

Love and Loss in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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Abstract

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2017, is a novel about mass migration, involving themes of transnationalism, magic realism, love and loss. The novel is a heart-wrenching story of a couple that struggles in the times of war, turbulence and migration. Their passion and affection for each other pass through various stages, as their love and devotion are tested time and again while they are forced to migrate from their unnamed town to Mykonos, from Mykonos to London, from London to a labour camp and from the labour camp to the American county, Marin. Their love gets transformed, falters and is being lost somewhere in the process. With conflicting opinions, opposing interests, differing choices, dissenting beliefs and divergent longings, the rift in their relationship widens. Love, compassion, admiration, hopes and partnership are lost, leaving a complete void – a void of feelings and emotions. This loss also enables us to extend our sympathies, understand shared human vulnerabilities and bring a more profound unity among the suffering human beings. This paper seeks to explore various facets of love and loss in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*.

Key Words: Love, Loss, Migration, Refugee, War

Human beings are relational by nature and love relationships in life are essential for their well-being. Love is a process of concentration and focus of emotions and effort on a single individual. It often leads to sharing of interests, memories, roles and values so that the two individuals build a distinct shared identity. Love is a form of emotional interdependence, which also involves mutual affirmation of each other's intrinsic worth. Can Akendiz describes love as "a diversity of states, attitudes and most importantly, feelings which could be anything from affection to desire." Psychologist Robert Sternberg describes love as having three constituents, namely intimacy, passion and commitment. "The

love that an individual receives is subject to how strong these three constituents are". (Akendiz) Peace and prosperity facilitate loving relationships as they engender positive emotions, but adversity and conflict situations can give rise to fear and cause anger, hate, anxiety and guilt. But love can enable individuals to combat negativity and face adversity with serenity and courage. Love makes human beings vulnerable to loss, but it is love that gives resilience when life is plundered by the failures of various kinds.

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Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* is a fascinating love story of a young couple, Saeed and Nadia, amid precarious conditions such as war, migration and deprivation. "Their love story plays out against a bleak backdrop of mounting violence between government and rebel forces, as bombings and shootings grow more rampant and society dissolves into chaos and paranoia." (Salleh) The relationship of Saeed and Nadia changes with changing places, journeying from love to compassion to obligation to loss. They share good and peaceful time in their own city, which make them fall in love and get committed to each other. Their love

continues to grow as they survive hardships, yet when they flee the country to live as refugees in various refugee camps, the relationship falters, and they finally drift apart.

Saeed and Nadia are attracted to each other in spite of having different belief systems, lifestyles, values and temperaments. Saeed and Nadia accept each other's flaws and respect the differences in their opinions. Saeed lived with his parents while Nadia, having moved out of her house, lives all by herself in an apartment. Saeed offered prayers to the Almighty, whereas Nadia never prays and constantly disdains the matters of faith. Nadia meticulously dresses in a black robe which makes her appear as a virtuous traditionalist. She expresses it in the following words: "So men don't fuck with me" (16) Saeed lived with parents – his mother is a schoolteacher and father, a university professor, both of whom were also avid readers. Theirs was a love marriage with a significant portion of their romance spent in meeting in bookshops before their wedding and reading together in cafes and restaurants and even their balcony after their marriage. Their romantic relationship didn't involve sexual intercourse until they were married. Saeed too is a virgin, when he meets Nadia for the first time and keeps telling her that they will not have sex until the day of their marriage. Nadia, on the other hand, has a different temperament and value system. She, being a rebel, had moved out of her parents' house and is keen to have a sexual relationship with Saeed and feels no inhibition in initiating the advances time and again. She had previously had a fling with a musician, years ago, which involved physical intimacy

and the breaking off included farewell sex. Nadia meticulously dresses in a black robe which makes her appear as conservative, while it is just a deception to trick men into believing that she is a virtuous traditionalist. She tells Saeed her reason: “So men don’t fuck with me” (16)

Their first meeting is at a Chinese restaurant of Nadia’s choice where they talk about their interests and the foreign destinations they wish to travel and surprisingly, both of them have places in Latin America. They both took extreme delight in explaining why each of them wanted to visit that specific place, which in Nadia’s case was Cuba and Saeed’s was Chile. Nadia is charmed by Saeed’s features. After finishing their dinner, Nadia invites Saeed to her home as they both longed to be in each other’s company and there was no other place in their war-torn city, where they could safely meet, spend time and know each other. Once they reach her apartment, she asks Saeed to wait at a corner while she hurries upstairs, unlocks the door, clears the mess that her room was and tosses a shopping bag down to Saeed, inside which she had kept one of her black robes and spare keys. Saeed wastes no time in wearing it, which covers him from his head to his toes and in an effeminate manner, reaches her room in just a couple of minutes through the stairway. Nadia makes him sit, plays an old album and offers to smoke a joint with him.

