Decoloniality and Nomadic Cosmopolitanism in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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Introduction

Decoloniality in contemporary thought has gained traction in the face of existing notions of Western hegemony from a political, economic, and epistemic standpoint. The concept of decoloniality is rooted in the need to disconnect oneself from what Walter Mignolo calls the 'colonial matrix of power' (2011, 16). Contemporary works of literature have increasingly shed light on marginalized communities and groups of individuals whose existence on the global periphery eliminates them from being considered as potential candidates for existing categories and classification. For example, migrant literature which has been on the rise during the past few decades has steadily gained momentum in literary and public spheres, cementing its status as a genre of fiction. One of the primary categories of individuals that this literary genre represents is that of refugees who represent a growing percentage of the world's population yet are marginalized and oppressed both politically and economically. Reading migrant literature opens up new horizons to present refugees who form a stratum of global migrants as a particular category of nomads who roam the world and are de-territorialized while simultaneously forming a new class of cosmopolitans unbound by stereotypical affiliations of affluence and elitism. In that manner, it can be argued that migrant literature has the capacity to challenge the existing colonial matrix of power and propose a redefinition of existing umbrella concepts such as 'cosmopolitanism.'

This article thus examines the concepts of 'decoloniality' and 'decolonial cosmopolitanism' as delineated by Walter Mignolo and attempts to chart the connection between nomadic cosmopolitanism in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and Mignolo's 'epistemic de-linking.' By examining the liminal spaces where characters reside, this article contends that occupying a liminal position, such as that of the refugee, potentially contributes to cosmopolitanizing a stratum of individuals that would hardly be considered cosmopolitan in the first place. Through mapping the interconnectedness of the concepts of decoloniality, mobility, cosmopolitanism, and nomadism, the article

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Cairo Studies in English – 2024 (2): 44–60. https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/
DOI: 10.21608/cse.2024.321872.1192

establishes how Hamid's portrayal of nomadic refugees who are forced to migrate involuntarily offers a new take on cosmopolitanism. It examines conventional affiliations between cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and affluence and elitism, on the other. The article thus argues that nomadic cosmopolitanism is capable of subverting standard conventions of 'Western' cosmopolitanism, thus attaining epistemic de-linking while simultaneously—within this process—becoming a new manifestation of Mignolo's decoloniality.

Decoloniality and Cosmopolitanism

The concept of decoloniality, which should not be conflated with decolonization,[1] denotes what Walter Mignolo calls the "decolonization of knowledge" (2011, 53). Mignolo's efforts stem from the necessity of "extricating" oneself, to use Anibal Quijano's expression, "from the linkages between rationality/modernity and *coloniality* … and definitely from all power which is not constituted by free decisions made by free people" (qtd. in Mignolo 2011, 52–53). Mignolo emphasizes the importance of this act of 'extrication,' establishing in the process what he terms 'epistemic de-linking,' which refers to disconnecting from the "colonial matrix of power" (2011, 54). This colonial matrix of power, initially formulated by Quijano, refers to "four interrelated domains: control of the economy, of authority, of gender and sexuality, and of knowledge and subjectivity" (Mignolo 2011, 8). In this sense, Mignolo's epistemic de-linking equates with being "epistemically disobedient" (2011, 54) since it denotes an inherent resistance of the existing—i.e. Western—matrices of power.

Mignolo contends that decolonial thinking "presupposes de-linking (epistemically and politically) from the web of imperial knowledge (theo- and ego-politically grounded) from disciplinary management" (2009, 178). This need for de-linking is rooted in the need to break away from dominant Eurocentric and colonial frameworks that have for long guided and shaped the process of knowledge production. For example, the term 'cosmopolitan' has for long been affiliated with a stratum of individuals characterized by what can generally be described as relative affluence and elitism. In other words, the term by default excludes other strata of individuals who do not subscribe to those two basic tenets that uphold the core of what it means to be cosmopolitan. To counter this longstanding definition of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitans, Mignolo proposes the term "decolonial cosmopolitanism" which revolves around rejecting the dominant Western-centric understanding of cosmopolitanism:

> [d]ecolonial cosmopolitanism should be thought of as cosmopolitan localism, an oxymoron for sure, but an oxymoron

> that breaks away, delinks, from the imperial bend of Kantian cosmopolitan legacies. Cosmopolitan localism names the connector for global and pluriversal projects, where all existing nation-states and future organizations that will replace, displace, or redo current forms of nation-states, as well as the emerging political society will participate (by whatever form of organization) to a truly cosmopolitan world. (2011, 23)

Hence, the apparent contradiction between the universalism or globalism that cosmopolitanism implies and localism is key to his argument.

