

Dehumanization of Refugees: A Postcolonial Eco-Critical Study of Mohsin Hamid's Exit West

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Abstract

This paper explores Mohsin Hamid's literary representation of dehumanization of refugees in the age of globalization, the exploitation of humans and their land, as well as the impact of migration on the lives of the migrants in his novel *Exit West*. The research uses the theoretical framework of postcolonial ecocriticism by Huggan and Tiffin to critically analyze the primary text. This research employs qualitative method to draw parallels between the exploitation of humans and their environment in Hamid's novel while exploring the dehumanized treatment of refugees, reasons of migration, and the role of war, science and technology in the destruction of environment in this particular narrative. Textual analysis, more specifically, content analysis is used as a method to link the global humanitarian and environmental crisis in the primary text under the Postcolonial Eco-critical ideology.

Keywords: Mohsin Hamid, Pakistani Anglophone Literature, dehumanization, refugees, environmental crisis, postcolonial ecocriticism

Introduction

Exit West is Hamid's forth novel and is a political fiction. Politics is, nowadays, a dirty game played to take control over others and because of this politics, almost half of the world is war-stricken. These wars have affected millions of people and every part of their lives and left thousands dead. Those who have escaped death, have run to different countries for their survival. The same politics has made the lives of the protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, miserable in the countries where they have migrated. They are living in non-human conditions with almost no shelter and no food. They are vulnerable to disease and famines. The destruction affects not only humans but it also has environmental effects. War-

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torn areas take years and centuries to rebuild, regrow and renovate. This attempt of humans to suppress other human beings by violence and force also damage the habitat and other non-living, abiotic factors in the natural surroundings.

Looking at the history of refugees and migration reveals that around seventy-nine million people are displaced around the world after World War II. More than twenty-six million are war refugees. (UNHCR, 2020, p. 1). As per UNHCR, refugees are mistreated for reasons of race, religion, ethnicity, participation of specific social class, political party and are considered outside the nation of their identity. It is the manifestation of racial prejudices that leads to the alterity. Tyson (2006) says that the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper 'self'; native people were considered 'other' different. This process of judging all who are different as less than human is called othering in postcolonial terminology.

The exploitation and inhumane treatment of human beings or human subjects is called 'dehumanization'. Haslam (2006) states that the denial of human attributes and to represent them animal-like or the denial of human nature and to represent them as object is known as dehumanization. Dehumanization is a borderline between humanism and animalism. Bain (2014) considers the dehumanization as the division of our own consciousness between animals and humans on the basis of prejudice models of interspecies. It generates the problem of individuality, identity formation of sapiens as animals or anything less than humans is a moral abuse. Dehumanization of refugees is acting as a global force of oppression and sets a way to violence and cruelty.

Literary Analysis

Study of dehumanization and history of refugees unravels how spatially displaced people have been treated in modern history and the problems they have faced. Turkolgu and Chadefaux (2019) assert that civil wars generate refugees that vary in number. The deleterious conditions of the homeland force people to migrate and this leads to a perpetual increase in the refugee flow. Dragostinova (2016) states that during 20th century, Europe has faced largest waves of refugees and most of them are forcibly displaced or receive the status of exiles. One major factor behind this forced migration is ethnic cleansing. Europeans, historically, have treated refugees as less than humans. It is the denial of human related specified traits and the outgrowth of dehumanization is sometimes violence and, in some instances,

empathy. (Bruneau, et. al., 2017, p. 1-4). Haslam (2006) explains that dehumanization is defined in relation to a derogatory perception of a person's ethnicity, race and immigration and has led to genocide. Like racists describe Africans as apes. Dehumanization manifests itself in human comparison to dogs, pigs, rats, parasites, or insects, making them feel or look like animals. Montague and Matson (1983) describe a term, "technological dehumanization". It is the reduction of human beings to machines.

