between the unmarried couple “disintegrates.” This disintegration is caused by the opposition of trauma to the big Other. The big Other being that which is symbolic collapses for the subject of trauma, since the subject of trauma undergoes an experience of the Real: the unsymbolizable. Contrary to custom, both Saeed and Nadia think that it is “natural” for her to live with Saeed and his father. Saeed and Nadia relish this particular freedom that has been caused by the traumatic event and call it a “cozy” “end of the world” (Hamid, 2017, p. 52). What is relished here is, needless to say, not the trauma but the freedom followed by it the “demise of the big Other.” “Saeed was grateful for Nadia’s presence, for the way in which she altered the silences that descended on the apartment, not necessarily filling them with words, but making them less bleak in their muteness” (Hamid, 2017, p. 51). Being what it is, a traumatized apartment, it is ipso facto filled with silences. Her presence does not alleviate the pain of trauma. It offers a sign of how trauma causes the breakdown of the socio-cultural big Other’s prohibition. The old rules no longer apply, and this fact is attested by her presence: it is the breakdown of Symbolic Efficiency. The big Other is no longer appealed to in order to certify her presence there. Although Saeed had decided not to overstep cultural boundaries (the morality of his parents), out of respect for his parents while she was there, he nevertheless enters her room and engages in sexual activity (except sex), spurred by “horror and desire” caused by the atrocities of the militants (Hamid, 2017, p. 53). The conditions enforced by the militants who are responsible not only for the death of Saeed’s mother but also for punishing such couples by death cause the “horror.” This horror becomes inexplicably coupled with desire, a “mad desire” where one desires to perform the prohibited precisely because it is prohibited (Lacan, 1981, p. 243). This coupling of desire with horror serves as a subversive element that dissolves the very conditions that lead to the horror: Nadia and Saeed are romantically involved right where the big Other’s prohibition is lethal.

Moreover, as per norms, Saeed’s father is expected to perform the role of embodying the prohibition of the Law and the big Other, but he remains unconcerned. Saeed’s father, following his wife’s sudden death, is clearly traumatized as he cries “silently, without tears, his body seized as though by a stutter, or a shiver” (Hamid, 2017, p. 50). His emotional condition cannot be symbolized. Through an experience of the Real (trauma), the big Other has died. Hence, he cannot be the conduit of the big Other’s prohibition. Before Saeed and Nadia leave through the magical door, Saeed’s father asks Nadia to take care of his son and hopes that she would eventually marry him but leaves this to their free discretion (Hamid, 2017, p. 60). There would not have been a possible alternative to marriage in the big Other’s tradition, but the father of prohibition no longer exists.

The characters’ social conditions compelled them to comply with the “rules on dress” and “rules on beard” (Hamid, 2017, p. 55). Under such a regime that micro-manages behaviour, unspeakable horror, and surely death was in store for them if they were found out. Their romance becomes almost revolutionary, and bears evidence of the “demise of the big Other.” Post-trauma, Saeed and Nadia discover a space of relative freedom from the demands of social law. Saeed’s house, then, begins to symbolize this niche of liberty. When Saeed and Nadia plan to escape their city, the father refuses to leave (Hamid, 2017, p. 59), since he has been more severely traumatized by the killing of his wife (life as he knew it had ended). He is the one that stays to perpetuate his freedom in this unique space: the severer the trauma, the harder the fall of the big Other. The spirit of the deceased mother stays pinned to this space and begins to symbolize a sad freedom. Hence, Saeed’s father stays not for any future but because “the past offered more to him” (Hamid, 2017, p. 59). What the past offers him is its own demise: the demise of the traditional socio-cultural norms of the past.

When Saeed and Nadia, prior escape, talk about their plans ahead, they speak of escape, doors and trivialities “nothings” (Hamid, 2017, p. 117). The nothings they talk about stand in for a lack of speech, where the Symbolic stands in for the Real of the new-found freedom. This lack of speech functions as the vacuum left behind after the removal of the big Other. Hence, Nadia thinks that by leaving Saeed’s father behind, they were in a way killing him, since when people migrate they kill those they leave behind (Hamid, 2017, p. 60). Rather than being a general platitude, this implies that they are rendering the old irrelevant, symbolically, rendering the big Other of traditional social norms obsolete.

