

The Body as Space of Migration and Exile: Representations of Violence and Crossing in the Contemporary English Novel

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Abstract: *This study undertakes an exploration of representations of the migrant body in current English literature by acknowledging the human body as more than a neutral biological entity. It is a site of political struggle a focus of bio political control and a location of postcolonial resistance. Utilizing the theoretical works of Foucault in terms of his notion of bio politics that of Agamben and his concept of bare life or that of the homo sacer and that of Butler and her ideas of precarity and somatic performativity this paper shall examine a variety of narratives which outline and detail the physical violence experienced by bodies in transit at the edge of the West. Mohsin Hamid's novel Exit West (2017) shall serve as a primary source for this study and in particular attention shall be paid to how the novel dismantles physical and geographical borders in order to reveal the migrant body as a political frontier or living border a body which harbors and carries a somatic archive of trauma and which is further valorized as commodity of the neoliberal economy. Importantly whilst the body of the migrant is put under constant surveillance by the Western metropolis and put to work for the profit of the metropolis in order to be in the end dispossessed and expelled the bodies under study here are never mere victims of circumstances and by virtue of their very physical presence by somatic solidarity of other bodies and by means of their cultural-somatic hybridity. They resist and critique the fully backed up promises of humanitarianism of globalization.*

Keywords: the migrant body, biopolitics, bare life, precarity, exit west, mohsin hamid, somatic, resistance, postcolonial criticism ,liminality.

INTRODUCTION

The current geopolitics is witnessing a high amount of forced migration and mass displacement towards the West and this movement has affected the basic structure of political and geographical borders between states and regions are perceived and constructed within the Western Center and has led to a re-thinking of the structuring of space in relation to the human body within contemporary literature and cultural studies. The body once perceived as neutral has in recent years become the main area on which are played out the technologies of power of late capitalist society and it is in literature that the marks of human migration and the effects of border crossing are given expression.

Forced migration and mass displacement are occurring on an unprecedented scale as people leave their homelands to travel to the West in search of safety and better lives. The growth of forced migration on this s of this research study could be identified as how contemporary English-language fiction writes the migrant body as having been transformed into both a site of conflict unease and simultaneously into a tool of resistance against marginalization toward exclusion in the West. This study further seeks to establish how a body transformed into physical deformity or worn down into total exhaustion continues to represent the destroyed homeland and reveal the disillusionment with globalization and its enormous empty promises to humanity.

The body of the migrant is studied in this research paper through theories of the body and post colonialism currently prevalent. By adopting the theories of Michel Foucault *bio politics* Giorgio Agamben *bare life* and Judith Butler *precarious bodies precarity* for analysis of literature of the West written in English language in contemporary times. This research tries to expose the widespread violence of institutionalized kind to bodies of marginalization and to show how the bodies of migrants are used as living archives to remember to resist and to refuse to be written off by colonial masters and be reduced to nothingness.

In order to elaborate and fulfill the objectives of the research paper the bodily experiences of the protagonists in the examined texts are explored in terms of their transformation into a borderland and their exploitation in the Western capitalist mode of production. Furthermore, ways of resistance and the relevant aesthetic strategies of representation are analyzed and portrayed within the discussed discourse. This study draws on Mohsin Hamid's recent novel *Exit West* which transposes the physical borders in order to focus on the bodies of the two protagonists especially those of Saeed and Nadia and to depict their transformation into vessels carrying vast amounts of psychological and physical pain as well as human ambition which are not acknowledged by Western societies and are constantly controlled and monitored by their machinery of surveillance and by the specifics of their alienation.

The Body Confronting the Wall of the Nation-State and Bio politics

French philosopher Michel Foucault explored the theoretical writings of modern states and how institutional structures attempt to regulate and monitor bodies of individuals and repel others in order to include some and exclude others. Today the migrant's body has become the site of confrontation with the hardened structure of the nation of the Western center and the flowing human masses crossing over its borders in search of safe haven.

Most importantly geographical borders are no longer only composed of wire soldiers and barriers. Today they are above all embodied in the bodies of migrants on which the techniques of exclusion are put into effect. The body of the migrant is perceived by the imperial center as demographic and security threat and accordingly is subjected to all sorts of violence on the part of institutions.

