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# TRAUMATIC TRANSNATIONALISM: THE REFUGEE AS TRANSNATIONAL SUBALTERN IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST*

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**Abstract**

*Transnationalism as an academic discourse has significantly altered the way immigration and cross-border movements have been interpreted by mainstream academia. With its emphasis on how national borders concede to the demands of inter-national movements propelled by globalization, ease of access to transport and communication, religious/political persecution and other socio-cultural factors, transnationalism has established itself as a major agent in policy formulation and decision making by states across the world. The figure of the refugee is a problematic one in discourses of transnationalism in as much as the 'refugee situation', as different from the 'diasporic/immigrant situation', is one that entails a completely different envisaging of transnationalism. As opposed to the diaspora, the community of refugees cannot, at least at the superficial level, be termed a 'productive' one, serving to extend the transnational base of the place of settlement. Refugees are perceived of as parasitical entities draining the resources of the countries in which they settle with no potential contribution to its economy or capital base. The post 9/11 "paranoid nationalism" (Hage 221) and the increased fear of 'non-natives' as threats to national security, has led to many nations closing off their borders to refugees. And in locales where they are allowed entry, they are treated as subhuman entities who are to be confined in camps segregated from the rest of the population. This makes 'disciplining', documentation and surveillance possible. The refugee becomes the transnational subaltern figure, caught between two nations, yet unacceptable and traumatized in both. The positive connections between nations, as underscored by transnationalism become problematic here since the refugee's relationship with her/his state is precarious and traumatic. Mohsin Hamid's Exit West (2017) exemplifies the refugee as a transnational subaltern figure, silenced and traumatized by the multiple states in which s/he seeks refuge. The paper attempts to explore the refugee crisis and traumatic transnationalism with the aim of unearthing potential ways of subverting existing hierarchies that silence refugees, as depicted in the novel and explores the ways in which the*

*states to which they migrate construct and re-construct the refugee experience as essentially that of a subaltern subject caught between two worlds.*

Transnationalism as an academic discourse has significantly altered the way immigration and cross-border movements have been interpreted by mainstream academia. With its emphasis on how national borders concede to the demands of inter-national movements propelled by globalization, ease of access to transport and communication, religious/political persecution and other socio-cultural factors, transnationalism has established itself as a major agent in policy formulation and decision making by states across the world. The figure of the refugee is a problematic one in discourses of transnationalism in as much as the 'refugee situation', as different from the 'diasporic/immigrant situation', is one that entails a completely different envisaging of transnationalism. As opposed to the diaspora, the community of refugees cannot, at least at the superficial level, be termed a 'productive'one, serving to extend the transnational base of the place of settlement. Refugees are perceived of as parasitical entities draining the resources of the countries in which they settle with no potential contribution to its economy or capital base. The post 9/11 "paranoid nationalism" (Hage221) and the increased fear of 'non-natives' as threats to national security, has led to many nations closing off their borders to refugees. And in locales where they are allowed entry, they are treated as subhuman entities who are to be confined in camps segregated from the rest of the population. This makes 'disciplining', documentation and surveillance possible. The refugee becomes the transnational subaltern figure, caught between two nations, yet unacceptable and traumatized in both. S/he is silenced by persecutors in their homeland and by the 'legitimate' inhabitants in their country of resettlement. The positive connections between nations, as underscored by transnationalism become problematic here since the refugee's relationship with her/his state is precarious and traumatic. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) exemplifies the refugee as a transnational subaltern figure, silenced and traumatized by the multiple states in which s/he seeks refuge. The paper attempts to explore the refugee crisis and traumatic transnationalism with the aim of unearthing potential ways of subverting existing hierarchies that silence refugees, as depicted in the novel and explores the ways in which the states to which they migrate construct and re-construct the refugee experience as essentially that of a subaltern subject caught between two worlds.

In "Diaspora and Transnationalism" (2010)Faistargues that the term 'transnationalism' refers to "migrants' durable ties across countries and captures all sorts of social formations such as transnationally active networks, groups and organizations" (Baubock and Faist 9). The most violent and undesirable transnational formation is that of refuges who are forced to flee their countries of origin owing to persecution. In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, refugees are portrayed as what Janine Dahinden terms "transnational

outsiders,characterized by low transnational mobility and a low degree of local anchorage" (57). Nadia and Saeed, as well as the other refugees, are unable to return to their countries owing to the political persecution; at the same time, they possess low local anchorage in as much as their integration with the local community is mired in problematic discourses of nationalism and ethnicity. Nadia and Saeed are unable to establish themselves as part of any particular state to which they move since they are fundamentally silenced by the violent discourses of nativism and nationalism. They are transported through black doors to Mykonos, Britain and finally America. There is a constant deterritorialization and a subsequent reterritorialization, albeit on a temporary basis. In the countries of their temporary resettlement, the refugees remain subaltern subjects unable to articulate themselves. The fear of being persecuted by the natives propels them to flee to other places or settle down in surveilled camps under the control of the state.

