

Exit Strategies: Paradoxical Mobility and the Redefinition of Belonging in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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Introduction

Set against the backdrop of globalization, transnational mobility, and geopolitical upheavals, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* critically challenges traditional understandings of collective identity and belonging by reimagining the concept of diaspora not as a fixed or static condition of dislocation but rather as a dynamic, ongoing process of relocation and negotiation. Through the journeys of the novel's central protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, who are compelled to flee their increasingly war-torn homeland in search of safety, the narrative illuminates the liminality of diasporic spaces—zones that exist in a state suspended between the promise of potential liberation and the persistent, often violent realities of social, political, and bureaucratic risk and surveillance.

While this in-between state emphasizes the precariousness and uncertainty that accompany forced displacement, the novel simultaneously frames such liminal spaces as generative, productive sites in which new modes of community, affiliation, and mutual understanding may emerge, existing beyond the limitations imposed by national borders, entrenched social hierarchies, or inherited cultural expectations. Central to this reconfiguration of migration and belonging is the recurrent and highly symbolic motif of the so-called “magical doors,” which collapse temporal and spatial distances with remarkable efficiency, reflecting a contemporary, globalized world in which mobility is technologically facilitated yet socially constrained.

These portals dramatize the inherent paradox of modern migration: while the act of movement may appear instantaneous and unrestricted at a physical level, migrants continue to encounter new, often insidious forms of marginalization, exclusion, and vulnerability as soon as they arrive in their destinations. By condensing the often extended and hazardous process of migration into a single, almost violent threshold, the doors function as both literal and figurative markers of transition, embodying the complex ambivalence of migration as simultaneously a rupture and an opportunity.

Within this context, diaspora, as displayed in Hamid's world, is situated within what Victor Turner (1969) would describe as a liminal passage—a transformative, intermediate zone where identities, relationships, and social formations are temporarily unsettled, yet also

capable of being reshaped in innovative, emergent ways. The symbolic and narrative function of Hamid's "magical doors" has been widely investigated by literary critics. Some have interpreted these thresholds as metaphors for unregulated global mobility and the technological compression of space that characterizes twenty-first-century movement (Yazell, 2023; Perfect, 2019), while others read them as tools through which the novel critiques forms of exclusionary nationalism, xenophobia, and nativism (Carter, 2020). Additional scholarship has examined the doors' role in cultivating empathy toward refugees, exploring posthuman perspectives, or considering the ethical and ontological implications of instantaneous migration (Bellin, 2022; Dietrich, 2023; Koshy, 2018; Faiz, 2023; Sukheeja & Bhangu, 2023). Yet, despite these valuable insights, much of the existing scholarship tends to overlook the novel's deeper and more nuanced interrogation of how diasporic life fundamentally transforms the nature of collective belonging itself. In particular, what remains underexplored is the novel's reconfiguration of the paradigms of collective belonging through its emphasis on the shift from conventional, heritage-based or static cultural formations to spontaneously emergent, hybrid communities that are continually reconstructed through shared struggle, mutual interdependence, and continuous reinvention.

This study seeks to address this critical gap by analyzing the narrative significance of the magical doors through the lens of Turner's concept of "liminality," demonstrating how *Exit West* reconceives migration as a threshold between alienation and belonging, stasis and transformation. In addition, it employs his related concept of "communitas" to examine the fluid, emergent social formations and affective bonds that arise within these liminal zones—forms of connection that are not predetermined by ethnicity, nationality, or ancestry, but instead emerge organically through shared experiences of movement, uncertainty, and collective adaptation. Ultimately, this article argues that Hamid positions diaspora not as a return to a fixed cultural past or as a mere reinvention of inherited traditions, but as a relational, pluralistic, and continuously negotiated mode of belonging, in which collectivities are formed and re-formed alongside the personal trajectories of self-definition, resilience, and relational agency. By emphasizing the productive potential of liminal experience, Hamid foregrounds the ways in which migration can generate innovative social spaces and ethical imaginaries, inspired by both the spatial and social dimensions of contemporary displacement and the transformative possibilities inherent within global movement.

