Xenophobia in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

Dr. VIJAYALAYAN
Associate Professor of English
RKM Vivekananda College (Autonomous), Chennai

Abstract

The present world order has witnessed a hitherto unprecedented migration of people across national frontiers. While this development has rendered human sensibility more receptive to notions of transnational diversity, it has simultaneously invoked widespread feelings of xenophobia. To facilitate a progressive orientation towards the future, it is vital that the former must be nurturedvia conscious efforts aimed at undermining the latter. To do this, however, it is required that the phenomenon be critically appraised in the first place so measures to counter it could be effectively devised. The expressed aim of this paper is to mobilize this imperative by exploring the aspect of xenophobia as depicted in the Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid's work Exit West. To this end, it seeks to appraise the diverse faces of it as exemplified in the migratory experiences of the novel's protagonists, Saeed and Nadia. The ultimate goal in view is to raise critical awareness regarding xenophobia as an anti-immigrant prejudice to abet its strategic undoing.
Keywords: *Xenophobia, Migration, Immigrant, Anti-Immigrant, Transnational.*

Paper

If we are seeking to encapsulate the contemporary era by a catchphrase, the most obvious choice by far is the title of Stephen Castles and Mike Miller's influential work *The Age of Migration.* This, however as Castles and Miller themselves clarify, "does not imply that migration is something new – indeed, human beings have always moved in search of new opportunities, or to escape poverty, conflict or environmental degradation" (5). Migration represents an enterprise whose source could be traced back to practically the very beginnings of the human race. As Khalid Koser points out, "The history of migration begins with the origins of mankind in the Rift Valley in Africa, from where between about 1.5 million and 5000 BC Homo erectus and Homo sapiens spread initially into Europe, and later into other continents" (1). Even if we are to take the emergence of documented history as our starting point, it is notable that migration goes back many thousand years. To quote Koser again, "In the ancient world, Greek colonization and Roman expansion depended on migration, and outside Europe significant movements

were also associated with the Mesopotamian, Inca, Indus, and Zhou empires" (1). The bottom line is that migration has been an integral and ongoing feature of human existence for many centuries now, and as such exemplifies nothing out of the ordinary to reckon with.Yet, the aspect of migration peculiar to the contemporary era exemplifies aphenomenon that is singularly distinctive. This hallmark, however is not merely warranted by the scope of its sheer volume that far outstrips any instance from the past. It is also a testament to the conducive feature that informs the prevalent perception towards it. Unlike earlier, migration is no longer considered an aberration to be grudgingly tolerated. It is insteadbeing seen as a norm to be willingly embraced. As Vertovec rightly observes, "migration-driven diversity and ongoing transnational ties are, for a broad span of the non-migrant population, now coming to be regarded as unsurprising or nothing special, commonplace and unquestioned – in many contexts, expected" (158). There is no denying that most of humanity is increasingly coming to terms with migration as an inescapable characteristic of the world today.

Vertovec's observation is indeed incontrovertible. However, the critical point of contention is whether this changed basis of perception regarding migration epitomizes the whole picture. Unfortunately not,for as immigrant sensibilities are being endorsed more than ever, anti-immigrant sentiments are also concurrently escalating. This is to say, the age of migration is not just centrally marked by an orientation towards transnationalismbut also that of xenophobia.

A combination of 'xeno' derived from the Greek 'xenos' meaning stranger, and 'phobia' begotten from the Greek 'phiobos' meaning fear, xenophobia alludes to the propensity typically associated with the so-called natives of any country or community to hate or dislike those recognised as outsiders. As Oksana Yakushko succinctly puts it, xenophobia refers to "a form of attitudinal, affective, and behavioural prejudice toward immigrants and those perceived as foreign" (14). The more substantial and holistic definition of Freemantle and Landau presented as a part of their report on xenophobia in South Africa also echoes the same sentiment. As they conceptualize, xenophobia exemplifies "attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity" (Yakushko 13). It is however interesting to note that in striking contrast to what these definitions convey, xenophobia did not initially carry a negative connotation. It actually shouldered a positive meaning as a term used to indicate opposition to "xenomania, defined as "an ordinate attachment to foreign things which was claimed to be more problematic than dislike or fear of strangers" (Yakushko 12). This apparently favourable significance xenophobia initially bore is, however no longer relevant. As it stands today, xenophobia represents by far the most prominent and destructive

form of anti-immigrant prejudice to contend with. In 2016, for instance, the website Dictionary.com proclaimed xenophobia as the "word of the year"(Yakushko 2), leading to the Smithsonian Magazine contributor Daley remarking that it "summed up the spirit of the age"(Yakushko 2). No doubt events like the outcome of the Brexit vote, Trump's infamous presidential address, and the xenophobic riots in South Africa, all of which happened during or immediately before 2016,had a profound bearing on Daley's pronouncement. Yet regardless of whether it happens to be the most prominent form of immigrant hatred or not, the fact still remains that xenophobia is an adverse mindset to be countered relentlessly. The chosen novel for study by Mohsin Hamid most effectively abets this agenda by offering a critical take on xenophobia that is both engaging and revealing.