Magical Doors and Resistance

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) is a shifting narrative which smoothly moves away from the Nadia-Saeed story to other places around the globe where conflict and trauma or their threat exists. From a psychological standpoint, the conflict or the threat of it lies everywhere simultaneously in Australia, Japan, America and so on. From the perspective of a narrative of trauma, not only does conflict become transnational, but conflict cannot be circumscribed into any symbolizable zone. By extension, an escape cannot happen in the symbolic world of visas but can only occur through something beyond the logic of the symbolic. Hence, all over the globe, people escape conflict and move throughout the world via magical doors that open in one country and lead to another. Saeed and Nadia plan to escape their city through one of these doors.

Passage through these doors imitates a passage through trauma. When Nadia enters it, she experiences first a "blackness", which is described as an "extinguishing". Then, she undergoes a "gasping struggle" while she fights to exit the door. The process ends leaving her "cold and bruised" (Hamid, 2017, p. 63). First, the subject experiences a blackness which is like an extinguishing a gap where nothing could be understood, since trauma is marked by a "failure to comprehend the experience" (Van der Kolk, 2000). The subject, obviously, struggles and fights the experience and ends up being "bruised." Going through these doors is an experience of an absence, of a gap in the Symbolic. This gap is opened up by trauma. Therefore, exiting the doors is like passing through the "demise of the big Other." Nadia and Saeed, attempt to escape the big Other of oppression in their city and pass through a door of this nature. When they first meet the agent that is supposed to take them to one such door, he instructs Nadia to uncover her head which she had covered because a woman was supposed to cover her head in public. This, as Nadia discovers, is not a request but an injunction (Hamid, 2017, p. 56). The uncovering serves as a rite of passage into the "disintegration of the Other" of old morality. Only after fulfilling this prerequisite, she could enter the door.

In the midst of traumatizing conflict, the Symbolic fails to operate, insofar as the path for the subject could no longer be laid out by the Symbolic Order. Saeed initially thought he would go through the magical door first, to ascertain safety for Nadia to follow. At the same time, leaving her behind alone equally seemed dangerous (Hamid, 2017, p. 63). Whatever he has learnt in life through the language of the big Other cannot provide him an answer out of the quandary. The Symbolic can no longer answer any questions at this point. Ergo, when Nadia first sees the door, she sees it as an opaque darkness through which she could see nothing and from which nothing is reflected back either, "like a beginning and an end [...] both like dying and like being born" (Hamid, 2017, p. 63). This paradoxical state could be described as the death of the big Other and the birth of a new condition whose path is yet to be laid out. It leads to a place beyond the restrictions of social conventions.

As they exit their city and then exit Mykonos (in Greece), they reside for some time in a Palace in London (Hamid, 2017, p. 75) where they occupy their own room for some time and are freely able to be together. They exit the control locus of the big Other of their city and through trauma/the doors they find themselves in a place without old rules. In their previous place of residence (the city), living in the same room would have been impossible.

As stated earlier, after having left through the door they find themselves in Greece, on the island of Mykonos which they discover is safe "except when it [is] not" and in that sense was like other places (Hamid, 2017, p. 65). As they journey the world through the doors, they witness violence existing ubiquitously. When they move next to a palace in London, they find a bathroom where Nadia decides to bathe and wash her clothes. Having taken too long, to Saeed's reckoning, since he thinks it is not safe, he reprimands her for standing out of the bathroom wrapped in towels. Saeed harshly rebukes her, "you can't stand here like that" (Hamid, 2017, p. 77). This is the moment of the big Other's "return." Although, Žižek speaks of the "disintegration of the big Other and its Return" in terms of postmodernity and claims that the "paradox of postmodernity" is that the freedom found as a consequence of this demise is seen as a "burden" and there is a return to a "desire for discipline." In order to counterbalance this demise, since the freedom is too much to handle, "partial big Others" or "little big Others" are created (Myers, 2003, p. 55). When the big Other disintegrates as a result of trauma, the freedom it creates is almost absolute. Hence, Saeed begins to stand in for a "partial big Other." The big Other's prohibition returns here to interrupt the continuation of freedom. Nevertheless, Nadia's strong objection "Don't tell me what I can do" (Hamid, 2017, p. 77) bears the residue of the collapse of the big Other. Henceforth, "friction" begins to take place between the two. Later, Saeed is "shocked by her tone" again (Hamid, 2017, p. 80), but this new way of speaking is precisely the straightforwardness afforded to them/Nadia by the demise of the big Other, where Saeed has begun to act like a partial Other of patriarchal authority. He is, moreover, the only one who disapproves when resident-migrants of the palace in London begin to take valuables of the palace. His objection seems "absurd" to Nadia (Hamid, 2017, p. 80) in light of the disintegration of older right-wrong binaries, but since he stands in for the new Other, he objects. Whether or not having fled oppressive violence, being surrounded by the threat of violence with nowhere to go, Nadia and others in the palace think that they cannot partake of the luxury of right and wrong. Be that as it may, it seems like moral codes have become redundant for them. Saeed insists that they leave the Nigerian majority Palace and move to another house of migrants with people from his own city/country. In that case, though they would have to sleep apart but be safer. Nadia refuses, claiming "here we have our own room [...] Why would we give that up to sleep apart?" (Hamid, 2017, p. 91). She is unwilling to relinquish the newfound freedom of being able to be in the same room with Saeed, since

that is the one freedom particularly characteristic of departing the location of suppressive norms.