The Liminality of Magical Doors: Between Integration and Exclusion

Exit West introduces the motif of "the magical doors" to transform the familiar trope of migration into a profound commentary on global hypermobility, surveillance, and the enduring tension of diaspora. These

in-between spaces, which instantaneously collapse geopolitical distance, are far more than mere plot mechanisms; they are the novel's central metaphor for liminality, embodying the unstable, ambiguous condition of being "betwixt and between" belonging and exile. By allowing immediate, effortless transit across borders, the doors initially promise a borderless world and the ultimate escape. Yet, this promise is persistently undermined by the very real dangers of exclusion, risk, and intensified surveillance, revealing migration in the modern era as a state of continual, existential suspension.

The conceptual framework of liminality, as articulated by Turner, provides the essential lens through which to understand the doors' disruptive power. He defines the liminal state as a transitional phase in rites of passage where "normal structures are suspended," leaving individuals "betwixt and between the positions" society assigns to them (Turner, 1969, p. 359). In *Exit West*, Nadia and Saeed's passage through the doors literalizes this suspension. Significantly, their experience of migration is described with striking paradox: "The passage was both like dying and being born" (Hamid, 2017, p. 98). This description shows that the singular, violent moment of crossing is not merely a geographic relocation. It is a rupture of identity as the migrant is simultaneously severed from their past self—tied to a specific nation, history, and social role—and yet withheld from the stability of a new one. In this sense, the simultaneous death and rebirth mark migration as a process not of linear forward motion toward safety or integration, but as a continual dismantling of self in the liminal void. The two characters become "bodies in transit" (Agier, 2011, p. 45)—a state stripped of the legal and social protections afforded by rootedness, as their subsequent life is characterized by temporary housing, shifting locales, and the constant need to adapt to new, often hostile, environments. The door, therefore, does not grant them a new position in society, as promised, trapping them instead in a perpetual non-position. Yet, this non-positionality, as illustrated in the narrative, is central to the migrant experience of evolution and ultimate transformation. Unlike traditional immigrants who often undergo a defined process of assimilation over generations, Hamid's migrants are ejected into new locations instantly, bypassing the typical bureaucratic and social rites of passage. They arrive as immediate outsiders, their presence undiluted by the slow process of integration.

This accelerated displacement deepens the ambiguity of their status, forcing them to exist in a social and political interstice. The ambiguity of the doors, as liminal spaces, is amplified by the rumors that surround them—whispering that they could transport refugees "well removed from this death trap of a country" (Hamid, 2017, p. 52). These rumors motivate the desperate act of escape, yet they also amplify an underlying existential fear. Hope and dread coexist in the consciousness of the migrant, emblematic of what it means to inhabit the global order from its margins. The decision to cross is an act of profound faith in the uncertain, a testament to the intolerable conditions left behind. Even when refugees

risk everything to pass through the door, they remain stripped of national protections, entering a global hierarchy where their worth is constantly being reassessed. The doors, in this sense, reveal how freedom of movement is paradoxically enabled and negated by global structures that selectively determine who may enter, who must wait, and, most cruelly, who is expelled or ignored. The promise of immediate liberation becomes, in practice, the mechanism of deeper alienation, as they exchange one form of marginality for another. The doors, in their political and metaphysical reality, signify that migration in the twenty-first century is no longer a linear movement from a point of departure to a point of arrival, but a constant oscillation between integration and exclusion. The migrant, hence, is always almost safe, almost a citizen, almost integrated, but never entirely. They inhabit the world's waiting rooms, refugee camps, and temporary housing, suspended indefinitely in a political "no-man's-land." They are neither full-fledged citizens nor mere visitors, but something unstable and potentially threatening to the established order, which intensifies the risks inherent in their passage.

