

Navigating Trauma and Displacement: A Comparative Analysis of *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid and *The Baghdad Clock* (2016) by Shahad Al Rawi

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This paper examines the thematic and stylistic parallels between Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Shahad Al Rawi's *The Baghdad Clock*. Both novels engage with the profound impacts of war and forced migration, yet through distinct narrative lenses. *Exit West* utilizes magical realism, following Saeed and Nadia as they escape their collapsing city through magical doors, to explore the global and psychological dimensions of displacement. *The Baghdad Clock*, set during the First Gulf War and the subsequent sanctions era in Baghdad, offers an intimate, localized portrait of a young girl's life, focusing on themes of childhood, memory, and communal resilience. Using an interdisciplinary framework that combines trauma theory, migration studies, and narrative medicine, this study investigates how both novels depict the processing of traumatic experiences. The analysis highlights the innovative combination of these theoretical approaches to reveal the psychological and cultural dimensions of trauma as represented in both a globalized and a specifically Iraqi context.

Keywords: displacement; *Exit West*; narrative medicine; migration; magical realism; trauma theory; *The Baghdad Clock*.

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Navegando el trauma y el desplazamiento: un análisis comparativo de *Exit West* (2017) de Mohsin Hamid y *The Baghdad Clock* (2016) de Shahad Al Rawi

Este artículo examina los paralelismos temáticos y estilísticos entre *Exit West* de Mohsin Hamid y *The Baghdad Clock* de Shahad Al Rawi. Ambas novelas abordan los profundos efectos de la guerra y la migración forzada, aunque a través de lentes narrativas distintas. *Exit West* recurre al realismo mágico, siguiendo a Saeed y Nadia mientras escapan de su ciudad en colapso a través de puertas mágicas, para explorar las dimensiones globales y psicológicas del desplazamiento. *The Baghdad Clock*, ambientada durante la Primera Guerra del Golfo y la posterior era de sanciones en Bagdad, ofrece un retrato íntimo y localizado de la vida de una niña, centrado en los temas de infancia, memoria y resiliencia comunitaria. A partir de un marco interdisciplinario que combina la teoría del trauma, los estudios migratorios y la medicina narrativa, este estudio investiga cómo ambas novelas representan el procesamiento de experiencias traumáticas. El análisis resalta la combinación innovadora de estos enfoques teóricos para revelar las dimensiones psicológicas y culturales del trauma, en un contexto tanto globalizado como específicamente iraquí.

Palabras clave: desplazamiento; *Exit West*; medicina narrativa; migración; realismo mágico; teoría del trauma; *The Baghdad Clock*.

Navegando pelo trauma e deslocamento: uma análise comparativa de *Exit West* (2017), de Mohsin Hamid, e *The Baghdad Clock* (2016), de Shahad Al Rawi

Este artigo examina os paralelos temáticos e estilísticos entre *Exit West*, de Mohsin Hamid, e *The Baghdad Clock*, de Shahad Al Rawi. Ambos os romances abordam os profundos impactos da guerra e da migração forçada, ainda que por lentes narrativas distintas. *Exit West* recorre ao realismo mágico, acompanhando Saeed e Nadia enquanto escapam de sua cidade em colapso por meio de portas mágicas, a fim de explorar as dimensões globais e psicológicas do deslocamento. *The Baghdad Clock*, ambientado durante a Primeira Guerra do Golfo e o subsequente período de sanções em Bagdá, oferece um retrato íntimo e localizado da vida de uma jovem, centrando-se em temas como infância, memória e resiliência comunitária. Utilizando um quadro interdisciplinar que combina teoria do trauma, estudos de migração e medicina narrativa, este estudo investiga como ambos os romances representam o processamento de experiências traumáticas. A análise destaca a combinação inovadora dessas abordagens teóricas para revelar as dimensões psicológicas e culturais do trauma, tanto em um contexto globalizado quanto especificamente iraquiano.

Palavras-chave: deslocamento; *Exit West*; medicina narrativa; migração; realismo mágico; teoria do trauma; *The Baghdad Clock*.

Introduction

CONTEMPORARY WORLD LITERATURE IS INCREASINGLY preoccupied with narratives of trauma and displacement, reflecting a global reality shaped by conflict and forced migration. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and Shahad Al Rawi's *The Baghdad Clock* (2018) offer two compelling, yet distinct, explorations of these themes. While both novels address the deep psychological toll of war, their narrative strategies and focal points diverge significantly. Hamid employs a surreal and globalized approach, using magical doors as a metaphor for the abrupt and disorienting nature of the refugee experience. In contrast, Al Rawi presents a grounded, localized narrative that juxtaposes childhood innocence with the brutal realities of life in Baghdad during the First Gulf War and the debilitating decade of sanctions that followed.

