Spatiality, Freedom, and Violence in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between space, freedom and violence as demonstrated in the novel Exit West by Mohsin Hamid (2017) through the journey of two refugees, Nadia and Saeed. While the novel is closely examined, theoretical ideas regarding space and power from critics such as Michel De Certeau and Michel Foucault are employed, as well as theoretical concepts of violence by Johan Galtung. The essay questions the power of space to liberate human beings as a result of an increasingly globalised and technologized world. It argues that space presents a contradiction as it is a platform for movement and freedom to be exercised while at the same time becoming a form of confinement and allowing violence to operate. The paper also considers the way in which memories and ideologies interact with space and influence the actions of those who occupy it.

Keywords: *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid, space, freedom, discrimination, violence, globalisation, refugee, immigrant

A woman had just left her apartment and was walking along the street towards a train station. She attempted to walk quickly due to the long distance. On the way she met a stranger who admitted he was lost and asked her for directions to the nearest café where he could charge his phone. After the stranger had left, the woman received a call from the friend she was visiting, asking where she was, what time she would arrive and where they should meet. When she arrived at the train station, she checked and found that the train she had booked would be leaving from platform number 3. As soon as the train had approached the platform, she got on board and looked for her seat, hoping that she would be able to sit alone since space was quite restricted. On the train ride she looked out of the window and recognised scenery which brought some memories to her mind. She chatted with the male passenger next to her who had got on the train at one point and asked where he was going. When the train

arrived at the destination, she messaged her friend and felt contented that the friend was waiting at their designated meeting point.

Michel De Certeau (1984) states that "[e]very story is a travel story—a spatial practice" (p. 115). His argument is that space is related to a human's everyday life in numerous ways, such as in conversations about directions, in casual talk ("Guess who I met at the bakery?") (p. 116), news reports, memories and tales of faraway lands. The above anecdote demonstrates how significantly place and space are connected to our everyday life and portrays the role they play in human activities. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between the terms *place* and *space* before going on to further discussion. To employ De Certeau's (1984) definition, *place* is "an instantaneous configuration of positions [which] implies an indication of stability" (p. 117). In this sense, it refers to the physical or material forms of space, exemplified in this anecdote by the woman's apartment, the street, the café, the train station, the platform, the train itself, the seat on the train and the woman's destination. *Space*, in contrast, is related to the way places are utilised and interpreted by its occupants. According to De Certeau (1984):

> space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. (p. 117)

If place is a physical or material form of space, space itself is what De Certau (1984) calls "*a practiced place.*" For him, a street (in its physical sense) can be altered into a space when it is utilised by walkers, in the same way that place represents a word and space stands for a word being spoken (p. 117). Harking back to the anecdote, space is presented by the length of the street from the apartment to the train station which the woman feels is long, emphasising the sense of temporality that De Certeau indicates. In addition, the street is for the stranger a place where direction is important and where direction is lost. The café as a space is a place where a phone can be charged, emphasizing its function. The location where it is situated is also important for the stranger. The train as a space is a moving place while the narrow seat implies not just its function as a place to sit but also a sense of discomfort. The scenery does not only illustrate places which the train moves past but also the woman's memories connected to these places. Thus, the places become the space of her memories.

In exploring the implications of place in human activities, it is important to consider it in terms of human movements occurring within it, the meaning it has for each individual and the impact it has on each life. Thus, it is inevitable in our discussion to look at place in the form of space – a practiced place. To

support this, J. Carter Wood (2007) has pointed out that "[t]he essential point is that analyzing spaces means not only looking at material structures themselves but also at their use" (p. 21). This use of space concerns not merely the individual but the collective community of individuals, for in many cases a space becomes public – as opposed to private – when it is shared by more than one person. Michel Foucault (2010) contends that "[s]pace is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (p. 252).

Drawing from this, what is at stake in the analysis of space is how it operates in the realm of power. For critics such as Foucault and Wood, space can be a platform for the production of power; it can possess its own power and exercise that power. The critical point is when the power incites or aggravates violence. In the novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid (2017), space, in various forms, plays a significant role in the actions of each character and their relationship with those around them. The opening sentence of the novel reads "[i]n a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her" (Hamid, 2017, p. 1). It is clear that the connection between the characters and space is established here (the two characters meeting in a classroom), as well as the novel's focus on war and violence. From this point onwards, the novel continues to portray the importance of space. Saeed, the young man, wants to have coffee with Nadia, the young woman, in a cafeteria. This cafeteria is not only a place, but it is a preferred space for Saeed instead of a café "to make it seem less forward" (Hamid, 2017, p. 2). Thus, for him, the cafeteria might be the place to meet Nadia as well as a space where their relationship can begin in a "less forward" way.

