

## Displacement as a Traumatic Discourse: A Critique of Critical Discourse Analysis of Mohsin Hamid’s Dystopian novel *Exit West*

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### Abstract

This discussed qualitative-cum-descriptive endeavor is critically carried out from the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the novel *Exit West* (2017), which deals with the discourse of forced displacement of the main characters; Nadia and Saeed, who work as the epitome of the refugees in an unknown Dystopian world. This fictitious world of Mohsin Hamid turns out to have an immense semblance with the contemporary world of uncertainty in the wake of proxy wars ultimately resulting in PTSD, shell shocks, and war neurosis. This research delves deep into the text to explore the atrocious and violent displacement of innocent souls of the affected countries. This pathetic scenario of traumatic displacement is narrated by showcasing the ominous presence of xenophobia and nativism in the host countries, due to the sudden influx of refugees. In this research, the researcher has applied Fairclough’s interpretative framework of CDA to put forth a detailed critique of traumatic encounters in the celebrated work of Hamid. Power relations are weaved in such a way in the novel that the text covertly inkles towards the postcolonial background of the novelist, and the mutual religious affiliations of both characters and author as well. The study finds that the main characters confront profound social, psychological and emotional challenges, which are the direct result of emigration and refugee crisis in a war ridden world of the novel.

**Keywords:** Xenophobia, Displacement, Power Dynamics, Refugee Crisis, Trauma.

### Introduction

This critical investigation discusses the dire diasporic dilemma of displacement. It probes

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deep into the profound denizens of traumatic discourse of the lifelike characters of Nadia and Saeed in the celebrated novel of Mohsin Hamid. The researchers have dived profoundly in the dystopian world of Mohsin Hamid from the lens of the renowned theory of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In fact, this critique deals with qualitative-cum-descriptive endeavor, which has been aptly carried out from the theoretical spectacle of Fairclough's theory of Critical Discourse Analysis popularly abbreviated as CDA.

Mohsin Hamid, being a transnational author, highlights the critical global issues like racism, identity crisis and mass migration of people. Not only are his concerns timely, but he is also concerned about future of the mankind. The main theme of his second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) was the traumatic world of post-September 11<sup>th</sup> and its effect on the US's relationship with the East, and the Muslim world. In *Exit West*, Hamid once again writes about a commonly occurring subject that has been based on the immigration policy of Donald Trump, where borders are actually being closed on refugees. In fact, Mohsin Hamid tries to imagine and create a world where there exist no hard and fast borders and where people do move across places with a comfortable ease.

*Exit West* (2017) is evidently an ambitious attempt in scope ranging from the geographic to magical realistic denizens; it takes its audience to hop from one magical door to another in the search of refuge from ferocious hands of dominant powers. Aziz in her review of the novel states:

Hamid uses the story of their journey to create a microcosm of the globe which is constantly changing and reforming due to the onslaught of terrorism, war and displacement. *Exit West* discusses these changes with optimism for a more fluid world which oscillates between cultures and identities smoothly. Nadia and Saeed's move from one part of the globe to another, leads to their unintentional yet unavoidable involvement in the conflict between natives and incoming refugees. (n.p)

Hence, this whole situation makes this work as a true narrative of horrendous dispersion of the innocent victims of dystopian war. This novel further poignantly deals with the inglorious notion of forced displacement of the main characters, Nadia and Saeed, portrayed as an epitome of the refugees in an unnamed rather unknown world. This fictitious world of *Exit West* (2017) turns out to have an immense semblance with the contemporary world of confusion worse confounded in the wake of proxy wars unleashed on humanity ultimately resulting in *Post Stress Traumatic Disorder (PSTD)*, shell shock and war neurosis.