As their relationship grows, Saeed begins to enter into Nadia’s thoughts irrespective of what time of day it was. He begins to creep into her thoughts while she is at work, while she eats her dinner alone at night and while she takes a shower. Saeed’s life, at this point, is no different. He thinks of Nadia day

and night and feeling her very existence. He made her laugh quite too often, and she could feel his presence without him being present. Soon, they strike a chord and establish a cadence, leading to a deep connection. Hardly a few hours would pass without some contact between the two of them. Saeed and Nadia made sure to continually keep in touch by way of exchange of text messages or a conversation over a phone call or a meeting. The early days of their romance were full of vigour and vibrancy, laying a strong foundation for the times ahead. Even when, and there were threats and killings all around, Saeed manages to visit Nadia at her apartment.

When their phone networks were disbanded and internet connectivity suspended as anti-terrorism measures, Saeed and Nadia felt stranded and also a little frightened. Saeed could think that he was in love, but Nadia was unsure of whether it was love but was sure that whatever she was feeling, the feeling was overpowering. With the conclusion of their evening classes, the disappearance of their mobile signals, not having the addresses of each other’s office and lack of mobile communication, Saeed and Nadia didn’t know where to reach out to each other. Saeed goes to their usual burger joint at lunchtime expecting Nadia, but it is in vain as she doesn’t show up. Days pass without any contact between them. A few days later, Saeed somehow managed to show up at Nadia’s entrance, and she is overjoyed to see him and displays mixed emotions. She is upset for not having been able to meet him, but he manages to calm her down with the bags of essentials he had brought for her. Their relationship is marked by mutual care and concern. In the warlike

situation of their city, Saeed offers Nadia to move in with him, and his parents as living alone in such a case could be risky.

On the other hand, Nadia was worried about Saeed's safety while he drove home. When the situation worsens, Saeed again asks Nadia to shift into his house and to have the utmost care for her feelings; he tells her that he would explain everything to his parents, that they wouldn't have to get married then. She could occupy his bedroom, and he would happily sleep in the sitting room instead. Saeed is genuinely concerned for Nadia and her safety and intends to protect her from all the possible dangers. Nadia is equally worried for him and understands that Saeed's driving over to see her and then return, is not safe in such circumstances. While she doesn't want to compromise on his safety but is in a dilemma about moving in with him for she had managed to set up her own independent life after a lot of efforts.

But after Saeed's mother passes away on being hit by a stray bullet, she moves in with Saeed and his father, without any second thoughts. She comes on his mother's funeral to extend support and comfort to Saeed and his father, stays with them the entire night but looking at the condition of Saeed and his father; she decides to stay with them. She becomes a member of that family, a daughter to Saeed's father, as she takes care of him during the most challenging time. Saeed is glad and appreciative of Nadia's presence and for the effect she had on his father. Referring to his closeness to Nadia, he even said: "The end of the world can be cosy at times." (77)

As the times grow tougher and the situation of their city worsens with each passing day, Saeed and Nadia are unrelenting in their quest to find a way out of their miserable town. They start believing in the existence of those magical 'doors' that the inhabitants had been talking about and begin to explore the possibility of one such door and the person or the 'agent' who could lead them to this 'door'. They manage to find and meet one such agent inside a gloomy and dark burnt-out shopping centre, and a few days later, they find a handwritten note at their door – a note that contained the desired time and venue where they were supposed to be on the following afternoon for their much-awaited getaway. Saeed's father refused to join them. Despite Saeed's repeated efforts, his father denied coming along with but commanded Saeed and Nadia to go ahead. His father asked Nadia, whom he called and regarded as his daughter, to look after Saeed, to ensure his safety, to take care of him until he was out of danger and to stay by his side always. He entrusted Nadia with his only son's life and expects her to keep her promise no matter what time puts them through. Nadia, with a heavy heart, made the promise as she was helpless and guilty for abandoning Saeed's father, whom she also regarded as her father, leaving the old man behind, alone, particularly at this age and such dangerous time knowing that she might never be able to see him again. They go with a terrible sense of loss. Hamid comments, "that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind." (94)

The door, through which they were to exit, existed inside a dentist's clinic which was on the ground floor of a converted house.