Huggan and Tiffin (2010) describe postcolonial ecocriticism as the study which examines the relationship between nature, culture, animals, humans, and their environment in the literary postcolonial texts. They have linked environmental activism with social racism and the exploitation of animals and animalized humans as 'others'. It is about the re-location of the human place in nature. The environment is struggling in the political dynamic surrounding the contemporary third world. It is a revolutionary step from anthropocentrism (human-centered) to eco-centrism (environment-focused) and the study deals with the natural and cultural relationships on the planetary level.

Bartosh (2013) uses the term 'Environ Mentality' for the texts which have both the eco-critical and postcolonial potentials. Flannery (2015) suggests to decentralize humans with the idea of 'place', takes it as land expands geographically while environmentally it is linked with the urban wilderness. Garrag (2014) argues that postcolonial approach to the environment is representation from 'native' to the 'subaltern'. It is representation of humans, place of humans in nature and the need to purify humans by protecting the serenity and purity of the wilderness. Buell (2009) explains the literal threat of environmental disasters produced by the cycle of violent acts, retaliation, and reprisal. Terrorizing the environment and locals in terms of the exploitation of the ecology in the political spectrum is ecoterrorism. It is corporate violence against the state and the environment.

Methodology

The method used to conduct this research is inductive and framework is qualitative.

Textual analysis is the path to critically analyze the text *Exit West* under the influence of

Huggan and Tiffin's Postcolonial Ecocriticism and for this, content analysis method is used to strengthen the discussion. This content analysis technique, not only include the close reading of the primary text but also other texts related to the postcolonial eco-critical perspectives. This technique will be applied to relate the objectives of the research with the research questions. The descriptive method is used to have an insight into the research. The relationship between the contradictory approaches is explained by the subjectivity of the suppression, marginalization, sufferings, and exploitation of the natives and the exiles as well as the natural environment and surrounding. Hamid, M. has a Pakistani origin, and being part of continent Asia, he has presented the counter-narrative of colonial rule and deliberately expresses that the environmentalism of first world countries is different from the environmentalism of the third world states. The synchronization and parallelism between post colonialism and ecocriticism is used to check the interdisciplinary nature of the theory.

The theoretical framework, Postcolonial ecocriticism explains that the discourse of nature and environment is shaped by the imperial history. It throws light on the issues of European invasion, terrorism, colonization, and the problems of estrangement of the indigenous by their sense of place and territory. This theory interrogates the modern man and his life as well as highlights human negligence towards the environment. Human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and is also affected by it. Postcolonial ecocriticism contest environmental and social injustice, environmental racism, and anthropocentrism as matters of deep concern. Trans corporeality is in favor of the environment and it directly questions human relations, attitude and the believes which shoves away and manipulates the natural environment as a mere disposable entity on which human's scheme for profit in the post-colonial culture. Therefore, thinking across postcolonial ecocriticism and trans-corporeality catalyze the recognition that the environment which is often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use is in reality comprised of flesh and bones with life which has its own needs and demands.

Discussion and Analysis

Wars are not climatic or natural; humans are responsible for the generation of wars. The high-tech surveillance, militarized borders, climate disruption and

human mobility are inter-linked. The war in Exit West is between the militants and the Government and exposes the dark side of humans to dominate societal institutions, environmental surroundings, and other species. Winthrop (1991) quotes Johnson and defines war as an 'armed conflict between population groups' (p. 317). The war soon becomes national, "large bombs still dropped from the sky." (Hamid, 2017, p. 46). The natives are left traumatized as they have to face the attacking militants and the unjust behaviour of the government.

Hamid's novel shows the 'unprecedented flow of migrants' (Hamid, 2017, p. 42) for their survival towards the rich countries that are unreceptive towards the refugees. Refugees are considered as "black holes" (Hamid, 2017, p. 71). Valtonen (1994) calls them a threat to territory from poorer to richer countries, from the collapsed government systems to the politically stable governments. They are the people who are forced to migrate from their native land to other places because of any political, social, and natural calamity. They leave their homes only to be treated inhumanly in their country as well as their places of migration. Rees. et. al. (2017) argue that the number of refugees is increasing and if this continues, one out of a hundred men will soon be a refugee. According to United Nation's estimation, almost 65 million persons are currently displaced by war. More than 80% of refugees are displaced internally or flee across national borders to neighboring countries; their majority is located in low and middle-income countries. Half of the world's refugees remain in "protracted situations", unstable and insecure locations.