While the doors may symbolize ways of exit and a radical liberation from rejected conditions, they simultaneously intensify the dangers inherent in the process of displacement. What appears to be an escape route is frequently revealed as a trap. Significantly, Hamid uses chilling imagery, such as the unguarded portals ominously labeled "mousetraps" (p. 77), to expose refugees not to salvation, but to the possibility of being violently ejected back into danger or transported into further, bewildering uncertainty. In this context, mobility becomes tragically indistinguishable from entrapment. The displaced bodies circulate freely across the globe, yet they remain confined within increasingly hostile political structures that dictate the terms of their survival. They have geographic freedom, but no civic freedom, revealing that the ability to move location does not confer the right to reside, work, or belong. This reflects a transnational world order where the movement of goods, capital, and data is celebrated as globalization, but the movement of certain people is deemed a crisis. In fact, the immediate access offered by the doors ironically fuels the "paranoid nationalism" that Ghassan Hage identifies. Since the door bypasses the official, regulated border, it appears as an existential threat to the sovereign nation-state, whose primary function is to determine who may enter and who must wait (Hage, 2003, p. 221). The instantaneity of arrival, as a result, provokes a visceral, defensive reaction from the receiving populace, often leading to increased xenophobia, heightened security, and the ghettoization of the newcomers. Relatedly, the *Exit West* doors confirm the deepest fears of nativist populations: the border is porous, and 'the other' can appear anywhere, anytime.

Hamid further complicates this liminality by exploring the defensive mechanisms adopted by native populations facing the threat of the "other," using the modern motif of surveillance. Indeed, the magical doors in the novel do not solely function as physical passages but they are also invisible extensions of global surveillance systems. The narrative,

actually, reveals how displaced subjects are forced to internalize monitoring systems that discipline and constrain their movement in their attempt to pass safely through these highly securitized thresholds. Hamid captures the impact of digital surveillance early in the novel, when Saeed's email activity is juxtaposed with a seemingly unrelated scene in Sydney; "AS SAEED'S EMAIL was being downloaded from a server and read by his client, far away in Australia a pale-skinned woman was sleeping alone in the Sydney neighborhood of Surry Hills" (Hamid, 2017, p. 12, capitals in the text). This passage highlights the interconnectedness of the modern world, where the actions of an individual in one part of the globe are simultaneously linked to distant locations through digital networks. The reference to Saeed's email being "downloaded from a server" sheds light on the pervasive nature of digital surveillance, which transforms seemingly private acts—such as reading an email—into data points that can be tracked, monitored, and analyzed. The reign of surveillance systems is further illustrated in the narrative when Nadia first encounters a portal; its darkness interrupts the glow of ubiquitous digital devices, evoking a profound atmosphere of threat: "a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness" (Hamid, 2017, p. 13). This juxtaposition is highly expressive and significant. It reveals that modern technologies, which promise connection, information, and even anonymity, instead become chilling reminders of vulnerability and exposure. In the hyper-connected, globalized world *Exit West* depicts, visibility amounts to constant observation and control. Nadia's encounter with the dark portal illustrates Fiona McConnell's concept of "space-time compression" (McConnell, 2017, p. 237), reflecting a digital era where personal boundaries are constantly dissolving.

Hamid (2017) reinforces this blending of physical and digital realms through frequent references to mobile phones and social media. In one striking passage, Saeed and Nadia's reliance on their phones is described as a form of magic: "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" (p. 31). Here, Hamid emphasizes the paradoxical nature of digital spaces—they are simultaneously omnipresent and intangible. The futuristic description of antennas "sniffing out an invisible world" evokes the idea of a hidden digital realm that connects disparate locations and experiences. This virtual world offers migrants the possibility of transcending physical borders, but it also highlights the disorienting effects of being constantly connected yet perpetually untethered. It is a direct critique of the celebrated global interconnectedness shedding light on the risk of denying "the right to opacity"¹ through the elimination of physical distance. The doors eliminate physical movement, but in doing so, they also eliminate the traditional anonymity provided by a long journey. As the novel demonstrates, the migrants arrive already exposed, their movements

tracked by data networks and the omnipresent gaze of state security and nervous citizens. This relates to Bauman and Lyon's concept of "liquid surveillance," where power operates quietly through dispersed data networks, permeating everyday life rather than being confined to physical barriers (Bauman & Lyon, 2013, p. 328). As an embodiment of the world's interconnectedness, the doors, hence, destabilize the private/public divide precisely when migrants seek anonymity and a fresh start. Their uncertainty is therefore inseparable from their exposure; their desperate mobility is continually monitored and logged, ensuring they remain 'bodies in transit' without ever truly escaping the structure of control. Even when they are out of sight, they are never truly unobserved.