Immediately at the beginning, the novel establishes how space possesses a complex and contradictory relationship with beautiful aesthetic, freedom, imprisonment and violence. One of the first examples is the balcony of Saeed's family flat which is described as:

> a usable, if narrow, balcony, with a view down an alley and straight up a boulevard to a dry fountain that once gushed and sparkled in the sunlight. It was the sort of view that might command a slight premium during gentler, more prosperous times, but would be most undesirable in times of conflict, when it would be squarely in the path of a heavy machine-gun and rocket fire as fighters advanced into this part of town: a view like staring down the barrel of a rifle. Location, location, location, the estate agents say. Geography is destiny, respond the historians. (Hamid, 2017, p. 9)

The irony is illustrated by the way this "premium location," which estate agents would encourage customers to buy, also draws attention from attackers

due to its proximity to the important part of the neighbourhood. Therefore, while the balcony has the power to allow its residents the privilege of a beautiful view, giving them the freedom to appreciate aesthetics and nature, its location also creates a greater chance for them to be harmed or killed, preventing them from escaping the gunfire and rendering them more exposed to violence. What is most interesting is the contradiction within space which presents several ironies; space in *Exit West* facilitates the characters' search for freedom while at the same time imprisoning them. In the worst scenario, it serves as a platform for violence to be executed. The essay will delve into further analysis of space in the novel on the basis of these ideas whereby employing concepts derived from various realms of thought, including Michael Foucault's notion of space and power, along with Johan Galtung's concept of violence, which also engages with the postcolonial lens regarding how violence can be exercised through space by the justification of race, religion and culture.

1. Space, Freedom, and Imprisonment

In his monograph *The Practice of Everyday Life*, De Certeau (1984) calls a train car "a travelling incarceration" and travelling on a train "a rationalized cell travel." In his view, train travellers are trapped inside a train and controlled as if they are being "pigeonholed, numbered, and regulated in the grid of the railway car" and there is no escape from this control except for in the restrooms (p. 111). Transportations are often seen as the means to liberate humans, allowing them to escape from their otherwise immobile space. However, the argument that travelling on a train is a form of imprisonment is something worth discussing. It is true that once on a train, passengers are forced to stay in a designated space and to move forward in the direction determined by the train. There is a contradiction here because these passengers have chosen to get on this train, to travel on this route and to leave the train at the destination they desire to visit. However, they are still not completely liberated in utilising this space. When asked about architectural projects and liberation, Foucault (2010) posits that "[l]iberty is a *practice*." Although some architectural projects are planned to loosen or challenge certain forms of limitation, in this sense the limitation in travelling, "none of these projects can, simply by its nature, assure that people will have liberty automatically, that it will be established by the project itself." When "the institutions or laws" claim that they can guarantee liberty, this liberty is "quite capable of being turned around." This is because, as Foucault (2010) points out, liberty cannot be guaranteed by these authorities as long as it "must be exercised" (p. 245). The phrase "to be exercised" reflects the irony that the processes of promoting rules and liberty are not necessarily distinguishable.

Here, Foucault offers a case of the Familistère at Guise in Northern France, a project by the French industrialist Jean-Baptiste André Godin. It was an apartment complex surrounding a square courtyard where residents could

participate in outdoor recreational activities. The complex was self-contained with adequate facilities and was created with the idea of providing a community for workers to live in unity and to possess their own authority in designing how they wanted to live. As Foucault (2010) states, it "was clearly intended for the freedom of people," but the paradox is that the square courtyard and the visibility it yielded acted as a panopticon where "no one could enter or leave the place without being seen by everyone—an aspect of architecture that could be totally oppressive." This renders the complex to be equated to *a prison*, "an instrument for discipline and a rather unbearable group pressure" (Foucault, 2010, p. 246). However, this would only happen if the residents decided to exercise their power to oppress other residents, or as suggested by Foucault (2010), "prepared to use their own presence in order to watch over others" (p. 246). The fact that it was self-contained also means that residents did not need to leave the complex to carry on their everyday living except for going to work. Thus, practically, trapping them within it. His example illustrates how space can simultaneously provide freedom and imprisonment.