Saeed initially thinks that he would go through the door first, to ensure that everything is safe for his beloved Nadia. But when the agent called out his name to make his way through the gloomy black door first, he reexamines his earlier decision and changes his mind, because he felt that it would rather be more perilous for Nadia to stay back there, alone. He decides that she would be the first one to go. As Nadia goes closer to the door, the opacity and the darkness of the door grab her attention and make her hold herself back for a while, and as she looks back on Saeed, she catches him staring at her with his face reflecting expressions that of worry and despair. She holds his hands tightly in her own as if to offer comfort as if to provide assurance and releases them later without uttering a word and after that heads towards a new journey. Saeed follows Nadia, and both of them emerge in the toilet of some public place. They embrace each other without standing back up, and Nadia cradles him, holding him tight because Saeed was frail then. As they begin to walk outside, they could feel the cold breeze blowing on their faces, and on looking around, they soon realize that they were simply on a beach. Soon a pale-skinned man led them from the beach to a hill where they saw the sight of a refugee camp “with hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colours and hues – many colours and hues but mostly falling within a band of brown that ranged from dark chocolate to milky tea” (100)

Saeed and Nadia soon discovered a clump of their fellow countrymen and women in the refugee camp. They wish to remain in the embrace of their kind and feel like home, and they soon get to learn that they are on a

beautiful and attractive tourist spot – the Greek island of Mykonos. They set up their temporary home on the patch of land, which they found at the edge of the camp partway up the hill. Nadia sits down beside a bush and asks Saeed to sit down too, and as she tries to kiss him there, in the shade of the beautiful open sky, Saeed angrily turns his face away to the other side. Though he offers his apology quickly and places his cheek against Nadia’s with her trying to relax against him, Nadia felt something she had never felt before. She had glimpsed bitterness in Saeed in that very moment. The loss of family, job and country and the insecurity had made him a bit bitter. Though Saeed made all the possible efforts to reassure her, holding and kissing her hands, as if to rectify his mistake, as if to make reparations but Nadia was troubled because it dawned on her that “a bitter Saeed would not be Saeed at all.” (103)

But things, however, begin to feel good when they survive the cold together in a small tent by sleeping closer, holding on to each other. In the morning, while she is watching him sleeping, he wakes up, and they feel each other’s touch, and they kiss, seizing the moment. Everyone in those camps desires for an escape to a new place and is trying to figure out a new door. It was a time that meant boredom for some, but Nadia instead suggests that they should explore the island while they can, and Saeed responds with a burst of laughter, for the first time since they have been in Mykonos, and it pleases and comforts her. As they traverse through the length and breadth of the island, they conclude that Mykonos is undeniably a heavenly place and they understand why it is among the tourists’

favourite destination. Their funds begin to dwindle, and with more than half of it gone, they could feel the desperation and the terror. Four men chase Saeed and Nadia while they are out for fishing in the dark. They lighten their load and drop the rod as an offering to those men. They, however, manage to be safe when they come closer to a house that is being guarded by uniformed guards. As the days pass, the cut on Nadia's arm begins to decay, and they had to go to the outskirts of the old town looking for somebody to tend to it and they soon find a volunteer who cleans and dresses her wound. The girl and Nadia rapidly develop a connection, and the girl offers to help them in finding their way off Mykonos. Soon, one early morning she makes Nadia and Saeed sit at the back of her scooter and takes them to a house with a courtyard on the hill, and when they rush inside, they spot a door. The girl embraces Nadia tightly and wishes them both good luck and Saeed is surprised to see moisture in the girl's eyes. She whispers something in Nadia's ears, and they soon "stepped through the door and left Mykonos behind." (115)

Their next stop is London, where they emerge through the door into a luxurious hotel-like room of a house, probably a palace "with rooms upon rooms and marvels upon marvels, and taps that gushed water that was like spring water and was white with bubbles and felt soft, yes soft, to the touch." (118). The house is inhabited by a variety of refugees ranging from Nigerians to a few Somalis to a family from the borderlands between Myanmar and Thailand with some of them leaving and some staying back. Saeed and Nadia occupy a small bedroom, and the first thing she does is to

take a bath. She then has a little argument with Saeed over her decision of washing her clothes, which by then have a foul stench. When Saeed, exercising his authority as an Asian husband, tries to tell her that she shouldn't be standing at the bathroom's door wrapped in her towel for long, something inside Nadia rebelled at that very moment. She retorts: "Don't tell me what I can do." (123) The new threatening situations accentuate the differences in their temperaments.