The magical doors in *Exit West* crystallize the paradoxes of contemporary migration. They promise instantaneous escape yet deliver persistent liminality, offering movement without belonging, visibility without protection, and freedom entwined with exposure. Through these portals, Hamid foregrounds the enduring instability of the migrant condition, revealing a world where geographic mobility cannot guarantee social, legal, or emotional security. The doors thus stand as a powerful metaphor for twenty-first-century displacement—a space where hope and danger, connection and surveillance, possibility and exclusion are inextricably intertwined.

Communal Belonging in Precarious Spaces: *Communitas* and Shared Struggle in *Exit West*

While migration in Hamid's narrative subjects displaced individuals to profound precarity and dislocation, the novel simultaneously reveals displacement as a potent condition for forging new affiliations that transcend inherited structures of belonging. The immediate, radical nature of the magical doors strips away the structural certainties of national, ethnic, and religious identity, depositing refugees into liminal spaces where the bare necessity of survival supersedes difference. In this respect, Turner's notion of *communitas*—a spontaneous, egalitarian solidarity that emerges "in the interstices of structure" during transitional, liminal phases (Turner, 1969, pp. 360-372)—illuminates how these profound, yet inherently unstable, collectivities are formed. Critically, the novel avoids presenting *communitas* as an idealized, utopian alternative to social structure. Instead, it meticulously probes its instability, partial realization, and dependence on shared risk and coordinated labor, tracing an arc of emergent belonging across three distinct geographical and social settings.

Hamid locates the earliest and most embryonic form of *communitas* in the Mykonos holding ground. This temporary settlement for migrants from disparate global backgrounds—including Hondurans, Sudanese, and Nadia and Saeed from their unnamed, war-torn city—is a place defined by radical uncertainty. It functions neither as a true refuge nor a safe home, placing its inhabitants in a state of pure, intensified liminality. In this

social vacuum, where no single nationality or cultural group holds established power, the act of being displaced renders all individuals similarly marginalized: they become “foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was” (Hamid, 2017, p. 106). In this new space, the previous social markers that determined status or privilege are neutralized and devoid of any real significance or value. This common exposure to life-altering risk becomes the foundation for spontaneous solidarity. The camp dynamically transforms into “a trading post in an old-time gold rush” (p. 106), where refugees organically initiate exchanges of goods, vital information necessary for survival, and mutual protection against external threats. In this context, the resulting collective belonging arises not from common origin—the traditional basis of national or ethnic solidarity—but from common necessity and shared solidarity. Mykonos, in this sense, exemplifies *communitas* in its most fundamental, reactive form: a temporary, non-hierarchical gathering where old identities are stripped bare and replaced by solidarities rooted in the urgency of immediate survival. This initial stage is a direct, sociological manifestation of Turner’s theory, demonstrating how the suspension of structure during the liminal rite of passage immediately generates a counter-structure—spontaneous and unregulated—based on egalitarian human relationship. The bonds formed here are born of the moment, intense but potentially ephemeral, a fleeting emotional and practical unity against chaos.