In *Exit West*, several forms of space serve to both liberate and confine the characters. The first instance is related to memories. As readers come to learn of how Saeed's parents began their relationship, one of the significant things they read is that "[t]hey met at the cinema" (Hamid, 2017, p. 10) and that they spend time together in "bookshops," "cafés," and "restaurants." Later on, his parents will reminisce about their past by looking at these buildings although they have been transformed and used for other purposes. Glancing at the buildings causes them to "remember and smile. Or remember and pause" (Hamid, 2017, p. 12). From this, we can see the contradiction that is shown in the power of space which affects these characters. The buildings serve as a reminder of the youthful past that they share, thus the smile, allowing them freedom to travel back to a time that has passed. At the same time, it emphasises that their past can never return in the same way that the buildings are no longer in the same form as they once were. Changes can be violent, especially if one is trapped in the past and cannot let go of one's memories. In this sense, the past collected in buildings will imprison those beholding them. It is then revealed later in the novel that Saeed's father refuses to leave his flat because Saeed's mother "is here" despite her death.

Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart (1995) argue in their essay "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" that some memories can serve as "obstacles that keep people from going on with their lives" (p. 158). Citing the French psychologist, Pierre Janet, the essay discusses how it might be difficult for experiences that are deemed "frightening or novel" to fit into "existing cognitive schemes" that govern our memories, or those experiences can be denied integration into the memories altogether (Van der Kolk & Van der Hart, 1995, p. 160). Indeed, we find in *Exit*

West that the frightening experiences that keep Saeed's parents from admitting their old age and Saeed's father from accepting his wife's death are the violent changes that they do not wish to integrate into their memories or, in another sense, their reality. The flat's impending demolition does not stop Saeed's father from insisting on staying even though he is aware of the approaching change and danger from the war. This is because for him, his wife's death is a traumatic memory that he still experiences through living in the space and knowing that she is not there. Van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995) provide an example of this type of experience through L. L. Langer's study of the Holocaust survivors who could not connect their memories of being inside and outside of the concentration camps and are forced to live both memories simultaneously, "the traumatic experience/memory is, in a sense, timeless. It is not transformed into a story, placed in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end […]. If it can be told at all, it is still a (re)experience" (p. 177). The buildings from his younger years and the flat where he spends his married life allow Saeed's father the freedom to relive happy memories that no longer exist; meanwhile, they trap him in this loop of time where he re-experiences his days with his wife over and over again.

Not only can memories of a space simultaneously provide freedom and imprisonment but we can also see this type of relationship in the physical aspect of the space itself. Buildings and rooms are often thought of as a confined space which shuts people inside unless they decide to exit the site while outdoor areas usually represent a space where one can move about more freely. However, the novel conveys how external space can also exercise its power to confine. Outside on Nadia's terrace, she and Saeed kiss when dawn has started. However, due to their fear that those "from some other rooftop" can see them, they need to *escape inside* the apartment (Hamid, 2017, p. 44). The limitation to freedom outdoors is even more explicit when surveillance cameras are employed to monitor people's behaviour. Going outside, "they could be seen by the lenses peering down on their city from the sky and from space, and by the eyes of militants, and of informers, who might be anyone, everyone" (Hamid, 2017, p. 88-89). Although it is true that the characters are not completely free indoors, risking an unnotified search by those with weapons at any time, they are relatively more liberated from surveillance in their home, especially when electricity is missing, causing the surveillance technology that can penetrate the building to stop functioning.

The relationship between the characters' freedom and space in the novel might be most significant in the portrayal of windows and doors. A window might be regarded by some as a space of liberation. Trapped inside a building or a room, one can see what it is like outside by looking out through a window. If one is able to open the window, one can even stick one's head outside or climb out through it. In the novel, a window is described as "the border through which

death was possibly most likely to come" (Hamid, 2017, p. 68). Here, the power of the window is contradictory. Due to the scarcity of gas and electricity, residents of Nadia and Saeed's city need to have windows in their houses to protect them from the cold, which can be harmful to health or result in death. At the same time, windows pose risk as they can be shattered during the time of an explosion, and thus causing the residents to be hurt. Windows also attract attention from attackers as "any spot indoors with a view of the outside was a spot potentially in the crossfire" (Hamid, 2017, p. 68). In the sense of freedom to live, a window can be the platform which either provides people more chances to live or causes them more risk of death.