This house in London is almost full, comprising of people from all age groups and all directions, ranging from Guatemala in the far west to Indonesia in the far east. For the first time in all these days, they could see the police who were armed with submachine guns. They threaten the inhabitants and ask them to evacuate the palace. They are successful in terrifying some of them enough to exit, but a vast majority of them stays back collectively, developing a camaraderie, in which they all stand united. Saeed and Nadia are among the lot that remains back. The police later opt to retreat. That night, Saeed and Nadia, lay down together, and feel comforted, and express their love for each other by holding hands in a long, very long time.

While living in close proximity with strangers, striking friendships with them and building a community seems an exciting experience to Nadia. But for Saeed, the stay at the house with the fellow refugees, completely unknown speaking in languages he did not understand, was utterly a bizarre experience which suffocated him. He exhibits his displeasure and thus attracts disgust and threats from the fellow inhabitants. Nadia always comes to his

rescue and scolds him only to protect him. Saeed is, however, piqued by the tone in her voice. He could feel the loss of warmth from their relationship and noted with concern growing instances speaking harshly to each other and giving room to insensitivity and callousness. Nadia, too, can feel the strife that is now beginning to grow its roots firmly in a relationship where once only mutual love, care and affection existed. A sense of loss, manifesting itself in a loss of love, loss of attachment, loss of care, loss of empathy, and loss of sensitivity, starts exhibiting itself in their relationship and they both want to keep a check on their fast-growing differences somehow. But with each fresh conflict, they find their threshold limits lowered even further. They end up growing cold even when they intend to be warm towards each other.

However, the couple struggles to hold their relationship intact and goes foraging like a team after the house had run short of food supplies. They also suffer an attack by a nativist mob which bruises Nadia's eye so severely that it soon gets swell shut. Saeed's lip is split so terribly that it keeps on bleeding incessantly. In such a threatening moment, they feel the need for togetherness, and so they tightly grip each other's hand. They feel sympathy and affection for each other and decide to start the day without a fight. After sunset, Nadia plays a music album of Saeed's choice, by a local band that was quite famous in their city when they were in their teens, and Saeed is happy to hear it. They then sit down and make a promise to not speak bitterly to each other. That night they both talk about life, with Saeed asking Nadia about how she envisions the life of her dreams and Nadia questioning

him whether he envisages them settling in London. Nights like these bring them closer. They feel that they were living together always for too long now, and conflicts and disagreements were bound to happen in such a relationship. The solution they seek is to explore separately during the day which provides them personal space and an escape from the round-the-clock closeness, but it also became a cause for worry for each of them due to the precarious conditions of their existence. This idea of giving space to each other by wandering separately during daytime worked well. It sets them free from their hemmed closeness and enables them to connect with warmth at night, something which had been missing in their relationship for long. On occasions, they would hold hands in their balcony at nights and on some occasions, kiss and could occasionally feel the rejuvenation of their fading relationship.

Saeed, amid all the distressing situations, seeks solace in his religion and comfort in his town co-religionists and his fellow countrymen. Nadia, on the other hand, is able to make friends with strangers and people of different religions. "Religion now provides comfort to Saeed in a new land. When he prayed, he felt an invisible, inviolable communion, with his parents, whom he lost in the unnamed city of his past. It is something he finds hard to share with others, especially Nadia." (Kumar) Saeed and Nadia's next stop is at a labour camp where they toil day and night, eat frugal meals and work tirelessly, in return for earning themselves "a home on forty square meters of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity." (168) While they are in the camp, despite a number of differences, they both care for each other's

needs. But they start missing spontaneity and comfort in sharing their heart and find themselves often tongue-tied. The conversations start getting shorter and shorter. They no more touch each other while they lie together in bed. The closeness and the warmth start diminishing.

Saeed and Nadia want to rekindle their relationship, the passion and warmth that had once existed there. Nadia is Saeed's only close family now, and he wants to cherish this last surviving relationship from his past. He decided to be amiable and cheerful with Nadia to provide her with the warmth, but Nadia only felt pain and gloom and a sense of loss. In order to rekindle their friendliness and passion for each other, she suggests Saeed that they should quit their desire to be on the housing list, make use of the first opportunity to go and take the nearby door which would land them in Marin, the city on the Pacific Ocean. She is surprised to get a positive reaction from Saeed.