Having witnessed the “fury” of “nativists” (the locals in London) and their desire to slaughter the migrants, Nadia contemplates the identical nature of her previous and current predicament, and questions whether anything had been achieved by migrating. However, once she notices the multicultural and multiethnic nature of her new community of troubled migrants and the fact that where she was from had “stifled” her for almost the entirety of her lifespan, she was convinced of her departure: “its time for her had passed, and a new time was here, and, fraught or not, she relished this like the wind in her face on a hot day” (Hamid, 2017, pp. 94-95). What she relishes, is not mere novelty. If so, this would make little sense since she is not any less troubled in London. She cherishes the gap left behind after socio-cultural norms have been eroded, since there is little promise of anything else. The narrator terms all the migrants (of various nationalities, mostly Nigerians) as “residents of the house” (Hamid, 2017, p. 77). Of course, none of them own the house, they had appeared through a magical door in the house; nonetheless, they are termed such because they live in the palace outside Symbolic Efficiency and the latter had been compromised by traumatizing conflict. When the police ask the residents to clear the London house, most of the residents decide not to comply and they resist the police operation to do so (Hamid, 2017, p. 92). After the big Other is seen firsthand to suffer a demise, the arrival of other big Others is resisted precisely to retain the freedom gained as a result of the demise. After the collapse of the older Other, these migrants who fled conflict zones through the doors in the palace in London surrounded by the police and the even more dangerous nativists, begin to build a “community” (Hamid, 2017, p. 80). New orders are created after the previous ones are left behind, as the gap opened up by the Lacanian Real is re-entered by the arrival of new Others. The Nigerian elders create a micro-government and Nadia was included in the Palace where they would settle various issues such as “room disputes or claims of theft or unneighbourly behaviour” and so on. Though this “council’s” meetings were not exciting, nevertheless “Nadia looked forward to them” because they symbolized “the birth of something new” (Hamid, 2017, p. 89). The creation of a new community begins to symbolize freedom for Nadia.

The idea of freedom thus found culminates at the end of the novel when Nadia and Saeed move to the Bay Area in the US. An African American preacher whose wife originally belonged to Saeed’s birthplace has a daughter with whom Saeed gets involved. She is one of “the campaign leaders of the plebiscite movement” who demand a local assembly for everyone in the Bay Area with suffrage for all (unlike other such entities where some have not been considered “human enough” to be given a role in): a democracy where “justice might be less easily denied.” It is unclear how this particular government would exist in simultaneity “with other pre-existing bodies of government” but it would first function with “moral authority” (Hamid, 2017, p. 129). This ideal council would grant suffrage to illegal migrants, since the ground on which it would stand would be the demise of the big Other: on the rubble of previous regulatory and governing authorities.

Conclusion

This paper analyses the traumatic experience in Mohsin Hamid’s 2017 novel, *Exit West*. It is interesting that once the conflict-induced traumatic event occurs, the big Other as authority for prohibition and oppression collapses. Moreover, the big Other of traditional cultural values/norms also disintegrates. Saeed and Nadia secretly date each other, since the big Other does not allow this. However, once Saeed’s mother is killed, Nadia moves in with him and his father. This research investigates how, in the wake of the traumatic event, social rules are suddenly nullified. This makes it possible for an unmarried couple to live together and for Nadia to be integrated into the family without any certificate from society—something that was entirely unimaginable prior to trauma. The cause of this demise of social structures is the nature of trauma itself. Trauma is a manifestation of the Lacanian Real: it cannot be symbolized. Since, the big Other of social customs is inscribed within the Lacanian Symbolic, with the storm of trauma big Other disintegrates. This opens up a niche of freedom unique to victims. The members of Saeed and Nadia’s city escape the conflict through magical doors, since an escape cannot happen in the symbolic but can only occur through something which represents trauma: the domain of magic realism which becomes similar to the Lacanian Real, insofar as it is beyond symbolic, in this case. Passage through the doors that provide escape functions as passage through trauma itself: opening up a gap in the big Other where the big Other’s hold is arrested.