He thus maintains that this ‘cosmopolitan localism’ can potentially connect “pluriversal” projects in a manner that creates room for an inclusive global system, demonstrating how this approach aims to disconnect from colonial epistemological systems. It promotes a pluriversal approach that embraces the co-existence of multiple worlds. Hence, Mignolo’s argument rests on the fundamental goal of steering clear of one universal framework that endorses one perspective, i.e. the colonial, Western perspective. Thus, it becomes imperative to first understand the existing standard definitions of cosmopolitanism, and their inherent connection to affluence and elitism, in order to demonstrate how such definitions can be subverted to advocate for a more inclusive understanding of the term.

Cosmopolitanism in Connection with Affluence and Elitism

Cosmopolitanism is derived from the Greek “*kosmopolitēs*,” meaning citizens of the world (Kleingeld and Brown, 2019). Aside from the term’s etymology, in being coined by a particular group of people—namely those who are residents of major cities of the ancient world, the term has been associated with a particular category of individuals who enjoy the privilege of living in major cities. Gisèle Sapiro refers to cosmopolitanism as how the local and the universal as well as the domestic and the foreign are connected in various intricate ways (2020, 3). She points to how the term has, in recent years, been revived and is “being used especially by migrant authors who claim it as an identity” (2020, 3). Transnational literature, which foregrounds the experiences of migrants in our modern-day world, is rooted in the intersection between these dichotomies. This literature gave rise to new forms of cosmopolitanism that cater to particular geographical regions in the case of located cosmopolitanisms or particular peoples (and not locations) in the case of dislocated cosmopolitanisms. Arjun Appadurai argues for the necessity of examining contemporary transnational cultural flows to allow the study of what he calls ‘new cosmopolitanisms’ (1996, 49). These new cosmopolitanisms are cultural forms of the contemporary world that ignore the “authority of Western experience or the models derived from that

experience" (1996, 49). Appadurai's association between new forms of cosmopolitanism and going beyond experiences influenced by or derived from the West raises questions on the definition of modern-day cosmopolitanism, especially in light of the normative view of cosmopolitanism as a marker of elitism, despite how the term originally emerged to denote a status of equality among all citizens of the world.

Cosmopolitanism has frequently been associated with certain strata of the elite. In economic terms, cosmopolitanism carries connotations of privilege. Connecting cosmopolitanism to power in literary spheres, Pascale Casanova acknowledges that the "huge power of being able to say what is literary and what is not" is in effect monopolized by a cosmopolitan aristocracy in the 'Western' literary centers of the world of letters (2004, 23). In spite of such monopoly, one reason why the writings of migrants have visibly gained traction, particularly as these works explore thorny problems on the subject of migration and mobility, is that they represent a relatively significant stratum of cosmopolitan individuals: "In a globalizing world, migrant writers are particularly interesting as emblems of the cosmopolitanism lived out by an increasing number of people, no matter whether their own bodies move, or their interaction with the world has changed due to shifts in their own society and the media they use" (Thomsen 2008, 62). However, referring to the basic tenets of cosmopolitanism reveals that it "includes a stance towards diversity itself, towards the coexistence of cultures in the individual experience" (Hannerz 1990, 239). Hannerz thus suggests that "a more genuine cosmopolitanism" principally denotes "a willingness to engage with the Other" (239). This implies that cosmopolitanism exists on a scale, which places it on a spectrum rather than assigning it as a fixed block of identity or a fixed descriptor. This creates space for questioning the extent to which those who do not conform to superficial standard definitions of the word can still be labeled 'cosmopolitan.'