When they are in Marin, Saeed gets a little more depressed and quieter than before. Nadia thought of him as being more devout and doubted about the objects of his prayers. Nadia sometimes even feels compassionate towards him, so she decides to take weed home after much thought. Saeed is thrilled to see it and offers to roll for both of them. Nadia's eyes gleam on seeing Saeed's reaction. That night, both of them laugh till their stomachs hurt. Saeed found solace in the words of the preacher who knew something about Saeed's language and was familiar with Saeed's religion as well. Saeed could feel himself getting attracted to the preacher's daughter at Marin, which makes him feel very guilty towards Nadia, and he

decides not to advance his steps in that direction. Thinking about Nadia, Saeed starts enjoying her company. Nadia could also see a glimpse of old Saeed in him and the improved mood between them makes both of them happier, but the craving for physical closeness or even a touch had long subsided.

There happens to be a loss of comfort in their relationship when Saeed begins to feel that there are certain feelings that he cannot express to Nadia, for example, the vision he gets while he prays, the mystery, to which his prayers connected him. He doesn't know how to convey them to Nadia. Saeed, however, feels comfortable in sharing his thoughts with the preacher's daughter, and it eventually acts as a foundation of a strong bond. Irrespective of all the hurdles and harsh circumstances, their loyalty towards each other remains unchanged. They feel committed to protect each other and do not wish to give up. Hamid comments:

so neither talked much of drifting apart, not wanting to inflict a fear of abandonment, while also themselves quietly feeling that fear, the fear of the severing of their tie, the end of the world they had built together, a world of shared experiences in which no one else could share, and a shared intimate language that was unique to them, and a sense that what they might break was special and likely, irreplaceable. (203)

Love and loss are among the essential and inseparable ingredients of life. Love and loss go hand in hand. Where there is love, there is bound to be a loss. Both these forces work together, and one cannot exist without the existence of the other. Hamid's novel brings

to the surface several losses- the loss of faith, relationships, love and sensitivity to one another. It also highlights the loss of one's humanity in migration, the loss of emotions, the loss of belonging, the loss of homes and the loss of nationality, the loss of lives, the loss of families and the loss of one's own being. But the most striking feature that Hamid puts before us by way of this novel is that it is loss itself that unites us. Hamid writes:

we are all children who lose our parents, all of us, every man and woman and boy and girl, and we too will all be lost by those who come after us and love us, and this loss unites humanity, unites every human being, the temporary nature of our being-ness, and our shared sorrow, the heartache we each carry and yet too often refuse to acknowledge in one another" (202)

It is the loss of family, the death of Saeed's father that unites Saeed and Nadia in spite of their drift from each other. Nadia kneels down to sit and pray for Saeed's father, right beside him which she never had done earlier. It is the loss of their nationalities that bring together the people of various nationalities in the refugee camps at Mykonos. It is the loss of belonging and security that unites the people from Nigeria, Somalia, Guatemala, Indonesia and other places at the house in London. Saeed is overcome by a great sense of loss as soon as he enters Mykonos. The loss of his family – the death of his mother and the abandonment of his father weighs heavily on his conscience. He feels alienated at the loss of his fellow countrymen, his own kind, his own people and his religion. He experiences

a feeling of alienation when he is surrounded by people of different colour, different skinned and different nationalities at the house in London. He is physically present in Mykonos and London and Marin, but his heart is always in his hometown, with his dear ones. This sense of alienation later estranges him from Nadia. Nadia too suffers from the terrible feeling of pain and loss. She finds herself helpless in preventing the severing of her ties with Saeed. They both sense the irrevocable drifting apart and can acknowledge the void in their relationship and feel the loss. They realize that their love has suffered in the process of migration, and it has become impossible for them to rekindle their love and restore it to the earlier form. Thus, they think it best not to worsen their bond and part ways in time.

The novel ends with an episode that takes place half a century after their parting when Nadia returns to her city of birth and meets Saeed in a café near her old building. They can now glance at each other with sympathetic looks. The time and maturity give them the freedom to discuss various possible scenarios of their lives, and they could afford to feel younger and more playful in their conversations. Hamid comments about their conversation: "...and it was also a dance, for they were former lovers and had not wounded each other so deeply as to have lost their ability to find a rhythm together" .when Saeed tells Nadia that he will someday take Nadia to his favourite sights in the deserts of Chile, when they both "rose and embraced and parted and did not know, then, if that evening would ever come." (229). "While the book ends with the disintegration of a young migrant couple's dream of starting a new life

together, it also closes on a note of hope.” (Salleh) The losses brought in by the rugged struggles of life can be too overwhelming for romantic love of a dream of leading a shared future, but the sincere hearts would

retain their ability to “find a rhythm together”, even though circumstances, chance, values and choices might separate them.

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