This paper provides a comparative analysis of these two works through an interdisciplinary framework that intertwines trauma theory with insights from migration studies and narrative medicine. This combination allows for a nuanced examination of trauma not only as a psychological wound but also as a phenomenon deeply embedded in cultural and historical specificities. By exploring the narrative techniques each author uses to convey the inexpressible aspects of loss and displacement, this study investigates how memory, resilience, and identity are negotiated in times of profound crisis. The comparative structure is organized thematically, analyzing both novels through the lenses of displacement, migration, character development, and narrative technique, all under the overarching focus of trauma. This approach aims to illuminate the distinct yet interconnected ways Hamid and Al Rawi contribute to the discourse on trauma and migration.

Literature review

Trauma fiction, a significant subgenre of contemporary literature, explores the psychological, cultural, and historical dimensions of catastrophic experiences. It frequently employs fragmented narratives, non-linear storytelling, and surreal elements to reflect the disjointed and often unspeakable nature of trauma (Caruth; Whitehead).

Foundational trauma theory, as established by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), argues that traumatic events resist full linguistic representation, disrupting linear time and memory. This disruption often manifests in literature through disjointed narratives that mirror the fractured psyche of the traumatized individual. Similarly, Kali Tal, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), positions trauma fiction as a crucial space for marginalized voices to articulate their experiences and challenge dominant historical narratives.

Both *Exit West* and *The Baghdad Clock* incorporate these elements of trauma fiction. Hamid's use of magical realism—particularly the motif of the magical doors—abstracts the physical journey of migration to focus on its psychological disorientation. Al Rawi's child narrator and her dreamlike, nostalgic, tone capture the surreal reality of a childhood framed by war, where memory itself becomes fragmented.

Recent scholarship has expanded this field. Michelle Balaev, in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (2014), critiques universalizing models of trauma, advocating for an approach that acknowledges how trauma is shaped by specific cultural and historical contexts. This is particularly relevant for analyzing Al Rawi's work, which is deeply rooted in the Iraqi experience. Furthermore, scholars have begun to intersect trauma theory with other fields. Simona Adinolfi, in "Reading for Distance: Form, Memory, and Space in Contemporary Novels of Migration" (2024), examines how narrative form in migration novels like *Exit West* shapes the representation of memory and trauma across distances. Amina T. ElHalawani's "Uncanny Journeys: Magical Realism in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*" (2024) provides a focused analysis of how Hamid's magical realism functions as a specific tool for representing displacement.

This paper builds on this foundation by further integrating the framework of narrative medicine and health humanities, as pioneered by Rita Charon (2006), to explore the therapeutic potential of storytelling in processing trauma, an approach that remains underexplored in relation to these two novels.

Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to explore the following key questions: 1) How do *Exit West* and *The Baghdad Clock* depict displacement and migration as consequences of conflict?, 2) What narrative techniques (e.g., magical realism, fragmented

narration) do Hamid and Al Rawi employ to express the ineffable experiences of their protagonists?, 3) How can an interdisciplinary framework combining trauma theory, migration studies, and narrative medicine enhance our analysis of the characters' psychological and emotional responses?, 4) In what ways do the protagonists' journeys reflect broader societal concerns about war, forced migration, and identity?, and 5) How do the specific cultural contexts of each novel influence the characters' reactions to trauma?

Theoretical framework

This analysis is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that synthesizes trauma theory, migration studies, and narrative medicine to provide a comprehensive examination of the novels.

Trauma theory

The core of the framework relies on Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as an event that is not fully experienced at the time it occurs, but returns through belated, intrusive repetitions like flashbacks and nightmares. This "belatedness" explains the non-linear, fragmented narrative structures common in trauma fiction. Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" (repetitively re-enacting trauma) and "working through" (the process of integrating trauma into one's life narrative) is crucial for analyzing character development. Most importantly, Michelle Balaev's work reminds us that trauma is not a universal experience but is mediated by cultural and historical contexts. This prevents a monolithic reading and allows for the specific traumas of Iraq under sanctions (*The Baghdad Clock*) and global refugeeism (*Exit West*) to be understood on their own terms.