In the text, the refugees lie on the pavements, live in the tents with their families hoping and trying to return to normal life. Dehumanization is a term used by Frantz Fanon (1963) in postcolonial context as it turns human into animals (p. 42). Kumar entitles racial dehumanization as the denial of humanness to others or the feeling of one ethnic group as 'less human' and 'the other'. (Kumar, 2018, p. 1). In Exit West, dehumanization is a psychological strategy to subjugate, control and dominate people. It appears as "about being human, living as a human" (Hamid, 2017, p. 69). Some of the refugees seem to hate the place and some choose to stay calm as dead. They are living in pathetic situations like instead of a roof, they have plastic sheet and branches of leaves as shelter. Anthropologists Montagu and Matson (1983) call 'Dehumanization' as the 'Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse.' (p. 9). In Exit West, humans are called 'bats' by Hamid. (p. 36). Haslam (2006) uses

the term ‘animalistic dehumanization’ in which humans are considered as animals or the traits of animals are somehow linked with human beings.

In *Exit West*, the dead bodies of Saeed’s mother and Nadia’s cousin are in pieces. It’s hard to find a place for the burial of dead bodies and they are in the end burnt in a pile. There is no electricity and gas supply in the city. City is exposed to the lack of food and resources, along with the downfall of politics due to war. Militants are killing people because of ethnic issues. They kill a neighbour of Saeed who lives upstairs. “Racial dehumanization is actually the treatment of human beings that is brutal at extreme level with people belonging to other ethnic groups. (Kumar, 2018, p. 1). Hamid (2017) verbally portrays animalism at various points in the text e.g. when he writes, “bodies hanging from streetlamps and billboards” and Saeed’s father finding a group “playing with a human’s head” (pp. 48-49). Huggan and Tiffin (2015) say that “human domination and anthropocentrism and western imperialism are intrinsically interwoven” (p. 11).

Bruyn (2020) says that climatic changes bring catastrophes (pp. 1-16). Nadia’s lemon tree is an example. Her lemon tree does not recover from the damage of the blast. “despite repeated watering, and it sat lifeless” (Hamid, 2017, p. 52). It will take months and years to regrow and regain its normal life. Franzen (2010) describes how when dehumanized humans are considered as the ‘cancer of planet Earth in which other species do not matter to us (p.244). When war started people faced the problems of social injustice and the humans start neglecting the surrounding environment, forget to do eco-justice. In Saeed’s office, the lawn is neglected by the authority full of “cigarette butts” (Hamid, 2017, p.8).

Lagji (2018) says that Hamid’s novels are set in unnamed cities resembling the cities of Pakistan. Both *Exit West* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are the South Asian Diasporas. Postcolonial narrative brings close the mobility paradigms. In *Exit West*, the migrants arrive and depart through the magical doors which exacerbate the existing unequal power dynamics between the global North and the global South. He shows the supremacy of “white” from the dichotomy of “them” and “us”. They are exposed to xenophobia, violence and hatred from the natives who label them as “rough people” (Hamid, 2017, p. 72). Their next stop is Marin which is peaceful as compared to the darker London. The division of land into darker London as “blackness in the ocean (Hamid, 2017, p. 79) and brighter London as “glowing up into the sky” (Hamid, 2017, p. 79) underscores the racial

discrimination. Whiteness is connected to the whiteness of light and the complexion of the civilized ones. Beaches sign boards are in English and other languages as “cacophony that was the languages of the world” (Hamid, 07, p. 58).