Furthermore, in this research, the researchers have applied Fairclough's interpretative framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to put forth a detailed critical critique of traumatic encounters in his fourth novel. CDA, in fact, is "A model of language which has evolved very fast in the 1990s, and it is an approach to textual commentary" (Stubbs, p.100). His model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on the linguistic features of the text, processes on the relation between production and consumption of the text. The dark and dismal sufferings of the horrible traumatic displacement are beyond the limits of time and space; they go on hunting their 'shikar (the prey)' wherever they go. In short, this novel is an exact depiction rather microcosm of human history in which wars have ended up on a point of massive displacement. In fact, wars, as a whole, are mammoth incidents of traumatic instances. The communication of the experiences of the displaced people lies at the heart of the discourse of displacement. *Exit West* presents a discourse of resistance towards exclusion

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of third world countries and “this argument for literary ‘resistance’ is an important one to hold on to” (Ashcroft, Bill et al 1994, p.107).

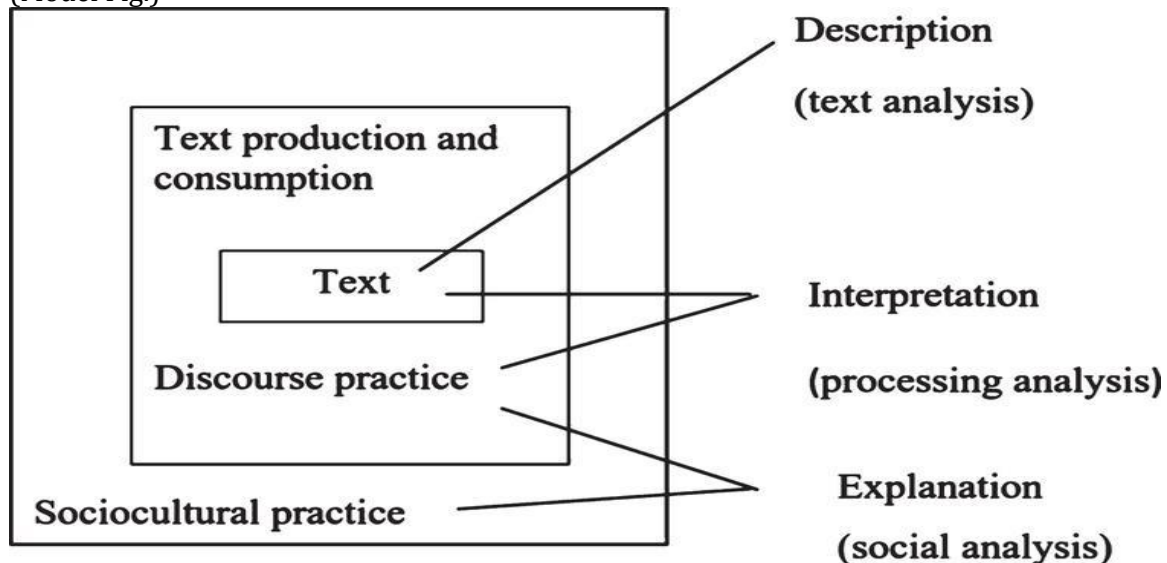
### Literature Review

The model used by Fairclough for discourse analysis mainly looms around the text and its language with this it also focuses on the simmering situation within the plot of the selected text book. The analysis of the text from the angle of CDA draws the major link between the language and the major happenings of a text. In short the critique of a text is not based on mere grounds rather it mainly deals with the “interdiscursive analysis” as this phenomenon was termed by Fairclough as his well-known theory.

Furthermore, the main concentration of the theorist is on the social impact triggered by a text and considers text as a casual effect springing right from the social events, which ultimately result in “change” enjoyed by the society. Apart from this text can also result or bring about change in reader’s thought process through knowledge, values, beliefs, attitudes and so on. In the current era the field of Humanities has been blatantly influenced by the theory of “Social Constructivism”, which aptly remarks that the world is solely a socially constructed abode for its most rational residents, human beings.

It is quite relevant to define Keeping this view Fairclough’s framework consists of levels of analysis, which are three in number: the text, the discursive practice and last but not the least it includes the socio-cultural practices as well. CDA relates different disciplines and voices together through the medium of discourse as Wodak states in *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* that, “In any case, it remains a fact that critical discourse studies follow a different and critical approach to problems, since CDA endeavors to make power relations explicit that are frequently obfuscated and hidden, and to drive results which are also of practical relevance” (p.19).