As the narrative shifts to London, the nature of *communitas* is tested by the realities of prolonged displacement and the complexities of inhabiting an already established, highly stratified society. The migrants’ initial act of occupying abandoned mansions—spaces heavily laden with the history of class privilege and wealth—serves as a powerful, symbolic reversal of social hierarchies. These quintessentially English, once-exclusive spaces, which are symbolic of wealth and privilege, are transformed into sites of communal living where migrants from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds coexist in close quarters. As the narrator observes, “[a]ll over London houses and parks and disused lots were being peopled in this way, some said by a million migrants, some said by twice that” (Hamid, 2017, p. 124). Here, traditional cultural boundaries begin to blur and strict social stratifications start to fade. The urgency of survival overrides national, religious, or ethnic distinctions, and the inhabitants of these makeshift homes establish self-sustaining micro-communities that tolerate pluralism and celebrate diversity for the sake of survival. The collective need for emotional sustenance is met by the comfort migrants find in “snatches of beautiful singing ... in Igbo” (p. 125), revealing a poignant, shared longing for cultural and emotional anchoring amidst profound upheaval.

However, London is where Hamid introduces the fragility and contingent nature of *communitas*. When the extreme, unifying pressure of the immediate crisis subsides and the complex social realities of long-term existence—including the search for food, work, and lasting security—return, the pure egalitarianism begins to fray. This is exemplified in moments of internal tension that impose the re-emergence of structural

divisions. As scarcity and fear intensify, the drive for stability causes some inhabitants to “move ... reassembling themselves in suits and runs of their own kind ... all the Sudanese, all the Hondurans” (p. 127). This re-assembly is a crucial narrative point, foregrounding the novel’s refusal to romanticize solidarity and present a vision of utopian pluralism. While shared suffering encourages initial unity, structural impulses—the deep-seated human need for the comfort and predictability of familiar cultural boundaries—begin to resurface. The migrants, seeking a durable sense of safety and a solid ground of order, fall back on familiar national, linguistic, or ethnic affiliations. This demonstrates that while liminality can dissolve old structures, the psychological pressures of survival often lead human beings to re-impose familiar boundaries when faced with the protracted uncertainty of life in exile. The London experiment illustrates that *communitas* is a powerful, yet vulnerable force, constantly battling the gravitational pull of inherited divisions and the practical demands of navigating a hostile world, as encapsulated in the novel’s assertion that “we are all migrants through time” (p. 209).

The final setting, Marin, provides the novel’s most compelling vision of durable and constructive *communitas*. Unlike the temporary camp of Mykonos or the politically motivated occupation of London, the Marin settlement is a community built collectively and intentionally by the migrants themselves. The settlement is consciously engineered to be “earthquake friendly” to ensure safety and continuity (p. 197). This detail is deeply symbolic: it signifies a communal investment in the future and a proactive desire to build a new social structure, rather than merely occupy the ruins of the old. The focus shifts from reacting to displacement to deliberately constructing belonging. The *communitas* in Marin is explicitly grounded in shared labor and mutual investment, fundamentally altering the basis of solidarity from shared suffering to shared purpose. Though the residents are “overwhelmingly poor,” the settlement nonetheless harbors “a spirit of at least intermittent optimism ... because of the mix of its people” (p. 198). This optimism is not naive; it is pragmatic, arising from the recognition that their collective work—the pooling of diverse skills, energies, and traditions—is generating a genuinely new and resilient environment. In Marin, *communitas* effectively matures, transforming into a form of stable, pluralistic civic identity, where cultural distinctions do not vanish, but are instead integrated as contributing components of the evolving social fabric. This successful iteration suggests that for liminal solidarity to endure and mature into sustainable community, it requires a proactive, structural commitment that moves beyond the spontaneous emotional bonds of crisis. It is the act of building together—the shared effort of creating shelter, infrastructure, and an economy—that solidifies belonging and bridges the gaps created by fear and cultural memory. Marin, ultimately, represents the hopeful potential that lies at the end of the liminal phase: the possibility of generating new, humane structures from the ashes of the old.