Pheng Cheah maintains that cosmopolitanism can be defined as "a universal circle of belonging that involves the transcendence of the particularistic and blindly given ties of kinship and country" (2006, 487). This understanding enables Cheah to present a liberal view of cosmopolitanism that frees it from the constraints of its affiliations with elitism: "the popular view of cosmopolitanism as an elite form of rootlessness and a state of detachment and nomadic non-belonging is mistaken. The cosmopolitan's universal circle of belonging embraces the whole of humanity" (487). Although Cheah's focus is geared towards the tensions between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, he maintains that cosmopolitanism does not function in opposition to nationalism in the same manner universalism functions in opposition to particularism (489). While the two spheres of cosmopolitanism and nationalism may conflate, it remains crucial to assess where cosmopolitanism stands in relation

to nationalism. Cheah's definition may be deemed theoretically commendable, since it groups all of humanity under one umbrella. However, his definition disregards the practicalities of processes that create a divide between multiple groups of cosmopolitans, therefore creating boundaries between individuals of various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. This can be seen in how migrants or refugees might undergo the experience of mobility differently from the more affluent categories of cosmopolitans. This, in turn, problematizes his view of cosmopolitanism as a "universal circle of belonging" (487) since it overlooks inherent divisions between these different categories. Cheah's definition thus proves unsustainable in how he groups together 'the whole of humanity' under one umbrella, with little regard to the practical aspects of cosmopolitan processes and to the categories of people whose existence may be ignored if that definition remains undisputed. Thus, such a 'universal circle of belonging' proves not to be as universal as Cheah claims.

However, Susan Standford Friedman offers a rather sustainable understanding of cosmopolitanism in the twenty-first century:

> [c]osmopolitanism, once thought to be the privilege of metropolitan elites, travelers, and expatriate artists, is newly understood to include those who move in search of a more secure or better life at the most basic level of survival, even those whose migration is only ambiguously voluntary or decidedly involuntary. (2007, 261)

By delineating the challenges that emerge when cosmopolitanism is restricted to privilege, Friedman argues for freeing the definition of 'cosmopolitan' from affiliations related to affluence, choice, or voluntariness. In other words, being forced to move from one locale to another—as in the case of migrants—makes an individual cosmopolitan; the fact that migrants are forced to relocate beyond national boundaries and settle elsewhere, or become roaming nomads, renders them cosmopolitan.

Mobility, Liminality, and Nomadism

A significant portion of twenty-first century literature on migration and mobility provides a rich context for examining existing and potential links between nomadism and mobility, on the one hand, and cosmopolitanism, on the other. Liminality and nomadism are key concepts in the attempt to understand how new forms of cosmopolitanism emerge, which subverts and reconfigures prevailing definitions of cosmopolitanism. When individuals occupy liminal spaces, they experience a fluidity in identity that, combined with multiple relocations, creates opportunities to develop nomadic or

cosmopolitan qualities. This lack of fixed identity, combined with mobility, carves space that allows these individuals to acquire cosmopolitan or nomadic qualities. Hence, migration and nomadism are two essentially different categories as Friedman explains:

> [t]he movement of peoples from one place to another around the globe is a history of dislocation and relocation, displacement and emplacement, losing homes and making new homes, living in a limbo between worlds and adapting over time to new ways, being changed by and also changing the culture of the adopted land. (2007, 264)

Migration can thus entail multiple relocations, as opposed to one move, which is the case with Hamid's protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, in *Exit West*. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari note a stark difference between both nomads and migrants. Instead of examining these two categories as fixed descriptors, Deleuze and Guattari believe that nomads and migrants exist on two opposite ends of the same spectrum.

They trace nomadism back to its ancient Greek root "nem," meaning "distribution" (1987, 557). "Nomadism" is thus employed to refer to a non-sedentary or an active state of being, a state of de-territorialization marked by constant mobility across land: "the nomads do not precede the sedentaries; rather, nomadism is a movement, a becoming that affects sedentaries, just as sedentarization is a stoppage that settles the nomads" (430). In this regard, nomads are inherently distinct from migrants in that their movement does not impact their state of being: "nomads do not depart, like the migrants, from a specific milieu but rather move at the same time that they remain still" (Georgiou 2013, 26).

Rosi Braidotti expands Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of nomadism further by examining what she describes as the nomadic subject. She maintains that "nomadic subjectivity as both an analytic tool and a creative project aimed at a qualitative shift of consciousness that is attuned to the spirit of our age. The ultimate purpose is to compose significant sites for reconfiguring modes of belonging and political practice" (2011, 11). Therefore, nomadism can be construed not merely as a description for a particular state of being, but rather as an end goal, which entails reconfiguring different forms of belonging. Braidotti argues that "[t]he nomad expresses [their] own figuration of a situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject in general and of the feminist subject in particular" (25). While she chiefly focuses on the feminist subject, Braidotti's conceptualization of the nomadic subject invites a broader engagement that is not restricted to a feminist perspective.