The door is possibly one of the most important elements of the novel. Magical doors are what allow refugees from various places, including Nadia and Saeed, to escape the fatality of war and other forms of harshness. They are "doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country" (Hamid, 2017, p. 69). To have access to these doors, one needs to have luck, money to pay a smuggler or connection to the right people. This means that for those who do not have these, at least yet, the door serves to reminds them of the impossibility of escape from this violent prison. As the narrator of the novel remarks, "each of their doors […] [becomes] partially animate as well, an object with a subtle power to mock, to mock the desires of those who desired to go far away, whispering silently from its door frame that such dreams were the dreams of fools" (Hamid, 2017, p. 70). Even when the citizens are able to escape their country through these doors, it does not mean that they will be free to live in safety and with adequate supplies of basic needs. This is demonstrated in the journey of Nadia and Saeed after they escape the city and of other refugees throughout the novel. In a worse scenario, some refugees are discovered and killed due to the fact that the doors also allow the militants to search for them easily. An example of this is what happens in Vienna, where citizens "[have] witnessed massacres in the streets, the militants shooting unarmed people and the disappearing" (Hamid, 2017, p. 104). The fate of these refugees could be worse than before they escaped the country.

The availability of these doors, when compared to the easily accessed forms of transportation these days, demonstrates their limitations. Human beings are free to access air travel, which has become much cheaper than in the past. They can take high speed trains or boats and road travel is much more developed. However, there are still constraints, especially for people from poorer countries, on where they can or cannot go. Edward Said (2004) states that after World War II it has become a worldwide agreement that "each individual or collectivity, no matter his or her color, ethnicity, religion, or culture, is to be protected from such horrific practices as starvation, torture, forced transfer of populations, religious and ethnic discrimination, humiliation, extra-judicial political assassination, land expropriation and all manner of similar cruel and

unusual punishment" (p. 16). These are part of the foundational ideas of human rights. Nevertheless, despite a great number of countries claiming human rights as their priority, we can see incessantly that many refugees are denied their entry into a foreign country even when they are forced to escape violent persecutions, no different from the ones listed in Said's statement, in their homeland. This refusal can be due to their nationality and/or wealth status, which is linked to the fact that the system of visas and the immigration laws determine who will be welcomed to the country usually not based on merit but on the chance of where they happen to be born or how much money they have. If an airport and a border between two countries serve the same function as the magical door, they stand to mock people who do not have the *right* to enter the country even though they are standing on its land (in case of an airport) or when it is just a few steps away (in the case of a border).

The last form of space which can be discussed in relation to freedom is the virtual space of the Internet. The reason why the Internet is considered as a kind of space is due to its relation to temporality, a space where people from different times can share the same activities and be aware of one another, as well as to movement, a space where users can virtually travel. According to the novel, the Internet engages "as if by magic, [with] a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be" (Hamid, 2017, p. 35). Because of the Internet, Saeed "[becomes] present without presence" (Hamid, 2017, p. 36) to Nadia and she to him. Life on the Internet can be better than the life in reality as "[o]nline there [is] sex and security and plenty and glamour" compared to on the street where Nadia is sexually harassed by "a burly man" (Hamid, 2017, p. 39) who insults her because she is a woman riding a motorcycle. Online, Nadia is *free from* this kind of real-life threat and *free to* browse the contents she wants to see (assuming they are not being censored). However, freedom on the Internet can also convey immobility and become a form of confinement. Firstly, Internet users become passive and too reliant on the technology. When mobile and internet signals in the city are suspended, Nadia and Saeed find it impossible to locate each other during the day as they were used to sending messages and do not know where the other person works (Hamid, 2017, p. 55-57). Secondly, the novel demonstrates that the Internet reminds the citizens of their inability to escape their situation:

> But even now the city's freewheeling virtual world stood in stark contrast to the day-to-day lives of most people, to those of young men, and especially of young women, and above all children who went to sleep unfed but could see on some small screen people in foreign lands preparing and consuming and even conducting food fights with feats of

> such opulence that the very fact of their existence boggled the mind. (Hamid, 2017, p. 38-39)

Apart from inciting the feeling that those on the Internet are better off than some users are, the Internet also allows and facilitates acts of violence, a threat to human's freedom to live. Online, Nadia can purchase shrooms from a middle-aged man, whose business is possible due to the Internet. However, a while after she does so, the man is beheaded, hung by an ankle and put on public display (Hamid, 2017, p. 38). It is not clear why this happens to him but we might assume, based on why his murder is mentioned, that his illegal online business draws attention to him and the Internet enables the murderers to identify who he is. It is not surprising in a city full of surveillance systems that this kind of incident can happen. Readers of the novel might also be well aware of the fatal capacity of the Internet whose functions facilitate the act of monitoring. From this example and the rest that were discussed, it can be gathered that all these forms of confinement can be regarded not only as a limitation to freedom but also as forms of violence imposed upon both the mind and the physical bodies.

2. Locating Violence in Territoriality

To bring the argument further from space and imprisonment, in his article "Cultural Violence," Johan Galtung (1990) identifies "detention" as a form of violence as it is a threat to "freedom needs" although in his sense it can mean physical detention. "Killing," is also a form of violence against "survival needs" (p. 292). In his discussion of violence, Gultung (1977) divides violence into three different categories: direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence. Based on his explanation, "[d]irect violence is an *event*; structural violence is a *process* […]; cultural violence is an *invariant*, a 'permanence'" (ch. 9 as cited in Galtung, 1990, p. 294). To exemplify, direct violence usually refers to physical forms of violence, such as killing, physical abuse, imprisonment and slavery. He provides an example of Africans who are "captured, forced across the Atlantic to work as slaves; millions are killed in the process – in Africa, on board, in the Americas." The repetition of these *direct violent* acts then causes them to be ingrained in the society, becoming *a structural violence* in the form of discrimination which regards the white as the master and the black as the slave. Due to this, *a cultural violence* is established in the form of racism which legitimizes the concept of discrimination and violent physical acts against the black (Galtung, 1990, p. 295). This chain of events can also be operated in an opposite direction where racism propagates racial discrimination which then results in inter-racial physical violence or where the discrimination leads to physical violence which requires racism to justify it. The magnitude of cultural violence can be disastrous and permanent as "[o]ne way cultural violence works is by changing the moral color of an act from red/wrong to green/right or at least

to yellow/acceptable; an example being 'murder on behalf of the country as right, on behalf of oneself is wrong'" (Galtung, 1990, p. 292). One can observe from *Exit West* that these three forms of violence are continuously propagated in the creation of territories, the division of space by employing culture as a tool.

J. Carter Wood (2007) argues that "violence is territorial, weaving together notions of power, belonging, social hierarchy and the public display of social status" (p. 28). This statement highlights his point on how territoriality is part of the connection between violence and space; "[t]his may include ritualized demonstrations within a space, thereby signifying control over [a space], or the use of force to physically exclude (or expel) those who violate local notions of spatial belonging" (Wood, 2007, p. 23). In *Exit West*, violence is employed to maintain territories, especially by those with power. The city Nadia and Saeed lives in is physically divided into a militant-controlled and a government-controlled area. The occupants who are "disloyal" to the area they live in can risk being persecuted (Hamid, 2017, p. 67). It is clear that here not only a physical space is divided but so is a mental space since a person residing in a certain side of the city cannot violate the spatial rules of the area and adopt the same beliefs as those on the other side. The novel illustrates that the idea of "the righteous" supported by a religion can help propagate violence and create division in space. During a prayer session, "the preacher in his sermon urged all the congregants to pray for the righteous to emerge victorious in the war but carefully refrained from specifying on which side of the conflict he thought the righteous to be" (Hamid, 2017, p. 49). Although the preacher does not identify the righteous side, the fact that it exists at all shows how religion might act to legitimize the violence caused by one side of the conflict. The irony lies in the space of a religious site where Saeed and his father go to pray which is supposed to be an advocate of peace but it instead supports the notion that there is "the righteous" side in this conflict who must win, thus encouraging the violence to go on. This harks back to Galtung's classification of violence. In this sense, cultural violence is incited by a religion, which has great influence on human actions at a cultural level. It then manifests itself in the form of structural violence, where the righteous and the evil are divided, territorialized ideologically and physically (as in the space of the city). Ultimately, this results in direct violence, including the bombing of buildings and the killing of citizens. As has been discussed, this chain could instead be turned around as the violent actions can be justified by the idea and action supported by a religion.