In Hamid’s literary world in the primary text, migration takes place by the help of magical doors in the tradition of magical realism. These magical doors symbolize a borderless world. People call refugee camps as “mousetraps” (Hamid, 2017, p. 63). Human trafficking and smuggling erupt as a possibility of people being “sold” (Hamid, 2017, p. 56) opens to militants and is done by the “people smuggler” (Hamid, 2017, p. 62). The state of the refugee camps at Mykonos is miserable. They as well as other migrants, most of them are ‘black’ have to face shortage of food and left with no option but to die of hunger or to cross the unguarded magical door. The couple migrates to London. They are open to the Dubai’s beaches but seen on security cameras and under surveillance, “lost in an aura of whiteness”. (Hamid, 2017, p. 51).

Here comes the technocratic start up and use of modern weapons, “automatic gunfire, flat cracks”. (Hamid, 2017, p. 13). Saeed mentions the serenity as the purity of air, less dense population, no artificial lights and starry sky. Saeed and Nadia are fed up of the artificial and industrially revolutionized habitat and want to live close to nature in the natural habitat. During curfew, the sky of the city is clear from the pollutants, moon and the stars are shining brightly, and there is less smoke because of no traffic and vehicles on the roads.

The construction site supervisor eats his lunch along with the migrants, only Saeed knows his “English” language. They have cut off many trees and left birds homeless, “lose their trees to construction.” (Hamid, 2017, p. 98). Supervisor wants to increase the productivity and efficiency of his project. So, he marches in a sense to utilize man power and the use of machinery as a project of “remodeling the Earth” (Hamid, 2017, p. 96). Huggan and Tiffin (2015) explain “Environmental racism is sociological phenomenon, exemplified in the environmentally discriminatory treatment of socially marginalised or economically disadvantaged peoples, and in the transference of ecological problems from their ‘home’ source to a ‘foreign’ outlet”. (p. 04)

In Marin, there is a community who wants to talk and speak of the rights of humans because of the inhumane treatment and exploitation of refugees as

workers. The party acts and works like the democratic and humanitarian group, they raise their voice for all without any racism, all regardless of their caste, creed, religion, country and colour. They just want social justice. Alaimo (2010) argues that humans should define environment from a new perspective as ‘trans-corporeality’ in which human beings are completely inseparable from the natural environment. Environmental justice, fair treatment for all living creatures even the minorities without any discrimination which also reaches to the flora and fauna of the natural ecosystem. Marin is “earthquake-friendly” (Hamid, 2017, p. 104). It has solar panels, strong internet signals, fancy and beautified rainwater saver and dew collector. There is desire and hope for a better future where, “dark skin with light skin” (Hamid, 2017, p. 116) are seen with different connections, man to man, and man to electronics.

Nadia and Saeed are under constant watch and surveillance even at a place like Marin. The drones are the size of the hummingbirds. The access to artificial intelligence in multiple forms like mobile phones, screens and internet is provided to the developers and facilitates them to monitor what people are doing and hold them accountable for their actions. The use of digital screens in the form of mobile phones or computers etc. are sources of connection for the lost people. The end of battery is considered as lifelessness. Even in danger when they are close to their death, death is compared to the digital screen, “blackout of a phone screen or going into sleep” (Hamid, 2017, p. 89)

In a context of people migrating from all around the world, Hamid makes a philosophical remark “We are all migrants through time” (Hamid, 2017, p. 112) referring to migration as a tragic trans-historical phenomenon. So Nadia also decides to move away from Saeed. The personal and interpersonal relationships are also symbolized by the environmental surrounding. The gap is seen between Nadia and Saeed, like the obvious infertility of a fertile land, the rise in water level might be due to the rise in temperature which is because of the global warming, “people were slipping away from where they had been, from once fertile plains cracking with dryness, from seaside villages gasping beneath tidal surges, from overcrowded cities and murderous battlefields” (Hamid, 2017, p. 114).

Man is moving towards his own destruction, building technology that is harmful for his own existence and gradually his own discoveries and innovations pose a serious threat to human existence itself. Nadia and Saeed believe that western

superiority and are controlled by the use of the internet and wireless signals. It is a fact that the electromagnetic waves and radiations are harmful to human eyes and other living beings. In a way, these radiations of different wavelengths are a sort of impurity dispersed in the air. “waved in the city’s air, untethered and free, phones in the millions.” (Hamid, 2017, p. 25). Keykoshravi et al. (2018) add, “The skin receives much radiation when in contact with mobile phones or tablets. The electromagnetic radiations cause tumors, especially skin cancers. Less attention has been paid to environmental factors like this.” (p. 01).