Braidotti claims that "[n]omadism functions as counterdiscourse" (14), which suggests that nomadic cosmopolitanism could also act as a 'counterdiscourse' to the conventions of cosmopolitanism. While the term 'nomadic cosmopolitanism' has been used in various contexts, it has hardly been employed in reference to refugees from the Arab world who become wanderers, which is the case of Nadia and Saeed in Hamid's *Exit West*. One distinct feature of nomads is that they are untethered to one specific location that functions as their home and are constantly on the move. In the same vein, "cosmopolitans are usually somewhat footloose, on the move in the world" (Hannerz 1990, 240). Although 'nomad' and 'cosmopolitan' are not typically associated with each other given their diverging connotations, a considerable body of literary works published over the past two decades has shed light on the rise of the category of individuals that can embody both labels synchronously. Therefore, the term 'nomadic cosmopolitans' can be utilized to refer to a specific group of individuals who involuntarily live a nomadic life and also become citizens of the world. This category finds itself not only living on the margins, but also forced to embrace nomadism in light of the absence of security, which is the primary drive for setting in one location. Although Hannerz argues that "[a]mong the several cultures with which [cosmopolitans] are engaged, at least one is presumably of the territorial kind, a culture encompassing the round of everyday life in a community" (240), the nomadic cosmopolitans in Hamid's *Exit West* are deterritorialized the minute they are uprooted from their homeland. As they continuously journey westward in their struggle to survive, they no longer fit Hannerz's description of the cosmopolitans' characteristics, hence allowing for the merger between the two categories: nomad and cosmopolitan.

Out of this merger emerges what may be labeled 'the third state,' in reference to nomadic cosmopolitanism, following Homi Bhabha's model of 'third space.' In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha maintains that while the national traditions previously formed the core theme of world literature, "perhaps we can now suggest that translational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these borders and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature" (1994, 12). Bhabha thus establishes a connection between migrants and refugees on one side, and questions of territoriality and borders on the other side. In *Exit West*, the two protagonists Nadia and Saeed migrate "across a paradoxically globalized yet bordered world" (Naydan 2019, 435). Bhabha's 'third space' advocates the notion that hybrid individuals manage to reconcile the two spaces of homeland and hostland, and that the third space, which is essentially a cultural space of 'enunciation,' is the outcome of this merger, describing it as "those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (1994, 1). Bhabha calls these moments or processes 'in-between spaces,' asserting that they "provide the terrain for

elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (2).

This idea of liminality, which Bhabha borrows from Victor Turner, is essentially "a stage of transition, as a border zone" (Kalua 2009, 23). Therefore, liminality entails identifying as "neither the one thing nor the other" (Bhabha 1994, 49). This liminal position is arguably applicable to migrant writers, such as Hamid, as well as the characters he portrays in *Exit West*. The upbringing and education of Hamid, who is Pakistani-British, marks him as liminal, primarily because of his hybrid identity. In a similar manner, the protagonists of *Exit West* can be described as liminal characters given the nature of their life journey as refugees continuously seeking survival following their involuntary displacement and uprooting. To emphasize this quality of in-betweenness, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen explains that "[m]igrant writers and bicultural writers speak from *a place between cultures*" (Thomsen 2008, 61; my emphasis). He argues that this category of writers presents "an interesting blend of the tacit knowledge of more than one culture, and this produces particular, but not automatically successful, modes of writing from an intermediate perspective" (62).

The act of positioning oneself in third spaces that exist "beyond national binaries and oppositions reflects a nomadic position as the subversion of set conventions" (Georgiou 2013, 25). The importance of liminal spaces stems from how they "problematize and so dismantle the binary systems which bring them into being" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 25). These liminal spaces challenge the notion of fixed borders. Friedman argues that "[b]orders are [simultaneously] fixed and fluid, impermeable and porous. They separate but also connect, demarcate but also blend differences. Absolute at any moment in time, they are always changing over time" (2007, 273). These spaces are also important because of their intrinsic capacity to surpass dualities by carving new spaces for identities and modes of being to transform. Similarly, new forms of cosmopolitanism can thus emerge from the heart of liminal spaces. In that sense, it can be argued that nomadic cosmopolitanism resides in an interstitial or in-between space, given how it reconciles nomadism as what Braidotti calls a 'counterdiscourse' and cosmopolitanism.