Published in 2017, *Exit West* relates the migratory saga of Saeed and Nadia, a young couple fleeing an unnamed war-torn city in a desperate quest for survival. It is however noteworthy that the facet which instantly captures our attention about the novel is the rather unusual vision of migration presented in it. Usually, migration requires the relocating subjects to physically travel across vast terrains, makingit an immensely grueling, even fatally risky affair. In the extraordinary notion of migration that Hamid affords, all the relocating subjects have to do is step through a door and they would be transported magically to another country upon exit. In foregrounding such a radical vision of migration, Hamid nevertheless does not seek to underplay the misgivings involved in it. As he makes it absolutely clear, the absence of a physical journey in migration does not preclude or even alleviate the natural human predisposition for hostility towards the other. The idea is conveyed memorably in the xenophobic

tension that Saeed and Nadia endure in the course of their relocation, a tension shown to take different forms at different stops. Accordingly, on the Greek island of Mykonos, which is their first stop, we are offered a model of this tension that is relatively passive.

At the very onset of their entry into the island, Saeed and Nadia are met by a stranger who signals them to move on. It is noteworthy that his bearing, though by no means threatening,isnonetheless perceptiblycold. "A pale-skinned man with light brown hair came out and told them to move along, making shooing gestures with his hands…"(Hamid, EW 60). This idea of passive xenophobia, the migrants are forced to endure, is accentuated by the lack of prospectsthey are faced with on the island. Primarily a holiday destination, Mykonos is by no means what one might consider a place filled with opportunities for growth. Moreover, it is winter when Saeed and Nadia arrive there, which is not the same as summer when the island would be teeming with lucrative international tourists. The place thus represents what one might regard at best a temporary stopover, but the people who have stopped there that winter are far from being wealthy tourists, and,hence,do not have the choice of moving on as they please. The point is they can go back to the poorer places they have come from, but are prohibited from moving further to new places that are promising in scope.

> Nadia and Saeed quickly located a cluster of fellow countrywomen and -men and learned that they were on the Greek island of Mykonos, a great draw for tourists in the summer, and, it seemed, a great draw for migrants this winter, and that the doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that

people would go back to where they came from— although almost no one ever did… (Hamid, EW 61).

The migrants in Mykonos are in a place where they would certainly not be physically threatened or harmed. However, they would also not be allowed to grow out of their impoverished state, which perpetuates them in a state of debilitation. The desperation shown by them to escape at the slightest suggestion that there is a door to a better place more than bears out the point. "Without warning, people began to rush out of the camp and, Saeed and Nadia heard a rumour that a new door out had been found, a door to Germany, and so they ran too…" (Hamid, EW 64). Of course, Saeed and Nadia do not make it through the door, and neither do any of the others. They find it heavily protected by armed guards who chase them away. However, fortunately for them it proves to be only a momentary setback. With the help of a local volunteer the pair of them find another door and manage to migrate to London.

Moving from Mykonos to London, Saeed and Nadia were obviously hoping for a better life, a future filled with prospects and opportunities. However,what actually transpires renders their situation indelibly worse. On the Greek island,there was hardly any chance to make a decent life for themselves, but at least they confronted no physical threat to their being. In London, however, they experience bodily threat not just an imminent possibility, but an actual reality. They are in other words forced to come to terms with an aggressive brand of xenophobia, in which nativist hatred is not merely exhibited in gestures of cold indifference but painful violence.

> The mob looked to Nadia like a strange and violent tribe, intent on their destruction, some armed with iron bars or knives, and she and Saeed turned and ran, but could not escape.

Nadia's eye was bruised and would soon swell shut and Saeed's lip was split and kept bleeding down his chin and onto his jacket… (Hamid, EW 81).

This abrupt and unprovoked assault, though extremely appalling in itself, turns out to be merely an opening salvo of sorts for Saeed and Nadia. Their situation becomes more endangered when they subsequently learn that on the day of their attack riots had actually broken out between immigrants and natives all over London. "After the riots the talk on the television was of a major operation, one city at a time, starting in London, to reclaim Britain for Britain, and it was reported that the army was being deployed, and the police as well…." (Hamid, EW79). The scenario quickly escalates into more of an outright war and Saeed and Nadia are reminded of their home. They ponder about leaving but decide against it, realizing that it would be more or less similar to this everywhere else.

> Returning to where they had been born was unthinkable, and they knew that in other desirable cities in other desirable countries similar scenes must be unfolding, scenes of nativist backlash, and so even though they discussed leaving London, they stayed" (Hamid, EW 80).

Eventually the conflict draws to a close when the government agrees tohouse the migrants in a settlement of their own. Accordingly,a working camp is established in which the migrants are employed as workers to construct the homes in which they could subsequently move in. This arrangement however though practically resolves the situation, does not end the xenophobic violence.