Saeed and Nadia, like many citizens of their country, fall victim to political persecution by the military and they are denied the power to speak and articulate themselves. They are subalternized by both the military which persecutes them and by the state which refuses to protect them. Identity becomes allied to questions of political allegiance, and persecution based on the (religious) sect to which one belongs in inflicted upon Saeed and Nadia in their homeland.

The night the militants came, they were looking for people of a particular sect, and demanded to see ID cards, to check what sort of names everyone had, but fortunately for Saeed's father and Saeed and Nadia their names were not associated with the denomination being hunted. The neighbours upstairs were not so lucky: the dead neighbour bled through a crack in the floor (Hamid 79-80).

The homeland becomes a dangerous place from where on has to flee in order to survive. This is the fundamental factor leading to the creation of the transnational subaltern figure of the refugee. The persecution in the homeland forces people to move to other countries as refugees. The movement is not merely a physical movement of people across borders. It is also a movement of cultures, lifestyles as well as fears about survival. At the same time, it is also a way in which persecuted subjects establish connections with multiple spaces, where the common denominator is their subaltern status in both the country of origin and the country of settlement. The refugee, who functions as a transnational agent, is thus characterized by her/his subalternity in several geographical locations.

In *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia cross multiple borders to find a safe haven within which to start their lives afresh. However, their status as refugees relegates them to the margins of mainstream existence within the new borders. They are grouped in 'refugee camps', a subtle yet potent mechanism for the surveillance of 'dangerous' elements who can cause ruptures within the stable nation state. In Mykonos, they stay in a camp "withhundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colours and hues and these people were speaking in

a cacophony that was the languages of the world" (Hamid 100). The manner in which states tend to homogenize refugees is symbolically represented in the camp at Mykonos. The people in the camp are not citizens of any state. They are 'refugees' – who do not have claims to nationhood or citizenship whether within Mykonos or in their own homelands.

The refugees are unable to break off their connections with the latter as proved by Saeed's repeated attempts at contacting his father. Transnational formations are as much about physical mobility as about ties maintained with the home country. Saeedbecomes a frequent visitor in a house where the people of his country and religion gather and pray. He is "drawn by the familiar languages and accents and the familiar smell of the cooking. (When he prayed there), It made him feel part of something, not just something spiritual, but something human. . ." (Hamid 148).This is particularly significant for the transnational subject dehumanised and demonized by the mainstream.Being a part of a group from one's country of origin functions as a way of asserting one's identity as belonging to a particular ethnic and religious group as distinct from the rest of the refugees. Here there is a double layered discourse being revealed – Saeed's interest in the group is as much related to his necessity to be human in a foreign land where his community is demonized, as to his deep desire at being recognized as a unique being different from the homogenized mass called 'the refugees'. The transnational subject's desire to maintain and extend ties with the homeland is reflected in Saeed. He is unable to accept his status as a subaltern transnational figure with no or little agency and attempts to transform it by asserting his identity through interactions with his community, leading to an extension of the homeland practices and lifestyles into the country of settlement. This is a peculiar transnational formation where the subject's actions within the country of settlement are dictated by his desire to connect with the homeland from which he had fled, transforming him into a "transnational outsider" (Baubock and Faist 58) who, despite the discrimination, chooses to stay in the former locale.

The question of identity becomes significant in discourses on transnationality. Saeed wants to shift to the house at Vicarage Gate, to be "among our own kind" (Hamid 149). When Nadia says that they are from the country they *used to be* from (and not any more), Saeed replies "That doesn't mean we have no connection" (Hamid 149). He is a transnational subject in that he retains ties with his country of origin, at least through an emotional bonding with other refugees from the same place. Saeed's association with the community is also an attempt at holding on to his roots at a time when he, and his community, are under attack by the self-declared legitimate inhabitants of the new land. Nadia, on the other hand, initially wishes to rupture all ties with her homeland where she never 'belonged'. Her status as a transnational subaltern woman is problematic since she finds more freedom in the countries of resettlement rather than in her own country where women were denied basic human rights. Her status as an independent woman is recognized by the countries where she migrates to.