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

Pakistani-British writer Mohsin Hamid (1971-) was born in Lahore and spent parts of his childhood in the United States before his family returned to Pakistan, which exposed him to life in two distinct cultures from a young age. He later attended Princeton, further shaping him as a transnational figure, a reality that has found some echo in his literary works. After working in New York and London, Hamid eventually returned to Lahore to pursue writing full-

time (Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau n.d.). Despite settling in Lahore, he describes himself as "feeling nomadic" (Cutolo 2012). This sense of being a nomad, alongside his liminal position between East and West, is evident in both his personal life and his writing. His novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) explores the struggles faced by a Pakistani man in the U.S. post-9/11 and his eventual return to Lahore. Similarly, *Exit West* delves into related themes, focusing not on migrants but refugees. Written in response to the global migrant crisis of the 2010s, the novel reflects the cautious, often apprehensive response of Western politics to the situation. Shortlisted for the 2017 Man Booker Prize and awarded the Aspen Words Literary Award in 2018, *Exit West* gained recognition for its portrayal of the challenges refugees face, not in the perilous journeys they undertake, but in their ongoing efforts to relocate, settle, and assimilate into new societies in light of the untenable situations they find themselves in.

Exit West's Saeed and Nadia are citizens of an unnamed country in the East— presumably an Arab country, given their names—who lead stable lives and have jobs. Nadia is the more independent and liberal of the two. She lives alone with hardly any connection to her family. She occasionally smokes weed and is sexually active, a lifestyle that is frowned upon at best in this region of the world. In contrast, Saeed lives with his parents and is more devout compared to Nadia; he avoids using illegal substances until he encounters Nadia, and the two meet while attending a business course. As civil unrest intensifies in the country, the two begin a tentative relationship that quickly intensifies amid escalating violence in the country. After Saeed's mother dies, Nadia moves in with Saeed and his father in their family home, and the three of them struggle to survive as the war brings normal life to a standstill. Eventually, the two protagonists hear rumors of magical doors that can transport people to other regions of the world, and they confirm that these doors truly exist. Hamid's use of these doors symbolizes their ability to function as connectors and barriers simultaneously, as some are heavily guarded while others are accessible for those who seek them. The novel thus examines the idea of borders, both in the literal sense of visible doors and in the abstract sense of national boundaries, raising questions about how to classify refugees who live on the margins of society indefinitely.

While *Exit West* generally falls under the umbrella of transnational literature, the novel has a diasporic quality because of its depiction of Saeed's perpetual struggle to outgrow his attachment to his past life. Nadia, however, is different from him; she does not exhibit any sentimental attachment to their homeland. Although Saeed and Nadia are both diasporic characters, the two can be placed on opposite ends of the spectrum: "Nadia had long been, and would afterwards continue to be, more comfortable with all varieties of movement in her life than was Saeed, in whom the impulse of nostalgia was stronger" (2017, 90).

Saeed is the epitome of a diasporic individual; he experiences feelings of the loss of his homeland once he learns he is about to leave his country and venture through one of the magical doors to escape the war, with no opportunity of return in sight: "he doubted he would come back, and the scattering of his extended family and his circle of friends and acquaintances, for ever, struck him as deeply sad, as amounting to the loss of a home, no less, of his home" (90). However, Nadia at that point displays a willingness to leave the country marked by the absence of the sense of loss that Saeed has shown: "her nature was such that the prospect of something new, of change, was at its most basic level exciting to her" (90). Of the two, Saeed exhibits more diasporic features than Nadia, and he continues to oscillate between seeking a more secure life and longing for the lost homeland: "the further they moved from the city of their birth ... the more he sought to strengthen his connection to it" (187). While both characters can be classified as refugees once they go through one of the magical doors, Saeed's stronger display of diasporic features presents him as less of a nomad than Nadia. However, what the two experience is an involuntary kind of nomadism.