The trauma of displacement is often compounded by a deliberate strategy of historical and cultural erasure, a process that seeks to sever a people's connection to their past and place. This concept is articulated by Walid Abdallah Rezk in his analysis of Palestinian literature, where he notes that the novel *Minor Detail* illustrates

the dialectical interconnection between human extermination, place, and memory, realizing the concept of the 'empty land'. This is evident through

‘ethnic cleansing, forced displacement, and the pushing of remaining inhabitants towards escape...’ Consequently, there was also the process of erasing the place by demolishing... villages, altering all environmental features, and eradicating all existing traces —historical, social, and cultural landmarks associated with the place—. (9)

This framework of enforced emptiness provides a crucial lens for understanding the settings of both *Exit West* and *The Baghdad Clock*. In Hamid’s novel, the magical doors facilitate an abrupt departure that itself feels like an erasure, a forced vacancy of one’s own life and history, mirroring the physical displacement Rezk describes. Meanwhile, Al Rawi’s narrative is an act of resistance against this very erasure. The narrator’s and her friend’s meticulous documentation of their vanishing neighborhood in a notebook is a direct counter to the “process of erasing the place”; it is a desperate and resilient effort to preserve the “historical, social, and cultural landmarks” of their community against the overwhelming forces of war that seek to render their existence a “minor detail”. Thus, both novels, though set in different contexts, engage with the same profound struggle: the fight to maintain identity and memory against the traumatic forces that seek to create an “empty land” both physically and within the human psyche.

Migration studies

This field provides the socio-political context for the characters’ journeys. It helps analyze the forces that compel migration and the experiences of alienation, assimilation, and hybrid identity formation in host societies. The works of scholars like Saskia Sassen (*Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*) illuminate the systemic pressures —including war and economic sanctions— that lead to displacement.

The journey of migration in postcolonial literature is often portrayed as a quest for a better life, yet a common thematic endpoint is the profound disillusionment with this very ideal. This sentiment is powerfully echoed in the works of Khawla Hamdi and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. As Walid Abdallah Rezk argues in his analysis of *Expatriation of the Jasmin* and *Americanah*, the protagonists

realize that they are chasing mirage, and the ideal image of the western world is scattered, they conclude that they can achieve success anywhere without having to migrate, and the first step on the way to success starts from the inside. (3)

This conclusion resonates deeply with the trajectories of Saeed, Nadia, and the narrator of *The Baghdad Clock*. While Hamid's characters find their relationship fractured by the pressures of displacement rather than finding a unified paradise, and Al Rawi's narrator processes trauma through memory and community rather than escape, they all undergo a similar process of introspection. Their journeys ultimately lead them away from seeking validation in the West and toward a realization that identity, resilience, and ultimately, success are not geographically bound but are cultivated from within. This reinforces the argument that a central project of contemporary postcolonial fiction is to challenge the hegemony of Western destinations and redefine belonging on one's own terms.

Narrative medicine and health humanities

Pioneered by Rita Charon, narrative medicine emphasizes the therapeutic power of storytelling. It posits that telling and listening to stories of illness (or trauma) is a healing act that fosters empathy and understanding. The concept of “narrative humility”—listening without imposing preconceived frameworks—is vital for engaging with migrant and trauma narratives. This lens allows us to see the novels not just as representations of suffering, but as acts of “working through” trauma, both for the characters and the authors.

By applying this combined framework, the analysis moves beyond a purely psychological reading of trauma to one that is equally attentive to its cultural embeddedness, its socio-political causes, and its potential for narrative healing.

Displacement: Global abrupton and localized erosion

Displacement is a central theme in both novels, though portrayed with starkly different textures and scopes. In *Exit West*, displacement is sudden, global, and metaphorical. Hamid uses the device of magical doors to instantly

transport characters from their war-torn city to locations like Mykonos, London, and Marin County. This technique abstracts the arduous physical journey of refugees to focus on the psychological rupture. The displacement is an immediate and total severance. Hamid captures this abruptness in the mundane:

It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class... but that is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying. (7)

For Saeed and Nadia, each door represents another murder of the life they left behind, another fragmentation of their identity as they are forced to adapt to new environments, from refugee camps to occupied London mansions, constantly perceived as outsiders.

In contrast, *The Baghdad Clock* depicts displacement as a slow, localized erosion. Set during the First Gulf War (1990-1991) and the subsequent period of devastating economic sanctions, the novel shows how war dismantles a city and a community from within. The narrator and her friend Nadia are not immediately forced to flee Iraq; instead, they experience an internal and communal displacement. Their neighborhood slowly empties as families emigrate to escape the violence and deprivation, creating a palpable sense of loss and abandonment. Al Rawi describes their reality: “We became like leaves carried by the wind, moving from one place to another without a destination” (87). This is a psychological displacement, a feeling of rootlessness within one’s own home. The “aftermath” involves living in a city that is a shell of its former self, where the threat of bombs is replaced by the silent violence of scarcity and isolation. The narrator’s displacement is in the loss of her community, the fragmentation of her childhood memories, and the constant, looming threat that forces her to mentally prepare for a departure that may never come.