Without mobile phones, internet and electricity, people think of themselves as bats who have “lost the use of their ears” (Hamid, 2017, p. 36). City is taken over by the militants. There is constant bombing “bombed from the heavens.” (Hamid, 2017, p. 48). The aircrafts, drones, robots add to their horror and discriminatory treatment by the government. They are like the colonized people who have no rights and freedom and live under the supreme authority of their colonizers which is unchallengeable. Hamid (2017) calls this neo-colonization “an unstoppable efficiency, an inhuman power” (p. 83) in which the refugees are trapped and feel like small mammals in front of predators “like a rodent before a snake” (Hamid, 2017, p. 83).

The study of Hamid’s *Exit West* reveals how rise of violence and militarism have an adverse effect on environmental sustainability. Discrimination, racial biases, xenophobia, ethnic issues, and nationalism are some of the reasons for the inhumane treatment of refugees in *Exit West*. The binary concept of ‘othering’ helps the host countries to deal with the outsiders as ‘others’ or ‘strangers’. This alterity affects the mind-set of the generation and ultimately leads to the prejudices and cruelty towards the refugees. The refugees are unwelcomed and considered as a threat. Despite being humans, they are deprived of their basic rights. They are forced to flee from their homes, go through identity crisis, leave the belongings behind, and their lives are in danger. They are also afraid of their reception because they do not know where the magical doors take them.

Humans cannot exist without their surroundings. Nowadays, it has become difficult to differentiate between environment and nature. While it is now an established fact that Freedom is the basic inviolable right of every human, human lust for power, land and rule forces them to control other humans. The desire to subordinate others initiates war. In the novel, human’s use technology, weapons,

machines, and drones which not only destroy the infrastructure and buildings but also destroy the plants and other species.

The idea of humanity is linked with the idea of development and progress. The rate of progress increases the humanity factor; the more developed you are, the greater humanity you have. In contemporary times, progress and development are a tool of superiority and supremacy. It is considered as the equipment to measure the human's efficiency. This efficiency is gradually increasing if we look back at stone age to the modern man. This progress as a developmental tool is the borderline which separates humans to other non-human species. From the cave man to the AI, this humanity has gone through various stages with its bondage to the progress.

Firstly, agricultural age then industrial revolution, advancement in medicines and nowadays, it's the age of digitalization where computers, screens, robotics and artificial intelligence are considered a better and more effective replacement of humans. It is more efficient than an ordinary man but soon this goes beyond the control and there comes a point where the progress and development fail to merge with humanity and cause the shattering of the civilization. Then the imperialistic practices emerge which try to keep up the humanity with and under the promise (while in fact, the pretext) of progress. Thus, for the sake of humanity, progress has become a necessary evil.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the postcolonial eco-critical exploitation in *Exit West* is concerned to the geographical range, the surrounding environment, and the violation of human rights in the age of globalization in the modern era. Despite the political nature of the text, this paper has explored the novel's geographical realities, borderless world, man-to-man relationships, and man's relation to the surrounding environment by highlighting how man relies on nature, resources, border, and shelter.

Keeping in mind the literary context and representation of the West, it seems much closer to the modern-day reality. This paper has examined the following processes: the colonial lens for the environmental objectification, the violation of basic human rights, animalized state of war struck indigenous people, the

discriminatory treatment of South Asians or black in the hands of white/West, the othering of nature during the war, eco-conquest by ethno-nationalism, eco-manipulation by develop-mentalism and the ecoterrorism by militaristic legacies and ethnic-nationalists.

The only way to progress is to conserve the planet and environment for the next generations and modern man has to rebuild his link with the nature. By replacing the natural with the unnatural and consumption of the natural resources without the precision is in no advantage either to humanity or to the progress.

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