The narrative trajectory across Mykonos, London, and Marin traces a vital arc in Hamid's examination of transnational belonging. In his fictional world, the refugees are consistently portrayed as active agents who reconstruct social worlds from the very precarious conditions of their marginalization. As he writes, "[i]n their terror, they spoke more to one another than they otherwise might, strangers speaking to strangers. A sort of camaraderie evolved ... being penned in made them into a grouping, a group" (p. 137). This passage encapsulates the way that the conditions of displacement—the fear, the uncertainty, and the marginalization—serve as catalysts for solidarity and mutual support, transforming strangers into allies. The shared suffering of displacement fosters not only practical support but also the psychological and emotional resilience necessary to endure the hardships of migration and to experience a solid sense of belonging. Significantly, the migrants utilize the social and political vacuum created by the magical doors to initiate new forms of social contract. Ultimately, the emerging communities in *Exit West* serve as a powerful lens on the promise and the limits of solidarities forged in liminality. They offer the displaced essential, meaningful belonging and a necessary psychological reprieve from isolation. Yet, their endurance remains continually contingent—tested by the external politics of fear, the economic scarcity caused by global inequality, and the deep-seated human impulse toward familiarity. The novel shows that while *communitas* can solve the immediate need for human connection, it is not a final, stable answer to the personal and political transformations that migration demands. It is a vital, ongoing process of negotiation and construction, forever poised between the dissolution of the old and the struggle to realize the new.

Diverging Belongings: Individual Reinvention and the Limits of *Communitas*

While *Exit West* demonstrates the emergence of collective solidarity in moments of shared precarity, the novel ultimately foregrounds the individualized and divergent paths of belonging that emerge from the diasporic experience. Migration, in Hamid's view, is not really a uniform collective process; rather, it intensifies individual agency and personal choice, producing distinctly different desires, attachments, and imagined futures that eventually test and ultimately transcend the initial bonds of shared struggle. The gradual, painful separation of the central couple, Nadia and Saeed, serves as the novel's most poignant symbol of this vision: collective solidarity is meaningful, but ultimate belonging is a personal negotiation. Migration or even '*communitas*' do not dissolve individuality; they rather compel and intensify them, transforming the diasporic subject into an agent of self-authorship constantly choosing between preservation and reinvention.

Nadia and Saeed embody the fundamental split within the diasporic condition. They enter the liminal space of the doors together, bound by love and shared trauma, yet their coping mechanisms and visions for the future place them on irreconcilably divergent trajectories. For Saeed, even the simple act of placing the photo of his parents on a bookshelf—where it “stood, creased, gazing upon them and transforming this narrow bedroom, at least partially, temporarily, into a home”—illustrates his deep attachment to the past. He represents the migrant who finds solace and identity in the preservation of cultural and religious heritage, viewing migration not as an opportunity for rebirth, but as a painful, traumatic severing (Hamid, 2017, p. 67). His grief is palpable and spiritual, encapsulated in his devastating realization that “we murder from our lives those we leave behind” (ibid). The continued adherence to traditional forms of worship, memory, and cultural practice becomes his essential mechanism for surviving displacement and compensating for the painful loss. His faith and nostalgia act as both anchor and limitation; in a world defined by fluidity and chaos, Saeed seeks rigidity and structure, struggling to invest himself fully in the uncertain present. He finds greater comfort in established migrant communities who share his language and religious practices, attempting to recreate a miniature, familiar structure within the new environment. Hence, his search is not for a new identity, but for the safest space—a comfort zone that preserves the old one intact.

Moreover, Saeed’s attachment to the past profoundly shapes how he perceives relationships, social bonds, and his position within the constantly shifting environments he traverses in transit. While the doors themselves collapse physical distance and allow instantaneous movement between worlds, they cannot collapse the emotional, psychological, and ethical weight of memory and history that he carries with him. Saeed bears the customs, expectations, and moral frameworks of his homeland as if they were a sacred inheritance, an ethical and spiritual code that must be preserved across borders. This insistence on continuity not only informs his daily practices but also structures his interactions with other migrants, shaping whom he trusts, whom he allies with, and the kinds of communities in which he feels he can belong. It creates a persistent tension between him and the emergent, adaptive communities that embrace the fluidity and openness demanded by liminality.