The text considers the work of writer Mohsin Hamid in particular in relation to his novel *Exit West*. Although in *Exit West* the geographical borders of the nation are transcended by the black magical doors which transport migrants from across the globe to a new home once they arrive at their destination in Mykonos or in London the migrant bodies of Saeed and Nadia quickly encounter the border of biopolitics. In temporary camps the two are confined within their own migrant bodies while their racialized bodies are constantly under the surveillance of hi-tech border control in the form of drones and security helicopters flying overhead during the day and night. In this way in the representation of Hamid the borders of the nation are re-presented no longer merely as doorways through which migrants pass but as the bodies of the racialized migrants themselves under constant surveillance and subject to expulsion and to detention in the barbed-wire-ringed fortresses of Europe.

The Body as a Living Archive of Memory and Trauma

While the documents of the state like any other human document are subject to revision alteration or even deletion by human hand or computer the body of the forced migrant is represented in contemporary literature as the living archive of painful memories of suffering and tortures endured by that person during his or her forced exodus. Natural physical scars as well as physiological manifestations of panic attacks permanent tiredness and even emaciation caused by lack of resources to survive while in transit can be represented and become significant signs of and of pain of memories of past sufferings in order to be remembered against their extinction by human memories.

In *Exit West* the trauma of Saeed and Nadia is primarily expressed through their bodies in the space of the novel's London shelter where both of them reside. As has already been stated their body is that which carries the painful memory of loss. Through the two characters' postures and their reaction to physical contact Saeed and Nadia are shown to be struggling with chronic exhaustion. Nadia's black robe is a body mark that not only denotes her transformation from a wartime setting to one of diaspora but also serves as an embodied spatialized inscription of that

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change. Furthermore, the solemnized posture of Saeed as well as his supplicated gestures demonstrate his psychological regression and increasing pain.

The body of the migrant thus can function as a living archive of memory that refuses to be reduced by the center to mere numbers. Rather it challenges the reduction of people in movement to simply statistics by carrying the memory of a particular history experiences and suffering to a place of citizenship and recognition by the center.

Bare Life and the Withdrawal of Legal Protection

Agamben's Homo Sacer and the concept of bare life have become a benchmark for critical work in order to deconstruct the legal and existential status of migrants within the center of the Western world. The notion of Homo Sacer can best be understood within the framework of Agamben's work on the political where he deals with the zone of Lester politics that escapes juridical controls in order to reveal a darker aspect of the use of human life within the juridical framework of modernity.

Within the London space of the novel as the migrants arrive in often deserted buildings such as an old housed within the rather affluent area of Mayfair the British authorities deny them social recognition and effectively strip them of their civic status leaving them to struggle with an excess biological mass. The focus of their existence is then transformed into that of mere biological life in search of basic warmth for sustenance and for safety above all else.

However, on the surface of humanism purported by global capitalism the Western human-rights ideology manages to strip the nation-state of its responsibility to protect the rights of its newly arrived migrant citizens. The forcibly displaced human body is therefore reduced to and treated as bare bodies fundamentally fragile and to be managed as security problems or even as human waste by the Western nation-state. Such migrant humans are best contained often silently at the margin of the nation-space.

The Commodification of the Migrant Body in the Western Labour Market

The integration of migrants in the Western center is presented by the media and politics as equal to that of the native population. However, when forcibly displaced persons and refugees cross the borders of the Western center of power they are confronted with the newest means of exploitation by today's globalization. This takes the form of the commodification of human bodies within the framework of capitalist globalization in which the migrant bodies are bought cheaply and used as mere units of production in low wage marginalized sectors of society that the native population does not want to work in.

The migrant's body is subject to extreme disciplinary measures and consequently stripped of its human and metaphysical value. Its physical strength i.e. its muscles is evaluated in terms of the way it can be employed in order to guarantee the migrant's presence. In case of injury or exhaustion

the body is reduced to damaged goods or even biological surplus and therefore is not included in the social welfare of a host society. This form of exploitation that is based on colonial structures of domination and is implemented through the medium of neoliberal capitalism aims at the exploitation of people from the South of the World for the benefit of the Western center.