> …disasters attracted the most outside interest, such as a nativist raid that disabled machinery or destroyed dwelling units nearing completion or resulted in the severe beating of some workers who had strayed too far from camp. (Hamid, EW 104).

Saeed however is not deterred by these scuffles. He avidly immerses himself in the construction work, constantly putting in extra hours so that his and Nadia's name in the long list of immigrants waiting for a house would be advanced. Their names however hardly ever move up the list as most of the other immigrants also work extra hours for the same reason. Finally tired of waiting, they decide to move, and this time the door takes them all the way across the Atlantic to Marin.

Marin presents Saeed and Nadia with an experience of life that is tellingly different from London, far more welcoming, much more peaceful, and most of all, almost entirely devoid of xenophobia. An obvious contributing factor in this regard is that Marin is only a county seat that is relatively poor, and not a "desirable place" (Hamid, EW 66). Not with standing this fact however the real reason as to why the experience in Marin proves to be so refreshingly free of xenophobic tension is because of the almost complete absence of nativistic zeal among its population.

> In Marintherewere almost no natives, these people having died out or been exterminated long ago, and one would see them only occasionally, at impromptu trading posts—or perhaps more often, but wrapped in clothes and guises and behaviors indistinguishable from anyone else (Hamid, EW 116).

This of course must not be taken to suggest that Marin represents a migrant utopia, in which the resident population never thought of those from outside as intruders. The fact is feelings of nativism exist even among the people of Marin, but this is more circumstantial, hence not threatening in scope.

And yet it was not quite true to say there were almost no natives, nativeness being a relative matter, and many others considered themselves native to this country, by which they meant that they or their parents or their grandparents or the grandparents of their grandparents had been born on the strip of land that stretched from the mid-northern-Pacific to the mid-northern-Atlantic, that their existence here did not owe anything to a physical migration that had occurred in their lifetimes (Hamid, EW 117).

The implicit suggestion here is the simple but troubling fact that though xenophobia is not a problem as such in Marin right now, the potential for it to take root and grow are very much present among its people. Whether it will or not remains to be seen, but meanwhile considering it is a safe haven for the present, Saeed and Nadia decide to settle there. However, while their problem of migration seems to have come to an end, there personal relationship sours. From the time they left their home, Saeed and Nadia have been experiencing a steady emotional rift grow between them. The fact that both in Mykonos and London they had to face many challenges on account of nativist backlash, ensured that they stuck together. In Marin however once their social situation became secured, the rift could no longer be contained. As a result, they inevitably break up, move away from each other, and settle down separately with different partners. Initially they keep in touch, but as it happens in any relationship, they subsequently all together stop calling or seeing one another.

Xenophobia is often presumed to be an offshoot that emerged in relatively recent times with the development of the modern notion of nation and nationalism. This is nevertheless a gross misconception. The formal origins of xenophobia could be actually traced back to over two millennia to the time of classical antiquity when Western Europe was ruled by the Greeks. However, it must be conceded that xenophobic impulses have not just increased but consolidated considerably as the idea of nationhood has grown to establish itself as the prime basis of global organization. For xenophobia to be eradicated, it is therefore prerequisite that the concept of nationhood and its ideological corollary nationalism be dismantled. Without the boundaries that demarcate the many nations, categories of native and migrant would cease to exist. Dismantling the idea of nation is however not so straight forward, at any rate not feasible until an alternative for it could be found. This said, it must be understood that certain alterations to the rigid framework of the nation is very much possible, and a preliminary measure towards undermining xenophobia could be sought in this regard. Hamid himself offers us a provocative idea to consider.

> We could commit to a blurring and reconceiving of national boundaries, to the immediate benefit of frontier-split communities, and to the growing benefit of everyone else. We might, as a start, embrace cross-border autonomous zones, visa-free travel…. and a reduction of legal differences between citizens and resident non-citizens (Hamid, DC 124).

It is undeniable that unless and until the structure of the nation could be categorically dismantled, xenophobia cannot be definitively undermined. However, till we become capable of doing so, executing these makeshift measures will have to do.

Abbreviations

Exit West – EW

Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore New York and London - DC

References

1. Castles, Stephen and Mark J. Miller.*The Age of Migration*. Palgrave Macmillan: England,1993.
2. Hamid,Mohsin. *Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York and London*.Riverhead books: New York, 2015.
3. Hamid,Mohsin. *Exit West: A Novel*. Riverhead books: New York, 2017.
4. Koser, Khalid. *International Migration: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press: New York, 2007.
5. Vertovec, Steven. *Transnationalism: Key Ideas*.Routledge: London and New York, 2009.
6. Yakushko, Oksana. *Modern-Day Xenophobia Critical Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on the Roots of Anti-Immigrant Prejudice*. Palgrave Macmillan: England, 2018.