Towards the end of the novel, around half a century later, Nadia returns to her city of birth where Saeed has resided for an unknown period. Upon her return, the two characters reconnect: "as she wandered about slowly, exploring, she was informed of the proximity of Saeed, and … she communicated with him, and they agreed to meet" (227). Though it is unclear how Saeed returned, it is implied that the magical doors are responsible for facilitating this step. The novel ends on an optimistic note where Hamid envisions a future where global mobility is readily available. This future embraces a world where Saeed proposes that he and Nadia visit the deserts of Chile via a magical door: "if she had an evening free, he would take her, it was a sight worth seeing in this life" (229). Hamid's novel, despite its utopian outlook, attempts to present a world where the fate of refugees is less gruesome and harsh than it is in reality. Bill Ashcroft believes that "[t]he idea of citizen of the world is a compelling one but who exactly is cosmopolitan? It can be a useful adjective but it's a failure as a noun" (Sarangi and Austin 2014, 134). Thus, the term 'citizen of the world' or 'cosmopolitan' is useful when stripped of associated biases and unchallenged affiliations with elitism, which allows it to encompass starkly diverse experiences of mobility shaped by precarity and the quest for survival.

In *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia enjoy a relatively affluent status, or what can be described as a comfortable lifestyle at least, in their home country. They each have houses, jobs, and a measure of financial security, and can thus easily belong to the middle class. However, when the war erupts in their country, they are hurled into a whirlwind of economic and financial distress that almost immediately demotes them in terms of class and socioeconomic stability. In

desperate need to seek refuge in another country, the two must pay a hefty sum to have access to one of the magical doors that can transport them to a safer location. Once Nadia and Saeed are in Mykonos, thus becoming refugees, they experience an immediate downgrade in their socioeconomic status, marked by the loss of a citizen status, as well as the loss of financial security. The new markers of this seemingly perpetual status of being refugees are uncertainty concerning their future and anguish over the loss of the homeland as well as the ensuing stability. During their long journey as refugees, moving from Mykonos to London to Marin County, California, Saeed and Nadia's situation barely changes; however, the two gradually adapt to their new status as refugees.

The twenty-first century has witnessed the rise of the nomad as a type of migrant unable to settle in one location or make it their home, resulting in their sense of homelessness and the temporariness of their stay in one locale. Nadia and Saeed are prime examples of this twenty-first century nomad. While they are initially forced to leave their home country due to the escalating violence resulting from the war, Nadia and Saeed face a different set of challenges in each locale they move to. During their brief stay in Mykonos, the first location they arrive in after going through one of the magic doors, the two engage in negotiations and bargaining to obtain a number of essential survival items, such as water, food, a blanket, and a portable tent, then find a spot at the edge of the refugee camp to "set up their *temporary* home there" (Hamid 2017, 107). The challenges in Mykonos thus pertain to basic survival given the precarious living conditions they encounter. When Saeed and Nadia relocate to London, their pursuit of a sense of security and stability invites questions about the possibility of making London their more permanent home. However, the challenges that the two face in London are both external and internal. The differences between Saeed and Nadia's views of themselves emerge when the two are confronted by the choice to move into living quarters with people from their home country. When faced with the possibility, Saeed indicates his enthusiasm for living with this group of people "from the country we used to be from" (153). Yet Nadia articulates her feelings that these ties with people from their home country are no longer meaningful. An emotional divide begins to emerge between the two characters in light of their diverging coping mechanisms; while Saeed seeks a sense of community and belonging in the form of surrounding himself with people from his home country, Nadia is more focused on finding a sense of security in the place they live. Their stay in London is also marked by a kind of apartheid in the form of segregation and confinement to certain areas, indicating limited freedom of mobility and access to opportunities. Coupled with the hostility that they as 'refugees' face from locals, this drives them to relocate once more. Moving to Marin in San Francisco, Saeed and Nadia face the inevitable challenge of cultural alienation

and undergo transformations that increase the divide further between them, leading to their eventual separation.

One manifestation of the privilege, or lack thereof, that Hamid's novel sheds light on is what Liliana M. Naydan terms "the digital divide" (2019, 434), which is the idea that "privileged individuals sustain access to digital technology that underprivileged individuals lack" (434). While there may not be a direct correlation between cosmopolitanism and access to digital technology, this access to technology in itself can be interpreted as a marker of affluence and is thus connected to cosmopolitanism. This shift in Saeed and Nadia's status from citizens to refugees upon their first use of one magical door witnesses a diminishing connection to the digital world: "When they woke Saeed tried to call his father but an automated message informed him that his call could not be completed" (2017, 103). This digital connection proves to be unstable as the two journey Westward; it materializes occasionally then vanishes again, repeatedly asserting its fragility and, by extension, mirroring the in-betweenness that has become Saeed and Nadia's new norm.

