

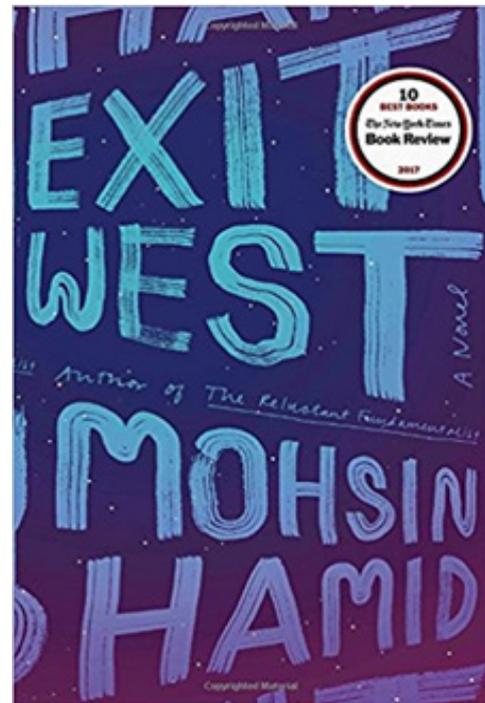
BOOK REVIEWS

TITLE: EXIT WEST

AUTHOR: MOHSIN HAMID

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"I can understand it," [Nadia] said. "Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived."

Mohsin Hamid's new Man Booker nominated novel, *Exit West*, centers on Saeed and Nadia — two young working professionals in an unnamed city. Nadia and Saeed live separate lives in a country shuddering under a militant religious civil war. Their lives are difficult. He is an observant Muslim dedicated to the protection of his mother and father. She is a secular woman willing to skirt the oppression of religion and bigotry in private but in public chooses to wear the hijab as protection.

Saeed is attracted at first to the hijab she wears, but the attraction builds when he discovers she is not the obedient observant woman she appears at first to be. In the midst of an increasingly terrifying war a liberating romance develops between them. As the bombs and the destruction move closer, they look for ways out. They learn of hidden doors that transport a person instantaneously to any other place, linking apartments and schools in countries of suffering and oppression

with mansions and rooftops in places of peace and abundance. The challenge for Saeed and Nadia is to find a door. Nadia and Saeed eventually make their way to London, only to find it's not the safe haven they expect it to be, there is hostility between the migrants and the native-born, including attacks and mob rule. The migrants are eventually sectioned off in a ghetto with minimal food and electricity called "Dark London". The book explores the couple's struggle to acclimatize to their new 'home'.

With the 'doors' Mohsin Hamid in *Exit West* creates a powerful metaphor that helps us make sense of the changing world we see around us today. There are no descriptions of life-or-death journeys in the backs of lorries or on flimsy vessels. No middle passages. Just the cognitive shock of having been freshly transplanted to a tough new environment. Whether you live in London or Kampala, you encounter people who are different and who are in difficult circumstances. Some may be migrants from war-torn countries with different skin color, language, food and religion. Others may simply be homeless who have lost their income, their housing and any sense of direction.

The experience of Nadia and Saeed made me reflect on the refugee situation in Uganda. The country currently hosts almost 1.4 million refugees, with more than 1 million who fled South Sudan. Beyond this massive displacement into northern Uganda, many settlements in the southwestern part of the country are also seeing steady influxes of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi and Rwanda. Refugees across Uganda and the world face similar challenges, women and girls, frequently mentioned experiencing disease, poverty, assault, sexual violence, and intimidation, and hostility from the host communities.

Hamid's writing, at times poetic, is sparse yet captivating, and this work is a quick read. The magical realism, is used well, fleetingly and adds to the main message of the story, one's situation is not permanent, a sudden change in circumstances could make one a refugee or migrant and we should remember to treat all people with basic humanity, regardless of their origin and circumstances.