(Model Fig.)



The above given figure needs more focus in order to comprehend Fairclough’s mentioned model more suitably. The discursive events discussed in text have got three proportions,

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firstly, written text; secondly, an instance of narrative involving the interpretation of the text; lastly, it is a part of social practice. The provided critiques under this model involve discursive practice, which analysis the production, consumption and reproduction of any given text of literature. Mainly at the end of the critique of socio-cultural practice provides an accurate probation of what is happening in a specific socio-cultural framework. Fairclough quips for the notion of language in which it is manifested as a multifaceted notion. Accordingly, he believes and operationalizes the theoretical assumptions that text narratives are socially dependent on, "Language use is always simultaneously constitutive of social identities; social relations; and system of knowledge accompanied by beliefs" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 134).

Now our main focus in this research endeavor is on the critique of *Exit West* (2017) as a story of traumatic discourse of diasporic people. It appropriately draws upon the model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This critical critique circumscribes the angle of production, reception and interpretation of the opted text. The researchers have tried my level best to connect the 'micro' analysis of the *Exit West* to the 'macro' critique of it, which accurately encircles the social practice. We have also delved deep into the text to explore and link how Mohsin Hamid has portrayed 'outside' world into his celebrated diasporic text and to what extent. The novel is based on important themes of displacement, xenophobia and refugee crisis as Ahmad Mir states:

Exit West is a story about dislocated people and their experiences, and the tale is made typical with the help of magically created doors that take refugees to different places. The novelist is guessing an age in which all the humankind will be refugees. We are provided with glimpses of a migration apocalypse where everybody seems to be on the move. (p.16)

### **Research Methodology**

This study is based on the qualitative-cum-descriptive method of research endeavor. In this method the researchers have investigated deep into the texts to get the intended objectives. The qualitative content analysis method has been used by the researchers to conduct this study. Qualitative method is the most suitable method for this specific study. Schwandt in qualitative inquiry states that "qualitative aspects of experiences are perceived, appreciated, interpreted, understood and criticized while using qualitative inquiry" (Schwandt, 1997, p.).

In this method things are explained "from the inside out". It not only depicts the instances but helps in understanding the social realities with their reasons and consequences. "Qualitative research, with its precise and 'thick' descriptions, does not simply depict reality, nor does it practice exoticism for its own sake. It rather makes use of the unusual or the deviant and unexpected as a source of insight and a mirror whose reflection makes the unknown perceptible in the known" (Jenner, 2004, p.). To get the desired objectives different sources have been used by the researchers. In the process of data collection primary sources have been used. These sources include relevant books, articles, documents and internet resources. The collected data has been analyzed by using qualitative content analysis technique and applied on aforementioned fiction of Mohsin Hamid.

The researchers have deeply analyzed the selected text *Exit West* (2017) by using qualitative content analyses method. In order to investigate profoundly into the text as a

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discourse of traumatic displacement researchers have explored the text to look for relevant details in the novel and apply Fairclough's model of (CDA) Critical Discourse Analysis while using this method researchers have analyzed certain passages, dialogues, incidents and characters to conduct this research study. CDA is a method of analyzing a discourse which is commonly used as Fairclough states in his book *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* that "CDA has also become more institutionalised, in the sense that there are many more academic posts and programs of study and research, and it has become more mainstream, and certainly more 'respectable' than it was in the early days" (p.23). The selected novel has been analyzed from the context of Fairclough's Model of (CDA) Critical Discourse Analysis. This said approach of CDA is based upon the assumption that language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected part of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language (Fairclough, 2003, p. 02). Moreover "during the past decade educational researchers increasingly have turned to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a set of approaches to answer questions about the relationships between language and society" (p.1). It focuses on social effects of texts and regards texts as elements of social events, which has got casual effects i.e. they bring about changes. Most immediately, texts can bring about changes in our knowledge, our beliefs, our attitudes, values and so forth. Contemporary social science subjects have been widely influenced by 'social constructivism' aptly claiming that the social world is socially constructed.