Nomadic Cosmopolitanism

In that sense, nomadic cosmopolitanism—of which Nadia and Saeed are epitomes—is hardly associated with either privilege or affluence: "It is a miserable plight to be a postmodern nomad, to be homeless, wandering, a refugee, following not a dream of disembodied bliss but a slim hope for survival" (Noyes 2004, 159). In the case of Saeed and Nadia, becoming cosmopolitan manifests in parallel to becoming a nomad, demonstrating how cosmopolitanism does not hinge upon either socioeconomic status or material wealth. Whereas Hannerz believes that exiles, as individuals coerced into moving, cannot be considered real cosmopolitans, it can be argued that Nadia in particular challenges this understanding of exiles, particularly because she abandons idealizing the lost homeland. While diasporics are often marked by their longing for the homeland, Nadia and Saeed stand on opposite ends of this spectrum. Saeed's longing for his homeland intensifies over time, especially as the two characters journey further West, yet Nadia's connection to the homeland diminishes and is replaced by her drive to look forward and dissociate from the past. It is in that sense that the two individuals are different from one another. Despite this divergence in their sentiments, the two are held together by their desire to survive.

Contrary to Hannerz's argument, the involuntariness of Saeed and Nadia's mobility does not hinder their capacity to become cosmopolitan, especially in Nadia's case. Being the freer spirit among the two, Nadia swiftly embraces the nomadic nature of de-territorialization. Life on the move becomes second nature to her as she and Saeed continually head West, which challenges

Hannerz's argument that forced mobility and cosmopolitanism are mutually exclusive. Therefore, an individual's approach to their state of being in the world arguably influences whether one can become cosmopolitan, even in the very dire states of existence. In this proposition, Saeed is cast as the less cosmopolitan of the two, in light of his strengthening connection to the homeland the further he is from it, while Nadia becomes representative of this nomadic cosmopolitanism, given her ability to forge a path forward that brings together nomadism and cosmopolitanism. Nadia thus becomes the embodiment of a real nomadic cosmopolitan capable of disengaging from the discourse of attachment to both homeland and hostland(s) and embracing a truly nomadic spirit.

Nomadic cosmopolitan literature, a label under which Hamid's *Exit West* falls, allows the underprivileged to access the sphere of cosmopolitanism, a category which had been thought for long to be exclusive (limited to those with ties to privilege, wealth, or elitism in mobility) or impractical (as implied by the broadly vague label 'citizens of the world'). This demonstrates that nomadic cosmopolitanism can inherently challenge and subvert mainstream definitions of cosmopolitanism, which should be liberated from associations with the acquisition of wealth and the occupation of a socially elite status. The definition of cosmopolitanism should also not stand for what Cheah calls a "universal circle of belonging" (2006, 487). The unparalleled rise in global mobility over the past few decades has left underprivileged groups stranded with nothing but the status of refugees and no means of being called 'citizens of the world.' However, nomadic cosmopolitanism challenges existing Western interpretations and readings of the term 'cosmopolitan.' In doing so, this term attempts to enact Mignolo's epistemic de-linking by severing ties with these Western interpretations and charting a new means of understanding cosmopolitanism. The term thus speaks to the need for revising and developing terms and concepts presented to the world from a Western perspective.

Despite the bleak outlook Saeed and Nadia face in each locale, Hamid's novel does offer a positive take on the narrative of migrants and refugees of the twenty-first century. Refugees, typically villainized or at best marginalized in the media, challenge their existing conditions when the opportunity presents itself. For example, in London, a refugee rebellion erupts against the police and refugees successfully occupy abandoned mansions in a posh London area. This prompts a hostile reaction from locals who view refugees as unwelcome invaders, which in turns results in the deployment of security forces. Yet, the persistence of the refugees and their resilience is a symbolic victory and allows them to express that their presence does not aim to overthrow or subvert existing systems but is rather about survival. Hence, their ability to carve space for themselves in new societies asserts their basic and most sought-after goal:

survival and co-existence. Thus, Hamid's narrative promotes a more humanistic view of twenty-first century refugees and is a call for humanizing the stories and struggles of modern-day refugees, asserting that "[w]e are all migrants through time" (Hamid 2017, 209).