Unlike those who move flexibly through transient networks, experimenting with new forms of sociality and collective identity, Saeed seeks stability, predictability, and familiar rituals even as the world around him is in constant flux. His attachment to established moral and cultural norms serves as both an anchor and a boundary: it provides him with guidance and comfort but also limits his capacity to fully engage with the radical, secular ‘*communitas*’ that often functions as the default mode of survival and solidarity in these liminal spaces. This duality highlights the broader diasporic tension between collective adaptation and the enduring pull of cultural memory, emphasizing how the liminality of migration produces divergent strategies for negotiating belonging, community, and

selfhood, and demonstrating that the challenges of displacement are as much internal and emotional as they are social or material.

Nadia, by contrast, approaches the liminality of the doors with radical pragmatism and an appetite for reinvention. She adapts to new environments with a resilient flexibility that signals an emerging, borderless identity. Her decision to wear a black, concealing robe even before the war was a gesture of asserting control and privacy, a self-imposed barrier that ironically prepares her for the psychological defenses required by displacement. Unlike Saeed, she does not mourn the loss of a specific culture; she mourns the loss of safety and normalcy, and once those are gone, she focuses relentlessly on creating a new equilibrium. The female protagonist sheds the constraints of her past and embraces the anonymity of the migrant experience. She gravitates toward the secular, mixed-gender, working communities—like the gardening commune in Marin—where action and practicality supersede old rituals. Her willingness to change, learn, and engage with difference is the very engine of her survival. She recognizes that the true power of the doors is not just escape, but the freedom to become someone fundamentally new. For Nadia, belonging is not found in heritage, but in the constant evolution of the self and the active construction of the present moment. The tension between the two protagonists is evident in a brief but revealing exchange: “It’s been forever,” he said. “This isn’t our house.” “I need five more minutes. I have to wash my clothes,” Nadia replied (Hamid, 2017, p. 84). Saeed’s statement reflects his disorientation and grief, while Nadia’s practical response reflects her desire to create a new sense of normalcy, showing that her belonging rests on utility rather than inheritance. For Nadia, washing clothes is an act of adaptation; a way to assert control over her circumstances. Saeed, by contrast, remains emotionally anchored to the past, unable to fully inhabit the present. While Nadia’s reaction to her new space shows a willingness to self-adjustment, Saeed’s comment reflects a sense of insecurity and unease, impatiently waiting to leave for a more familiar place. In fact, his struggle to move forward reflects this tension, while Nadia’s adaptability highlights the dual nature of the doors as both liberating and disorienting. The divergence of Nadia and Saeed is a crucial structural and thematic choice by Hamid, illustrating the limitations of shared trauma as a basis for enduring belonging. While the doors initially throw them together into the spontaneous unity of *communitas*, their internal, psychological responses to displacement pull them apart.

The novel suggests that *communitas*—whether in Mykonos, the London mansions, or even Marin—is often a contingent and temporary psychological necessity. It provides the essential support structure needed to navigate the immediate crisis, offering a sense of solidarity, shared understanding, and emotional sustenance to those grappling with the disorienting, dislocating effects of forced migration. However, while *communitas* temporarily alleviates the pressures of displacement, it cannot override the deep-seated, preexisting individual needs, desires, and

attachments that predate and will outlast the shared journey. As the immediate, existential threat recedes, the emotional, psychological, and intellectual differences that were temporarily muted or suppressed by the need for survival inevitably reassert themselves, revealing the limits of communal cohesion. Saeed's growing need for ritual, spiritual continuity, and cultural familiarity comes into increasing tension with Nadia's desire for a fluid, pragmatic, and secular existence, gradually straining the shared space that had once united them. Their eventual separation embodies the novel's most profound critical insight: migration functions as a catalyst for intense individualization, forcing migrants to confront questions of identity and belonging that cannot be fully mediated by collective solidarity alone.