Direct Textual Evidence

As observed in the extract from Exit West above in the parts of the novel set in London and Marin where Saeed and Nadia are employed as manual laborers constructing the city's infrastructure to be of benefit to the citizens of the host country but not granted full citizenship Saeed describes their arduous work in this fashion.

Exit West presents a pictorial agronomist simulation of this sort of arduous labor in neoliberal-communist country and also dissects the subsequent reduction of a migrant's value solely to the sum of their corporeal energy in cities of the West as in this passage from the quoted novel where Saeed and Nadia are introduced in a new setting: Marin in a dying communist country Exit West. The migrants worked furiously digging trenches and laying cables their bodies strained to the limit paying in sweat and exhaustion for the right to merely exist on the fringes of the city.

Aesthetic and Critical Construction: The Aesthetics of Labour Extraction

These verbs constitute a sort of narrative painting with an intense physical labor digging trenches laying cables in contrast with the magical fast movement of the migrants by means of doorways and gates across vast distances within a second or two thereby highlighting a most marked contrast between the two technologies.

The body of human flesh is transformed into currency while exerting all the power of a human being to exist precariously in the geographical space of the so-called Western Center of globalization. The migrants are paid for their bodily labor to exist in the geographical space of Western labor market which manifests the exploitative nature of labor of globalization.

The Sick and Exhausted Body as a Symbol of the Collapse of the "European Dream"

The deteriorating health of the migrant body in superdivide and postcolonize spaces exposes the failure of European Dream of global prosperity and peaceful coexistence of peoples. A discourse of the oppressed body in suffering and pain in its materiality conveys a somatic message of resistance and protest which cannot be articulated by the same body in discourse of intellectual ideas and concepts even when aware of the adverse effects of oppression.

Direct Textual Evidence

Hamid's depiction of Saeed in London displaying the effects of severe marginalisation is depicted in his physical and psychological decline while exhibiting symptoms of trauma and alienation and how this affects his physiological functioning and body.

“Saeed felt a heavy lethargy seep into his bones a weariness so profound that his body seemed to shrink as if trying to occupy less space in a world that clearly wished him absent.” [9]

Saeed was suffering from severe fatigue which seeped into his bones. He felt so worn out that his body shrunk. The man was so exhausted that his body was trying to occupy less space in order to traverse a world that did not want him in it.

Aesthetic and Critical Construction: Somatic Shrinkage and Spatial Aesthetics

Here the same account of Saeed’s physical and spatial experience of social rejection in London is interpreted through the Aesthetic of the Somatic Shrinkage which reads Hamid’s narrative of social and spatial dislocation and alienation through the physical sensations of Saeed’s body which are a sign of his collapsed “European Dream” and of his confinement within a psychosomatic prison.

The somatic shrinking displayed in the image above could be read as an aesthetic visual representation of the collapse of the so-called European Dream. The Euro-peasant eager to cross the borders of Europe and escape the traumas of war becomes confined within the walls of a psychosomatic prison that he has unwittingly constructed for himself. Rather than developing symptoms of fatigue the migrant body dwindles and contracts.

An Analytical Application: Bodies of Transit and Diaspora in Contemporary Fiction with Exit West as a Case Study.

As was already outlined in detail above in Exit West the bodies of migrants constitute a focal point for the contradictions of our world and for the violence of globalization as practiced by neoliberalism. In the following these bodies will be analyzed from three different perspectives.

The Hunted and Confined Body

Even though with the help of the magical doors migrant bodies are able to cross geographical boundaries in other ways they are still subject to the security measures of the spaces that they enter and are restricted by the confines of these same spaces and by the ways in which they are excluded by them.

Direct Textual Evidence

“Their bodies were counted cataloged and watched by armed men. They were a category of humans whose movement from one country to another was considered a crime and so they were hunted.”

The Aesthetics of Categorization

Within the passage the Passage is viewed through the aesthetics of categorization whereby individuality is submerged beneath a general categorization of the Other and is viewed as undesirable. Normal human movement is rendered criminal such that the bodies of the migration-

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g Metalized become objects of administrative control within the prevailing structures of power and are restricted in their movements on the basis of how their presence is viewed by the powerful.