Cultural violence upheld by a religion is also presented during the time Nadia and Saeed are in London. Here, at the house on Vicarage Gate where refugees from their country live, the idea of martyrdom is encouraged

> not as the most desirable outcome but as one possible end of a path the right-minded had no other choice but to follow, and advocated a banding

> together of migrants along religious principles, cutting across divisions of race or language or nation, for what did those divisions matter now in a world full of doors, the only divisions that mattered now were between those who sought the right of passage and those who would deny them passage, and in such a world the religion of the righteous must defend those who sought passage. (Hamid, 2017, p. 152)

The passage presents several ironies. While religions are often associated with peace, martyrdom conveys that in order to prove one's loyalty to a religion, one needs to suffer acts of violence, what Galtung (1990) refers to as the opposite of peace (p. 291). This again reminds us of a form of cultural violence. The proposal to create a group based on those who have faith in *the right religion* is also problematic and reflects a structural violence which will result in physical forms of discrimination among people. How would the division based on religion be different from those based on race, language or nation? The passage shows that the magical door fails to achieve its presumed goal, which is to bring people together by facilitating their travel, allowing them to live wherever they want and creating a sense of coexistence among them. Instead, the division remains clear as people with the same religion gather in the same house and are prepared to "defend those who sought passage" through martyrdom. The residents of the house collect weapons in cases that they need to defend this right passage, reproducing the forms of direct violence seen in the country Nadia and Saeed have left.

The novel also shows that the doors cannot dissipate the beliefs in race, language, nation and class. This idea is demonstrated in space through the division of refugee houses. The house where Nadia and Saeed initially settle down in London becomes a "Nigerian house" (Hamid, 2017, p. 143) as the majority of refugees who reside there are those who are regarded as Nigerians, despite the variety of their cultures and languages (Hamid, 2017, p. 134) while people from Nadia and Saeed's countries gather at the house on Vicarage Gate. In the Nigerian house, Saeed feels uncomfortable and fearful for being "the only man from his country" and threatened by a woman whose words "he often could not understand, but words that made others laugh" (Hamid, 2017, p. 146-147). When the woman blocks his passage in the hallway, "he stood there and waited for her to move, to yield space for him to pass" (Hamid, 2017, p. 147). The significance of space is indicated here again and demonstrates how, as a person from a different country who speaks a different language, Saeed does not have the sense of spatial belonging in this house. The house itself stands as a symbol of separation, which still persists among the refugees and it is manifested in Saeed's fear of violent actions from the woman and other men in the house.

Another thing which is worth noting is that one factor which contributes to the division of houses based on nations is the violence from "the nativist,"

those who claim to be native to London. Their formation is for the purpose of "reclaim[ing] Britain for Britain" (Hamid, 2017, p. 132) and violent acts are employed towards the refugees to clear them out from London's space and almost results in "the battle of London" (Hamid, 2017, p. 159). Nadia and Saeed are physically attacked by a nativist mob who "look[s] to Nadia like a strange and violent tribe, intent on their destruction, some armed with iron bars or knives" (Hamid, 2017, p. 131). Refugees huddle together because of fear. London is being zoned into dark and light London, the former the space where refugees reside and the latter that of the natives.