Migration: Metaphysical passage and the weight of departure

The novels' treatment of migration follows directly from their approach to displacement. *Exit West*'s magical realism allows Hamid to explore the metaphysical and emotional consequences of migration, divorced from the politics of borders. The doors are a narrative shortcut to the core experience: the simultaneous death of an old life and birth of a new one. Hamid writes, "When we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (94). The migration is transformative and surreal; Nadia experiences passing through a door as "both like dying and being born" (103). The novel focuses on the universal human condition of migration, arguing, "We are all migrants through time" (209), thereby connecting the refugee experience to the fundamental human experiences of change and loss.

The Baghdad Clock grounds migration in the specific historical context of Iraqis fleeing war and sanctions. Here, migration is not surreal but a (*chézhòng*, heavy), painful reality that (*siliè*, tears apart) the social fabric. The novel is less about the journey itself and more about the emotional burden of those who leave and those who are left behind. Al Rawi captures the grief of departure: "We could see the pain of departure in each other's eyes, the unsaid words hanging between us like ghosts" (57). The narrator and her friend Baydaa chronicle this communal disintegration by creating a notebook documenting every family in their neighborhood, "to summarise their lives and our memories of them" (Al Rawi 112). This act is a desperate attempt to preserve a community that is physically disappearing through migration, highlighting its profound local impact.

This resonates with the experience of exiled revolutionaries, as noted in other contexts: "Though their revolutionary dream... has been frustrated, many of them never give up articulating the revolutionaries' voice" (Karam, Khalil, and El Bagoury 14). Similarly, the characters in Al Rawi's novel, whether leaving or staying, strive to preserve the voice and memory of their community against the forces of erasure.

Character development: Evolving selves and the preservation of memory

The protagonists of both novels undergo significant development shaped by their encounters with trauma and displacement. In *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia's relationship serves as the primary lens for their transformation. Initially united by the crisis in their city, their journey through the doors exposes their divergent coping mechanisms. Saeed, grieving the death of his mother and deeply connected to his faith and culture, turns inward. He seeks solace in prayer and the company of other migrants from his homeland. In London, he gravitates toward a conservative Muslim group, finding comfort in tradition and familiarity. Hamid notes, "He was drawn to his own kind, not out of prejudice, but out of an instinctive understanding that in numbers there was safety" (Hamid 121). His trajectory is one of cultural retrenchment.

Nadia, conversely, embodies adaptation and liberation. A fiercely independent woman who left her family before the war even began, she embraces the fluidity of her new identities. In the migrant camps of London, she connects with people from diverse backgrounds. Her journey is one of becoming increasingly "worldly" and detached from her past. This fundamental difference in responding to trauma strains their relationship irreparably. As Perfect observes, "Their relationship, which began in an old city being destroyed, ends in a new city being built. In essence, Nadia and Saeed migrate away from each other" (192). Their character development is a study of how trauma can bifurcate even the closest of bonds.

In *The Baghdad Clock*, character development is less about radical transformation than about the preservation of self and memory against erasure. The unnamed narrator and her friend Baydaa (referred to as Nadia in the English translation, but distinct from Hamid's character) navigate the transition from childhood to adolescence under the constant shadow of war. Their development is marked by a loss of innocence, but also by a profound resilience forged through friendship and communal bonds. Their relationship with neighbors like Uncle Shawkat and Baji Nadira provides stability and a connection to a wider community. Their act of creating the neighborhood notebook is the ultimate symbol of their development: from passive children experiencing trauma to active chroniclers preserving their history. They assert agency not

by physically leaving, but by mentally and emotionally safeguarding the world they are losing. Their development is measured in their enduring commitment to each other and their community, even as it disintegrates around them. As Althobaiti observes, “The characters in the novel demonstrate their ability to endure and persevere despite the horrors of war, showcasing the human spirit’s unwavering strength in the face of adversity” (Althobaiti 35).