Nadia's interest in affiliating with Nigerians and other refugees is an attempt at integrating herself with a community equally alien in the new land, yet accepting of her autonomy.

. . . around her she saw all these people of all these different colours in all these different attires and she was relieved, better here than there she thought, and it occurred to her that she had been stifled in the place of her birth for virtually her entire life, that its time for her had passed, and a new time was here, and, fraught or not, she relished it. (Hamid 156)

Nadia's case demonstrates how for women from social orders characterized by suppressive patriarchy, forced migration and transnationalism, mean more than just the trauma of departure. Being subjects subalternised by the patriarchal social orders in their own countries, they find in their novel status as refugees, the possibility of being at par with the men from their places. Their common status as refugees, in a way, blurs the hegemonic distinctions that ensured women's subservience in their countries of origin. Thus, for Nadia, her subaltern status is the new country does not prevent her from integrating, unlike in the case of Saeed who finds his masculinity challenged by the new norms in existence there. His encounter with the Nigerian woman makes his realize his loss of power as an autonomous male in the new transnational scenario. His inability to resist and the psychological trauma of being perceived as being 'less of a man' entrenches his deep sense of being a secondary citizen with no enunciatory power.

Persecution by the 'original' inhabitants of the country of resettlement forces the refugees to remain in the margins of the mainstream social order. Instances of such persecutions abound in Hamid's work. In Mykonos and Britain, mobs attack the refugees. "The mob looked to Nadia like a strange and violent tribe, intent on their destruction, some armed with iron bars or knives, and she and Saeed turned and ran, but could not escape" (Hamid 131). Fleeing the mob becomes the only option available to the transnational subaltern subject who is unable to return to her/his country of origin due to the persecution. The condition of the refugee is peculiar since in the country of settlement s/he is forced to encounter the very rhetoric of violence from which they had fled.

The fury of those nativists advocating wholesale slaughter was what struck Nadia most, and it struck her because it seemed so familiar, so much like the fury of the militants in her own city. She wondered whether she and Saeed had done anything by moving, whether the faces and buildings had changed but the basic reality if their predicament had not" (Hamid 156)

Being transnational subjects who cannot move back to their own countries, refugees become vulnerable 'objects' forced to bear the brunt of nativist outrage at being outnumbered in their own locales by the refugees and their fear of losing opportunities and resources. A "paranoid nationalism" which Hage defines as "a national imaginary characterised by fear, the main threat to the security and well-being of a nation is conceived along the lines of a racial and/or religious 'other'"(221) sets in. The refugees as the transnational 'other' are projected as potential threats to the state and to its 'legitimate citizens'. Here, in as much as the refugees

do not contribute to the economy of the new country, they are perceived of as parasitic entities who would gradually 'displace' the natives.

After the riots, the talk on the television was of a major operation, one city at a time, starting in London, to reclaim Britainfor Britain, and it was reported that the army was being deployed, and the police as well, and those who had once served in the army and the police. (. . .)Saeed and Nadia heard it said that nativist extremists were forming their own legions, with a wink and a nod from the authorities.(Hamid 132)

Here, we observe how the state colludes with its 'legitimate' citizens in displacing and subalternizing refugees. The transnationalism of refugees is a burden to the state and hence exiling them becomes the sole means of maintaining 'national security'. The state becomes an instrument of oppression, preventing the transnational subaltern subjects from integrating with the new country.

For this purpose, the state utilizes refugee camps as the major sites where surveillance and control takes place. In "Refugees and Exile: From "Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things"(1995), LiisaMalkki argues that "the refugee camp is a standardized, generalizable technology of power in the management of mass displacement" (498). It enables "the spatial concentration of people and facilitates bureaucratic processes" (Malkki499) by segregating people based on their nationalities, resettlements, control of movement and surveillance. Refugees are concentrated in such camps, so that they will not 'pollute' the spaces and formations belonging to the mainstream. Nadia and Saeed's interactions with the natives are limited and the refugees are instructed to not stray far away from the camps. A fear psychosis where the refugees cone to believe that the camp is the sole space that would offer them safety is created in order to keep the transnational agents from 'transgressing'. Their freedom of movement is curtailed by the state – an instance of how biopolitics works in maintaining state power. Surveillance becomes easier and the state gradually comes to establish absolute control over them, ensuring their 'discipline'. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Foucault remarks:"Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. It is not a triumphant power . . . . It is a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy" (124-25). In America, Saeed and Nadia are confined to worker camps where

"in exchange for their labour in cleaning terrain and building infrastructure and assembling dwellings from prefabricated blocks, migrants were promised forty meters and a pipe: a home on forty meters of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity" (Hamid 167-68).