The names of the two zones are both literal and symbolic. In the first sense, dark London suffers from lack of electricity which is taken away by the authorities, leaving darkness to cover the area at night. In light London, however, the electrical light during night time highlights its privilege over dark London. Facilities are operated normally and people are free to travel on trains, which keep "skipping stops near Saeed and Nadia but felt as a rumble beneath their feet and heard at a low, powerful frequency, almost subsonic" (Hamid, 2017, p. 142). The fact that they can feel and hear the trains continuously reminds the couple and perhaps other refugees of their status as secondary citizens, which in Galtung's (1990) terms, is considered a kind of direct violence against identity needs (p. 292). This status limits them from the benefits of facilities which the city provides and from being able to travel as freely as other city dwellers. In a sense, it means that there are certain spaces in the city which they cannot access, making them experience the act of expulsion, yet another form of direct violence which is concerned with freedom needs (Galtung, 1990, p. 292). It can be seen that these forms of direct violence are incited by the structural violence of space discrimination, masquerading as a usual act of zoning of a city to create territories. This, in turn, is being justified by the ideas of nationalism and racism at the level of cultural violence. Therefore, dark and light London symbolically reflect a sense of hopelessness and hopefulness, as well as a sense of confinement and freedom, which distinguish the two zones of London. The zoning does not only reduce the refugees to secondary citizens but it also aims at eradicating their presence. Inevitably, dark London becomes invisible without the light, which strikingly resembles Edward Said's (2004) description of South Africa in 1991:

> you could drive from white centers like Cape Town to Stellenbosch, a distance of about 80 miles and never see anything of the black South Africa. It was entirely white; why? Because the road curved around in such a way that the townships, where you would occasionally see a large light, but the rest of the black population was simply made invisible. This is one of the ways that colonialism has of dissipating the existence of the other people. (p. 25)

Said also recalls another account of cultural dissipation through space which occurs in the West Bank where roads are built, in Jeff Halper's words, as "a matrix of control" in order to annihilate the Arabs' presence in the areas that became Jewish settlements. The road signs no longer present the Arabic names of towns that initially belonged to the Palestinians so that people travelling on the roads will never know that they had existed at all (Said, 2004, p. 25). These incidents further prove how, just as in *Exit West*, space is utilised as a means of control to impose violence on certain groups of people whose mistreatment is justified by their inability to access and occupy a designated spatial zone.

3. Conclusion

Despite the violence in several forms of space, the novel ends on a hopeful note. Marin, the city where they later move to, forms its own culture, combining "[d]ifferent types of music [which] gathered different tribes of people, tribes that had not existed before" (Hamid, 2017, p. 216), along with "new cuisines that were being born, for many of the world's foods were coming together and being re-formed in Marin, and the place was a taster's paradise" (Hamid, 2017, p. 217). This positivism seems to suggest a form of globalization which is no stranger to most readers of the novel. However, the utopia of cultural diversity and harmony of the human race set by globalization can be questioned by the tone set by the novel. In a world with magical doors, a city can be divided due to differences in ideologies and racial discrimination. The space which becomes more and more open due to the availability of transportation represented by these doors continues to be contradictory as it possesses the power to liberate, while at the same time confining its occupants and facilitating violence.

Exit West was first published in early 2017, not long after various significant incidents regarding violent racial discrimination and division of countries between 2014 and 2016, including the Black Lives Matter movement, the Syrian refugee crisis, Brexit and the presidency of Donald J. Trump, whose primary campaign was to "make America great again." One of Trump's strategies to do so was to build a wall, a literal wall, to divide the United States and Mexico. A similar act of division took place in Brexit where the United Kingdom voted to break away or "exit" the European Union (EU), setting up a legal border between itself and the rest of the EU. The Syrian refugee crisis was the strongest evidence of border division here as more than 10 million people became refugees or displaced. Several were refused asylum and had to continue their struggle despite already travelling on a dangerous sea journey or taking an arduous, deadly walk from their home, only to be denied at the physical space of the border. The Black Lives Matter movement depicts the way that space can induce violence in the same fashion as Nadia's and Saeed's attack by the nativists claiming that they are a threat to the space, just as Trayvon Martin, an

African American teenager, was shot to death in 2012 by “a community watch” in Sandford, Florida for being "a suspicious person" entering the neighborhood (CNN Editorial Research, 2020, para. 3). The most vital question raised by *Exit West* is whether it will be viable for a city like Marin to exist in a world full of hatred, division, and discrimination. Nevertheless, the ending’s hopeful tone might signify the possibility of change in attitudes when more and more people in the world have become displaced similar to in the novel. Perhaps humanity will find a way to plan and navigate its space to lessen its contradiction with regards to freedom, imprisonment and violence. Perhaps there could be a world where a space of diversity can truly exist even when, oftentimes, history has proved otherwise.

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