Somatic and Spatial Alienation

Most importantly in Exit West the bodies of the migrant characters are deprived of the space needed to develop and grow as fully human beings are transported from place to place in a sort of concentration camp of globalization. Visible marks of exclusion of racialization and of class-based stigma are carried by all migrant characters wherever they go.

Direct Textual Evidence

“However in this new city Nadia’s skin felt like a uniform she could not take off. Everywhere she went in this new city Nadia’s skin would announce her to the passing crowds of Westerners. Stranger her skin would say announcing her stranger hood to every passerby.” [9]

The body as a site of visible otherness.

This metaphor in particular condenses the appearance of the body with the way in which the body of the migrant is perceived and thereby surveilled by the Western gaze. He or she cannot remove this identity that is imposed upon him or her and thus it is woven into the very fabric of the body’s appearance. It is this appearance that is perceived to contain the difference of culture the “stranger hood” which is imprinted on the skin of the migrant like a uniform.

This body part this appearance can be and is read by others as a sign that others others. This sign is here on Nadia’s skin bearing witness to her difference to her status of stranger in a strange country. It cannot be stripped off as a uniform is removed and she is always going to be read by the Western gaze in terms of her otherness.

The Resistant Body and the Recovery of Agency

Their bodies are not simply passive victims of the exploitation of the migrant body in the neoliberal space of the novel. Instead the migrant body becomes the medium of resistance. Thus Nadia and Rasheed share a meal they experience human touch and the exiled collect together to reconnect.

Direct Textual Evidence

“Touch was a currency and they were rich. They held hands not merely out of affection for each other but to anchor one another in space their physical touch a silent refusal to be erased from existence.” [6]

The Aesthetics of Haptic Resistance

This aesthetic concentrates on the act of holding hands usually seen in romantic affairs and reveals how this simple gesture serves as a means to anchor each other in space and time. Sharing a gesture that expresses love and desire at the same time anchors the characters in their physical existence as against the risk of being erased from space and time.

Through the interpretation of the body as site of resistance the creative writing above stresses that the physical contact between the migrant bodies can give expression to solidarity shared human experience and gives expression to the acknowledgment of the individual other's existence and recognition. In this way the neoliberal way of exclusion and othering is opposed through the embodiment of agency in the form of human physical contact.

Ultimately these three readings of the body of the migrant in the novel of the capitalist globality the body that is hunted the body that is alienated and the body that resists reveal the ways in which the body of the migrant is always a contested site between the force of global capitalism that of the institutions that govern a space in which the migrant is to live and that of human agency that strives to reclaim in and through such spaces a sense of dignity and of belonging that has been irreversibly lost through unequal mobility and in and through often extremely exclusionary borders. Exit West therefore is here read as a highly productive literary work that can enable us to explore a number of key issues in the flesh of narrative.

The Resistant Body and Its Articulation of Silent Protest.

Although the bodies of migrants of excess are being reduced by neoliberal institutions and by the biopolitics of the Western center to bare life or to productive labor the human body in exile of the Third World has an immense resistance power and it turns into an effective tool of political rebellion as soon as the legal and political structures that are supposed to guarantee its safety and its rights cease to function any more.

Embodied forms of the negative can resist and refuse projects of erasure and silence in a host of ways often silent locked in resistance refusing the compensation of being acknowledged as workers and therefore as human in a negative sense demanding instead to be seen and to be recognized in their full humanity in the public spaces of the Western center of capital. The simple presence of fully human dyed-in-the-wool tired- looking other ethicized bodies in high end stores in areas of the West of capital such as affluent Mayfair in London is enough to signal to the citizens of this center of imperialism that the West is indeed Imperialistic and must acknowledge its responsibility for inequalities created in the Global South.