Conclusion

Hamid's *Exit West* presents the category of involuntary migrants—in the characters of Saeed and Nadia—who transform from nationals to global citizens when they acquire the status of refugees who are unable to settle in one given location. As refugees, the two characters exist on the periphery with no leverage to pull themselves closer to the center. Their liminality is accentuated by their multiple border crossing, thus asserting their existence on the margins, literally and figuratively. However, despite being refugees, Saeed and Nadia are proof of the capacity of refugees to acquire a cosmopolitan status. Friedman maintains that "borders … [take] on broad theoretical dimensions as spatial metaphors for the liminal space in between, the interstitial site of interaction, interconnection, and exchange across all kinds of differences" (2007, 273). Initially, Nadia and Saeed dwell in those liminal spaces when they are displaced, but the two gradually drift apart from one another when their goals and aspirations prove to be different: "Nadia sought integration and connection with refugees of other nationalities, while Saeed sought solace from their conationals" (Fisher 2019, 1120). It is implied towards the end of the novel that Saeed managed to return to their unnamed homeland at one point, while Nadia returns around 50 years later. This highlights how Nadia's ability to embrace being a nomadic cosmopolitan, a citizen of nowhere and everywhere at once, is far greater than Saeed's. Hence, Saeed and Nadia are foils for each other. While Hamid depicts Saeed as being nostalgic for his homeland, Nadia exemplifies the spirit of the true nomad primarily identified by the absence of attachment to specific territory: "Nadia had long been, and would afterwards continue to be, more comfortable with all varieties of movement in her life than was Saeed, in whom the impulse of nostalgia was stronger" (2017, 90). She is therefore capable of becoming a citizen of the world, a cosmopolitan, who is not associated with cosmopolitanism's standard features of affluence and elitism but is rather driven by the need to survive. Unlike her, Saeed still exhibits several qualities associated with nomads; however, it is suggested towards the end of the novel, when the two characters meet once again decades later, that he returned to their home country much earlier than Nadia did, probably driven by the nostalgia he displayed from the moment the two were displaced.

Saeed and Nadia, the protagonists of *Exit West*, can be seen as representatives of a new kind of cosmopolitanism that avoids subscribing to conventional Western interpretations of the term. Their journey as refugees

presents them as promoters of nomadic cosmopolitanism. As a concept that challenges standing Western-centric definitions of cosmopolitanism, nomadic cosmopolitanism has the capacity to achieve Mignolo's epistemic de-linking from the West by charting a more comprehensive understanding of cosmopolitanism. It subverts the idea that affluence, privilege, and elitism are a necessary component in defining cosmopolitanism. By 'de-linking' cosmopolitanism from its standard affiliations, this type of cosmopolitanism promotes a new non-Western understanding of the umbrella term in a way that can be described as one manifestation of Mignolo's epistemic decoloniality.

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* reimagines cosmopolitanism through Saeed and Nadia's refugee experience, challenging traditional Western-centric interpretations of the concept. The two characters embody a nuanced form of global citizenship that emerges from displacement rather than privilege. The novel reframes nomadic existence not as a romantic ideal, but as a complex survival strategy. It exposes how global systemic challenges like conflict, inequality, and climate change force millions into uncertain migratory conditions. Rather than glorifying homelessness, the narrative critically examines the precarious realities of contemporary global mobility. By centering marginalized perspectives, *Exit West* proposes an alternative understanding of global belonging. It suggests that true cosmopolitanism isn't defined by elite mobility, but by resilience, adaptability, and the capacity to reconstruct identity amid uncertainty instead. This approach aligns with decolonial thinking by centering experiences traditionally excluded from dominant narratives. The novel ultimately challenges readers to reimagine existing social structures. Instead of viewing displacement as a temporary aberration, *Exit West* advocates for systems that recognize and support nomadic lives driven by the quest for security in a world characterized by precarity and global instability. In doing so, the novel demonstrates the capacity of the narratives of migrants and refugees to de-link from the hegemony of Western definitions of terms such as cosmopolitan and twenty-first century nomad.

Notes

1. Mignolo maintains that decolonization transformed into decoloniality towards the end of the Cold War to point to how the issue became about decolonizing knowledge rather than expelling colonizers from the territory (2011, 53–54).

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