The protagonists' separation ultimately reveals that the constant, high-stakes choices imposed upon the diasporic subject—where to move, which language to learn, which customs to observe, which faith to retain, and which attachments to relinquish—require a level of personal agency and self-reflection often absent from a stable or settled life. Hamid's narrative emphasizes that the migrant cannot rely solely on communal frameworks to define who they are; instead, they must become a self-authoring subject, actively editing, negotiating, and reconstructing their own life story, determining which elements of their previous identity to carry forward, and which to leave behind or reinvent in light of new circumstances. In this sense, the collective identity of the refugee—the provisional, supportive, and often ephemeral *communitas*—must ultimately yield to the complex, layered, and autonomous identity of the survivor. The novel thus suggests that the criteria for belonging are not fixed; they shift from the replication of familiar structures—an attempt to integrate into a static past—to the individual's capacity to navigate fluid social terrains. Ultimately, belonging becomes an act of reconciling memory with present realities and asserting personal authority over the formation of one's own identity. This new reconceptualization of belonging makes migration as much an ethical and psychological process as a spatial or physical one. That is to say, the ultimate significance of the doors is that they create not a borderless *world*, but borderless *individuals*. By eliminating the physical journey, they place the entire burden of transition onto the psyche. The migrant's true crossing is not through the door, but through the internal rupture of identity that follows. The novel's diverging paths for Nadia and Saeed foreground the idea that while collective solidarity is a powerful source of life and hope in the face of precarity, the final act of finding peace and belonging is a deeply personal, solitary victory. The *communitas*, the novel demonstrates, is the temporary shelter; the *self-authored life* is the permanent home.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Exit West* demonstrates that contemporary diaspora, as imagined by Hamid, cannot be understood as a fixed or unified collective identity; rather, it emerges as a dynamic, evolving process in which belonging is continuously negotiated between individual agency and communal interdependence. Reading the novel in light of Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas*, the article reveals three interconnected stages in the migratory experience: the uncertainty and disorientation of liminality, the solidarity and mutual support fostered through shared trauma, and finally the individualized expressions of belonging that arise as migrants navigate complex transnational spaces. These stages together map the contours of contemporary diasporic life, highlighting the tension between collective resilience and personal self-realization. While *communitas* offers a temporary, generative form of connection within the liminal zone, Hamid makes clear that such bonds, though ethically and emotionally sustaining, remain provisional, ultimately yielding to the demands of autonomous identity formation and the necessity of personal adaptation.

Through the trajectories of Nadia and Saeed, the novel illustrates the divergence between collective and individual imperatives in contemporary migration. Saeed's yearning for the continuity of his past, expressed through adherence to cultural and spiritual traditions, contrasts with Nadia's pragmatic embrace of fluidity, secular autonomy, and borderless adaptability. Their eventual separation shows that shared experiences of displacement, even when initially unifying, cannot ensure permanent cohesion or a common destiny. In this sense, the novel positions *communitas* not as an enduring form of belonging but as a provisional framework that facilitates ethical and social engagement while allowing the individual to assert agency over their future. Hamid's depiction thus challenges conventional understandings of diaspora as a site of uniform collective identity, emphasizing instead the importance of fragmentation, pluralism, and personal choice in the constitution of social and individual life.

In this way, the symbolic function of the magical doors reinforces this conception of diaspora as a liminal, constantly negotiated space. These portals compress time and space, enabling instantaneous movement while simultaneously producing new forms of uncertainty, marginalization, and adaptive demand. By foregrounding the doors as thresholds rather than destinations, Hamid situates diaspora as a space of transition; a site in which identity and belonging are actively negotiated and redefined. The novel ultimately suggests that liberation and belonging are inseparable from the exercise of personal agency within broader social and ethical networks, and that the most meaningful forms of connection are those which permit, rather than constrain, individual reinvention. The tension between *communitas* and autonomy, between temporary solidarity and

enduring individual expression, lies at the heart of the novel's vision of migration, illustrating that belonging in a globalized world is neither inherited nor imposed, but actively constituted through negotiation, adaptation, and choice. *Exit West*, thus, leaves readers with a profound insight into the nature of contemporary displacement: belonging is not a monolithic or static condition but a vibrant, evolving domain in which the processes of collective formation and personal reinvention intersect, overlap, and ultimately redefine the possibilities of human connection, identity, and ethical engagement in the modern world.

Notes

1. Borrowed from Édouard Glissant, referring to the right of not being entirely known by hegemonic structures. See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

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