### **Textual Analysis**

In the discussed novel *Exit West (2017)* by Mohsin Hamid the pathetic scenario of traumatic displacement is narrated by depicting the ominous presence of Nativism accompanied by the invisible mortal lash of xenophobia in the host countries, due to sudden high influx of refugees in certain countries. Generally, this dystopian novel is a story of two people, who are living in a war-ridden country from this beckoned place they are in dire need of finding an escape. The relationship is triggered and influenced by their entity as displaced souls. This novel of one of the celebrated author revolves around the challenges and experiences faced by the dispersed people same like the concept propagated in Shamsie's *Home Fire(2017)* and Hosseini's *Sea Prayer (2018)*. So, the following research attempt has analyzed Hamid's language, how it is marked by trauma language and what effect this has on the ground narrative of the work. His in depth description of different cities conveys the notion of trauma, anxiety, terror and anguish confronted by characters and leaving marks of shock accompanied by sensationalism in the diasporic world of dispersed entities.

The title and the trying predicament of the aptly reminds one of *No Exit (1944)* by Jean-Paul Sartre. Here Hamid's world of *Exit West (2017)* in the beginning discusses an unnamed city, which starts sprouting magical doors through people find so-called safe abodes. The residents of this unnamed city leave it for not returning back to their city of birth. Although their future thought to be on stake but people voluntarily go on to gamble on the idea of getting security in foreign countries. Same like this the main protagonist of Hamid's plot Nadia and Saeed travel to different cities of London, California, Marin and Mykonos. This experience of travelling from one country to another through mysterious doors leaves a mark on their respective personalities and changes their demeanor forever. Their traumatic

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encounters leaves them on extreme junctures, where Saeed gets inclined towards religion and on the other hand Nadia finds comfort in foreign landscapes and seeks out other avenues without once thinking about heading back to her own country. In this way novelist imparts depth in his captivating mannerism of writing the dilemma of the suppressed and alienated lot.

Moreover, as a migrant throughout his life Mohsin Hamid has got a profound insight in the prejudice and biased attitude displaced lot may meet in the unknown host country. The way he has penned down the character manifest the displacement, change, transition accompanied by the conveyance of language dipped in trauma results in the connection with the country of refuge. Writer starts the novel by creating a situation of restlessness in horrible circumstances, People are not leading their life at peace rather are under the siege of simmering circumstances of hopelessness and despair. The said situation can be gauged by the words of Saeed's father, "and they were not playing with the severed head of a goat, and he thought, barbarians but then it dawned upon him that this was the head of a goat but of human being, with hair and a beard" (p. 71). The gruesome account sketched in this quotation makes the reality of proxy war-ravaged world known to the readers.

Hamid underlines the negatively worse effect of trauma of violence and discord in the city at length. The appalling reality of displacement and migration erupts from chilled environment of crumbled world, which makes it undesirable to live in the war stricken place. Every living abode is portrayed to be situated in a place facing, "heavy machine guns and rocket fire" (p. 51). So, in the very first chapter of the novel writer anticipates it with his words, "Geography is destiny, respond the historical" (p. 52). This is the first hand prediction in *Exit West (2017)*, where he beckons towards the factual reality of geographically navigating from the aforementioned act of blatant violence. In this quote Hamid put the idea of eventual experience for consider their safety above all. It lays the groundwork in the shocking violence based scenario to head for borders (here through magical door) for escaping the hovering threat of death.

In order to avoid traumatic alertness under the reign of terror the main characters, Nadia and Saeed, plan to escape from the traumatized city. This discussed scenario ends up in complete uncertainty and trauma due to long distanced journey. The place of arrival also inkles towards the danger, pain and anguish faced on the refugees route in the depicted dystopian world. In this situation of taking the decision of migration trauma erupts from Nadia and her family regret of never bridging the gap, which becomes final in the face of the war. On the other Saeed's regret and sense of guilt rises from his abandonment of the father. This idea of leaving behind his father for his own safety and later on the brutal news of his death pricks his consciousness throughout his displaced life.