Narrative techniques: Fragmented realities and magical survival

The authors employ distinct narrative techniques to mirror the psychological states of their characters. Hamid uses a sparse, lyrical prose with a third-person omniscient narrator that occasionally zooms out to a global, philosophical perspective. His primary technique is magical realism. The doors are the central metaphor: “The doors would sometimes appear without warning, an ominous black rectangle where none had been before” (45). They represent the unpredictability of displacement and the dissolution of geographical certainty. The narrative structure, while largely linear concerning Saeed and Nadia, uses these surreal elements to create a sense of disorientation, mirroring the migrant experience of existing between worlds, never fully grounded. As Abbas and Noreen argue, Hamid “generates a ‘hyperreal’ image of the real that has absolutely no correspondence to reality and therefore, the tale of migration in *Exit West* is a tale of the loss of the real” (693). This insight helps us see how Hamid’s teleportation system not only universalizes migrant experience but also actively remakes it in a postmodern logic, raising questions about what gets elided in the process.

Al Rawi chooses a first-person narrator, creating an intimate, subjective account. The narrative is non-linear, unfolding through a series of memories, dreams, and anecdotes, much like a “bag full of fragments” (192). This fragmentation reflects the way trauma disrupts coherent memory. Her key magical realist element is the Baghdad Clock itself, which the narrator imagines as speaking, marking not just time but the history and soul of the city. “We listened to the Baghdad clock as it recounted tales of the city, whispering secrets of the past and future” (Al Rawi 75). This personification symbolizes the persistence of memory and culture amidst destruction. Unlike Hamid’s doors, which lead out, Al Rawi’s clock is rooted in place, a magical guardian of local memory.

Trauma theory in practice: Acting out and working through

Applying the interdisciplinary framework reveals how trauma manifests and is processed in each novel. In *Exit West*, Saeed often “acts out” his trauma through repetition: he repetitively prays and seeks to recreate the lost community of his homeland. Nadia, on the other hand, exemplifies a form of “working through” by continually moving forward, adapting, and building new connections, though not without emotional cost. The novel itself, through its global perspective and metaphorical doors, can be seen as an attempt to “work through” the trauma of the global refugee crisis on a narrative level, fostering empathy and understanding in the reader —a core goal of narrative medicine.

In *The Baghdad Clock*, the entire community is engaged in a collective process of “working through”. The shared storytelling, the gatherings in shelters during bombings, and the girls’ notebook are all narrative acts that transform unspeakable fear into shared testimony. The novel is a testament to Rita Charon’s concept of narrative humility; it does not explain or analyze Iraq’s politics for an outsider but immerses the reader in the subjective, lived experience of a Baghdad childhood. The trauma is specific: the fear of Scud missiles during the First Gulf War, the deprivation of the sanctions era. The response is culturally specific: deep communal bonds and the rich tradition of storytelling become the primary tools for resilience, preserving identity amid chaos.

Conclusion

Exit West and *The Baghdad Clock* offer two powerful, complementary portraits of trauma and displacement. Hamid’s novel provides a global, metaphorical exploration of the refugee experience, using magical realism to transcend specific politics and tap into the universal emotions of loss and adaptation. Al Rawi’s novel provides a deeply localized, intimate glimpse into the slow violence of war and sanctions on a community, using fragmented memory and local magical realism to underscore the importance of place and story.

Through an interdisciplinary framework weaving together trauma theory, migration studies, and narrative medicine, this analysis has highlighted

how each author's narrative strategies are perfectly tailored to their thematic concerns. Both novels, in their distinct ways, move beyond merely representing trauma to actively participating in the process of "working through" it. They serve as profound acts of narrative hospitality, inviting readers to listen with humility to stories of loss and resilience. They affirm that while the experience of trauma is shaped by irreducibly specific cultural and historical contexts, the human capacity to endure through story is universal. Ultimately, both novels contribute significantly to a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the profound human costs of war and displacement in the contemporary world.

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Walid Abdallah Rezk is an Egyptian poet, academic, and translator whose work bridges Arabic and English literary traditions. He holds a PhD in English language and comparative literature and serves as an Associate Professor at Suez University, Egypt where he has over fifteen years of university-level teaching experience in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. An award-winning translator, Walid has co-translated the poetry of renowned Egyptian poet Farouk Goweda with American poet Andy Fogle, earning recognition from prestigious literary journals, including the RHINO Translation Prize. His own poetry collections —as *Shout of Silence* and *Arc and Seam*— explore themes of identity, displacement, and human resilience. Walid's scholarly research spans comparative literature, diaspora studies, and the intersection of Arab and Western narratives. He has published widely on writers like Monica Ali, Khawla Hamdi, and Mohja Kahf, illuminating Arab and Muslim female voices in the West. Deeply committed to education and cultural exchange, he has participated in the U.S. Department of State's International Leaders in Education Program and continues to champion projects that foster cross-cultural understanding and environmental sustainability.