The refugees become the objects on which the state exercises its disciplinary powers, through surveillance and containment. At the same time, they function as instruments through which the state exerts its authority. They are used as resources to build the very settlements where they could be ghettoed by the state, by projecting these locales where surveillance becomes

easy, as proof of the state's magnanimity. Besides, the potential of the new arrivals in the country is utilized efficiently and they are provided an opportunity to integrate into the new social order. However, their status as subaltern subjects do not undergo any significant transformation as is evident from the native workers' reluctance to stay with the migrants and by the occasional nativist raids which "disabled machinery or destroyed dwelling units nearing completion or resulted in the sever beating of some workers who had strayed too far from camp" (Hamid 175). Transgressions by the transnational subjects are punished severely by the citizens with the consent of the state so that they remain stateless forever, thereby perpetuating their oppression.

In transnational contexts characterized by violence, typically as in the case of refugees, resistance to hegemony surfaces as a major mode of asserting autonomy. Community formation becomes a necessary prerequisite for the refugees to escape their dehumanized subaltern status. This is accomplished by refugees by accepting and articulating their common status, irrespective of the differences in their language, nationality or religion. In London,the illegal immigrants in the hotel room, from various parts of the world, refuse to vacate when the police come. Before they could be attacked, other refugees
gathered on the street, other dark- and medium- and even light-skinned people, bedraggled, like the people of the camps of Mykonos, and these people formed a crowd They banged cooking pots with spoons and chanted in various languages and soon the police decided to withdraw.(Hamid 125)

Spivak argues that subalternity is fundamentally characterized by the lack of enunciatory power. When the refugees on the street bang pots and chant in multiple languages, it is an attempt at articulating, at acquiring the enunciatory power they are otherwise denied by the state. The withdrawal of the police is significant here, because it is an indication of the possibility of the transnational subaltern figure of the refugee transforming into a subject with agency and reckoning power.

It is after establishing themselves as a group with enunciatory power that the refugees begin grouping themselves according to their nationality or religion. They
. . . began to move, in the manner of cards dealt from a shuffled deck during the course of a game, reassembling 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. (Hamid 142-43)

These communities slowly begin occupying houses, gradually displacing people from other regions/ religions. The subaltern subjects here transform themselves into transnational subjects with agency. The community formation enables them to maintain ties, at least on an emotional level, with their countries of origin. At the same time, it provides them with a sense of security and an opportunity to organize themselves against the nativists. This is not to say that there is a significant transformation in their status in the countries of resettlement.

Saeed and Nadia remain confined to refugee camps or housing areas. Access to the country's resources is limited and employment opportunities are provided only in sites where refugee population is high.

Transnational formations involve an extended relationship with both the country of origin and resettlement. "Transnational practises show us how migrants build and rebuild their lives in a manner whereby roots and connections are simultaneously developed and maintained in more than one society" (Daswani and Quayson 67).Saeed and Nadia are a case in point. They are gradually integrated, albeit to a limited extent, in the new social order, as is evidenced by Saeed's relationship with the preacher's daughter and Nadia's with the cook. However, although they maintain their friendship, the emotional bond between them is ruptured. The friendship is an attempt at maintaining ties with the homeland where their relationship began. And the new relationships become attempts at integrating with the mainstream social order in the country of settlement. Both Nadia and Saeed, even after establishing themselves as (partially) autonomous subjects in America, maintainties with people from their country either through direct interaction or through social media and mobile phones. And ultimately, they return to their homeland. The marginalization experienced by Nadia and Saeed, as refugees, in the country where they settled, and their nostalgia for the lost homeland, propels them to return. Although it is not clear whether they have translocated permanently or for a short period of time, their return is an expression of the subalternized, traumatic transnationalism that characterizes the life of refugees. The return is simultaneously an attempt at coming to terms with their status as refugees in an alien country and an escape from that status.

Hamid's work is a succinct portrayal of the global refugee crisis and the transnationalism that characterizes the twenty-first century. The problematic location of the refugee as an insider-outsider in both the country of origin and the country of settlement subalternizes her/him. S/he is unacceptable in both countries and blatant violations of human rights are facilitated. While transnationalism in its current form has its charms, a true transnational spirit is possible only when refugees attain enunciatory powers and obtain liberation from the transnational subalternity imposed upon them by the mainstream global social order.

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