Direct Textual Evidence

The embodiment of rebellion and the manner in which this space is occupied by migrants in order to challenge western bourgeoisie is demonstrated in the novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid when a group of undocumented migrants occupy high-end homes and public spaces such as restaurant cafes and retail units. This is illustrated when a group of migrant men occupy a highly-end Luxury Home in an upscale part of London namely Mayfair. In this instance the men are threatened by police with force and the possibility of detention:

“An uncountable mass of bodies stood together in the square. They were not throwing stones or even shouting slogans they were just occupying space in their huge physical numbers and no one dared to move them.” [6]

The Aesthetics of Silent Presence

This is also how one can interpret the silence of the stories in Hamid’s novel within the aesthetic of silent presence. Instead of weak and brittle bodies locked up within themselves Hamid’s narrative gives rise to somatic solidarity in his migrant characters. Their resistance stripped of the ideological rhetoric of their action of the aggressive word is transferred and embodied within the space of their collective physical presence. The force of their silence and their embodied stillness turns within the public space of the Western center against the very powers that were convinced of their defeat. And it brings about a reversal of the prevailing power structures and forms of perception that up till then had managed to keep these same bodies at a distance in order to reduce them to nothing more than weak and powerless creatures of contrast to the culture of the center.

Through our interpretation of this text we have revealed how the presence of the migrants’ bodies within the space of the Western center comes to be articulated as a political statement. His or her silence and stillness can be used to challenge dominant structures of power and challenge how space is used within the Western center and how he or she is allowed to occupy space within it.

Somatic and Cultural Hybridity and the Emergence of Transnational Identities

Beyond being exploited and waging war in recent years the migrant’s body has become a space of cultural and bodily hybridity within transnational urban spaces. The migrant’s body and its physical features as well as its physiological rhythms are faced with other bodies features and rhythms within these spaces. Thus the space of cultural and bodily hybridity is created which questions the imperialist notion of cultural purity.

The representation of somatic and cultural hybridity as embodied by the diasporic individual in literature of the diaspora challenges outdated binary structures of culture that attribute purity to the center and otherness to the margins. In so doing new bodies emerge which dismantle the illusion of fixed and closed identities and draw attention to the aesthetic possibilities of human plurality. These bodies symbolize the resistance of the subaltern to hegemonic representations of human identity and challenge the cultural center to acknowledge its limitation and to recognize alternative forms of identity.

Direct Textual Evidence

The embodied hybridity of the above mentioned characters is displayed throughout the life of Nadia in New Orleans. Her physical and existential transformation moves her out of the rigid structures that seek to categorize her within the East/West framework and allows for new local physical and social contacts: “In Nadia the local and the foreign merged into something new... her

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body no longer belonged to the city she had fled nor fully to the cities she had passed through but to the fluid space between them.”

“In Nadia the local and the foreign had merged to create something new and her body no longer belonged to the city of her exodus and was not completely at home in the cities she was traversing rather she belonged to the fluid space of movement and of encounters between places and of people.” [9]

Aesthetic Analysis: The Aesthetics of Fluidity and Transformation

The aesthetics of fluidity and liminality characterize the narrative of Hamid’s novel. This term focuses on the story as an ongoing process of production of aesthetic as well as of existential nature. This process leads to the very center of the human being to the site where all decisive experiences take place: the bodily space of the characters which in turn becomes a spatial site in its own right undergoing changes of an existential nature. The special form of hybridity experienced by Nadia’s body thus describes a fluid space in which spaces bodies identities and cultures are in a constant process of change. The expression fluid space indicates how the body of the migrant is transformed from a clearly delimited space into a space in constant motion in need of orientation. This fluidity describes the spaces in between fixed identities and between different cultures.

As aesthetic analysis the representation of hybridity in Hamid’s work can be read by means of the aesthetics of fluidity and transformation. Here the body of the migrant is represented as continuously changing between different identities and so as being in a constant process of production and transformation. Not only is Nadia’s foreignness transformed into something which is local but in her foreignness she is also enabled to develop relationships of physical contact with others in the local space.

The Body as the Ultimate Text of Resistance

Rereading today’s English-language fiction through the perspectives of body studies and post colonialism therefore provides an innovative critique that unravels the violence of the Western center today. It is through the bodily text of diaspora that we can gain the most perceptive insight to today’s era of migration. The body once a mere narrative accessory or even mere description now turns into the ultimate text to understand the complex realities of today’s diasporic communities

The body as geography and power.