In the wake of traumatic conflict, the Other of socio-cultural oppression and that of modes of regulation disintegrates. Obviously, the Other returns in new forms of regulation. Nevertheless, this opens a space for the subject to seek liberation from previous regulations. Specifically, this opens a space of freedom for the migrant who had hitherto been subjected to suppressive norms and trauma. The symbolic collapses through conflict and trauma. Though the symbolic must return in order to give expression to the space of freedom opened by conflict in new forms of the big Other; nevertheless, resistance and freedom are retained.

This work provides insight into trauma and solves the puzzle of the mysterious resistance of traumatized people to social norms. It also sheds light on the mystery behind the resistance to oppressive authority, once a certain line is crossed (once the subjects are traumatized). The experience of traumatizing violence in any form has a silver lining of freedom and leads to a greater capacity to resist, to change the world. Future research may trace other, numerous examples for this curious relationship between trauma and freedom to cement the findings of this research and shape it into a proper theory. Future researchers may also combine scholarly work in psychology and literature to lay the foundation of this theory.

REFERENCES

- Bilal, M. (2020). Reading Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* as a World Novel. *Journal of World Literature*, 5(3), 410-427. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24056480-00503006>
- Carter, J. (2021). How far are we prepared to go? Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and the refugee crisis. *Textual Practice*, 35(4), 619-638. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1745877>
- Chambers, C., & Chambers, C. (2019). The Doors of Posthuman Sensory Perception in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*, 213-252. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52089-0_6
- Evans, D. (1996). *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Fielder, E. R. (2021). Stowaway stories and mythological realism in Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, 12(1), 331-346. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc_00035_1
- Fisher, B. L. (2018). Doors to safety: exit west, refugee resettlement, and the right to asylum. *Mich. L. Rev.*, 117, 1119. <https://doi.org/10.36644/mlr.117.6.doors>
- Gray, M. (1994). *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Singapore: Longman Singapore.
- Hamid, M. (2017). *Exit West*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Homer, S. (2005). *Jacques Lacan*. Oxon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203347232>
- Knudsen, E. R., & Rahbek, U. (2021). Radical hopefulness in Mohsin Hamid's map of the world: A reading of *Exit West* (2017). *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57(4), 442-454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2021.1889641>
- Lacan, J. (1981). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*. J.A Miller (Ed.). A. Sheridan (Trans.). New York: Norton. (Original work published 1973).
- Lagji, A. (2019). Waiting in motion: mapping postcolonial fiction, new mobilities, and migration through Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. *Mobilities*, 14, 2, 218-232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2018.1533684>
- Larson, C. (2017). *Review: Mohsin Hamid's "Exit West"*. [Review of the book *Exit West*, by M. Hamid]. Counterpunch.
- Mir, M. A. (2018). Global Refugee Crisis: A Study of Mohsin Hamid's Novel *Exit West*. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities*, 3(1), 15-16.
- Myers, T. (2003). *Slavoj Zizek*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203634400>
- Naydan, L. M. (2019). Digital Screens and National Divides in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. *Studies in the Novel*, 51(3), 433-451. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2019.0048>
- Perfect, M. (2019). 'Black holes in the fabric of the nation': refugees in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 23(2), 187-201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2019.1665896>
- Popescu, M. I., & Jahamah, A. (2020). 'London is a City Built on the Wreckage of Itself': State Terrorism and Resistance in Chris Cleave's *In-cendiary* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. *The London Journal*, 45(1), 123-145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03058034.2019.1687203>
- Sadaf, S. (2021). "We are all migrants through time": History and geography in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. In *Writing Brexit* (pp. 52-63). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003171980-5>
- Sadiq, N., Saleem, A. U., & Javaid, S. (2020). Subjectivity, power affairs and migration: a foucauldian analysis of hamid's exit west. *Global Regional Review*, 1, 584-593. [https://doi.org/10.31703/grr.2020\(V-I\).61](https://doi.org/10.31703/grr.2020(V-I).61)
- Van der Kolk, B. (2000). Posttraumatic stress disorder and the nature of trauma. *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 2(1), 7. <https://doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2000.2.1/bvdkolk>
- Venugopal, V. (2017). *Doors to Nowhere*. [Review of the book *Exit West*, by M. Hamid]. The Hindu BusinessLine. Retrieved from
- Zaman, A. (2017). *Migration and Gender: A Review of Mohsin Hamid's Exit West*. [Review of the book *Exit West*, by M. Hamid]. The Massachusetts Review.