Hence, in the process of displacement the writer reminds his readers about the tendency of nostalgia of Saeed as he quips, "it was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and being born" (p. 42). Nonetheless, Saeed is acquainted with the fact that returning back to his native place is impossible due to apparent accounts of violence. So, in this way he is traumatized due to the sense of nostalgia, which is equated with 'death' of old self of a diasporic person. With this he resolves to go ahead and start over tagged as 'birth' in the abovementioned citation. This analysis of the circumstances he has dragged into can be suitably linked with the contemporary historical refugee issue, the one Europe has

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confronted since year 2015. In this situation it is appropriate to quote Hamid's poignant portrayal of pain of fleeing once native land: "for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (p. 65).

Saeed metaphysical anguish can be further analyzed by Nadia thought process pertinent to his bitter subjunctive mood. She thinks without saying it out loud, "a bitter Saeed would not be Saeed at all" (p. 97). In this way it can be understood that how differently rather bitterly the couple has started behaving in the given circumstances of displacement. This also depicts the influence of the escape in the diasporic world. This dispersion leaves its 'victim' harsh and discontented in the menial process of saving their physical lives and encrypting their mental faculty. This also shows the indelible influence of global migration ultimately activating the xenophobic mobs to assert the mapped divisions and borders with the help of might. Most of the time migration is not considered a compassion badge by the countries holding the provision of refugee. Today due to this xenophobic approach accounted extensively in chapter six and seven the faces of white people have turned out to be representation of fear for the migrating dispersed souls. In most of the recorded cases in current world white faces trigger a basic animal fear of protecting one's self in the migrating chunk of these victims of financial and political wars.

Subsequently, the suppressed displaced couple beholds the instances of mortal assaults through murder and rapes in the discussed novel. Saeed feels alienated in the city of London as mentioned time and again in chapter eight. In the process, he is pulled down in the depths of ocean of alienation as he feels that the Nigerian neighborhood is not safe. He considers the area in which the couple has got a room to live in belongs to mostly Nigerian ethnic people and he deeply believes they are not his kind. He eternally suffers from the dilemma of uncertainty, which comes as a gift out of Pandora's box as soon as one steps on a foreign land. He strongly craves to stresses on following his culture in a powerful manner. He even intends to move to another neighborhood brimming full with people of his nationality and religion. He shuns the reality that holding the same nationality doesn't make people behave and think alike. Unlike to it he clings fast to the ideology springing from the proposition that unity is about shared common backgrounds, memories and cultural practices.

### **Conclusion**

In short, the impact of Hamid's novel significantly relies on the themes of global displacement, trauma and migration from one part of the world to an alien land. The title reminds us of the ongoing situation under the lash of proxy wars, where everyone is striving hard to move to westward. The story is based on one of the important issues of the present world i.e. Refugee crisis that assumed such vast proportions which finds its parallels only during the displacements of World War II. CDA evaluates the selected text to highlight the problems of citizens of war torn countries where economic instability and deadly conflicts are forcing them to leave their homes in search of better lives. This paper makes a humble attempt to highlight how *Exit West* depicts the plight of refugees and it also argues that keeping the city unnamed is actually a way of attaining oneness with the predicament of world refugees in general. In fact, the very name of the novel *Exit West* implies that the movement is towards Europe, the Western Hemisphere according to the geographical mapping of the world. It captures the world in its phase of historical turmoil. The way sheer trauma of displacement

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is portrayed in the work is quite an achievement on author's end. Hamid's words are quite apt in this regard as, "we are all migrants through time" (p. 209). This viewpoint is worth keeping in mind as it is the perennial theme incorporated in the work. Every single entity in one way or the other has traveled in a metaphysical and philosophical way out. If one is not acquainted with the terror and fright of crossing divisions and borders in order to disperse for attainment of sense of security. The phrase we are "migrants through time" (p.209) imparts an open notion of sense of connection between the main protagonist Nadia and Saeed.

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