The human body with all its physical features and natural needs is the material map that underpins the exercise of power by bio politics. It is also the physical and most visible boundary of a nation. The human body as physical space is rigorously controlled and surveyed by the nation-state.

The body as an archive of trauma.

While the living human body which is afflicted by physical psychological and emotional pain and woe cannot be erased from the face of the earth by the bureaucratic apparatuses of modernity the latter would certainly like to reduce this lived human body to a written document which can be archived and erased at will.

The body as a site of commodification and resistance

The migrant's body is in all situations a commodity within the sphere of the global capitalism. In most cases though it is in negative way the subject of commercialization. In the approach of this study however the body is perceived as well a site of silent resistance against inclusive structures and as space of transnational hybridity in order to be able to negotiate new identities and a new home.

It is particularly important to listen to the language of oppressed bodies today above all because they represent in a concentrated form the fractures of human existence which in the post-globalization world have somehow not been cured by the universal promises of progress. But above all these fragile vulnerable resistant and changing bodies also reveal the contradictions of the dominant systems of power and their limits and prove that even today there is room for human action for human solidarity and for new identity and new belonging beyond the restricted and exclusionist frontiers of today's world.

CONCLUSION

The Migrant Body has become the site of meaning-making in many recent narratives of migration displacement and exile in the English novel. The approaches in this study based as they are on the foundational work of three influential critics – Michel Foucault Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler – move critical study of the contemporary English novel away from the kind of biological reductionism that has hitherto characterized such work. The body of the undocumented migrant has become in the space of the contemporary novel the site upon which are played out the enduring functions of bio politics and the sites of violent discitis imposed upon it by that space's specific mode of governance.

The territorial borders which characterize geography today go beyond simple physical borders of fences walls and lines. Geopolitical bordering and the surveillance of undocumented migrants today predominantly take place on the body of the migrant. Within the space of the body a whole range of biopolitical practices tactics and violence can be realized and materialized. This is also the case within the space of narrative in the sense that a description of a geopolitically bordering practice is not just a representation of that border but is itself also part of that bordering practice. Through the magical doors in Exit West Saeed and Nadia can travel to anywhere in the world and are seemingly beyond physical geography. But despite their physical movement to locations such as London and Mykonos Saeed and Nadia are constantly under the surveillance of drones and

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security spotlights. Their bodies thus function as the site on which practices of surveillance and bordering are realized and become tangible.

Drawing on the literary examples from above it is shown how contemporary narratives can depict physical scars bodily weariness and even panic attacks as living documents in the form of archives of memories of past traumas as well as of current struggles and hardships experienced by migrants and refugees in their quest for asylum. The psychological and physical traumas and spatial dislocations experienced by Nadia and Saeed are not merely reported through narrative. Rather their physical contraction and their clothing – in particular Nadia’s black robe – carry the full weight of memories of past traumatic events in a devastated city and thus function as resistant texts which will not be erased from the historical records. As opposed to the above mentioned attempts to erase the experiences of migrant individuals and groups from the memories of the West in order to accommodate new economic projects of development these documents function as embodied archives of traumatic memories.

Through the examples of trench-digging in Hamad’s depiction of the migrant worker in London in *Exit West* as well as in representations of contemporary higher education a picture emerges of how the migrant body can be reduced by the strategies of the globalized economy to a cheap expendable productive energy. At the same time the bodies of such workers who have been transported to do this sort of work by the structures of global capitalism are in the centers of these structures to be controlled and if necessary to be slaughtered as bare life or indeed to be regarded as a biological surplus that is kept alive in order to be useful.

The body of the migrant is often perceived as passive and even submissive; however in instances of resistance migrant bodies are able to unsettle the powerful within the dominant center by virtue of their physical presence in spaces that have been socially closed off. They are able to occupy public spaces in countries such as the UK in order to expose to critical view the systems of exclusion and discriminatory practices at work within those societies. Moreover, by challenging myths of cultural purity of imperial peoples and embodying alternative sites of identity formation transnational somatic hybridity of characters such as Nadia in *New Orleans* is disclosed to potentiality of contributing to the new pluralistic meanings of human identity and of migrant’s place within globalized space.

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