

**Negotiating Patriarchy in Transit:  
Gendered Subjectivities in Mohsin Hamid’s  
Exit West and Monica Ali’s Brick Lane**  
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**ABSTRACT:**

Gender, in recent migration narratives, is a key location where identity, belonging, and displacement are reconfigured. This paper attempts to explore Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2004) and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017) via the lens of transnational gender studies and postcolonial feminism. The study investigates how migration creates unequal and gendered subjectivities, drawing on the theoretical interventions of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Avtar Brah, Inderpal Grewal, and Caren Kaplan. In contrast to Nadia’s quest for independence and self-determination, Saeed’s retreat into religio-cultural nostalgia reveals a crisis of masculinity in *Exit West*, which uses magical realism to conceptualize refugee mobility and borderlessness. By following Nazneen’s steady negotiation of agency within the confines of patriarchy, community surveillance, and economic dependency, *Brick Lane*, on the other hand, offers a realist portrayal of diasporic domesticity. The study contends that migration reconfigures gendered power relations, resulting in broken masculinities and contingent female agency, rather than dismantling or reproducing patriarchy in uniform ways. This study highlights gender as a crucial element for comprehending diaspora, transnational identity, and the politics of belonging in modern migration literature by contrasting Hamid’s metaphorical refugee tale with Ali’s realistic depiction of immigrant life.

**KEYWORDS:**

Postcolonial feminism, diaspora, transnationalism, gendered subjectivity, patriarchy, migration narratives, subaltern women.



## Introduction

Global migration is one of the defining features of the modern world alongside the changing literary imaginations in political and demographic environments. Migration narratives are progressively delving into the affective, relational, and ideological ramifications of displacement rather than just chronicling actual travel. Gender, which regulates how movement is experienced, portrayed, and challenged, is at the centre of these investigations.

Feminist academics advise against viewing migration as a process that is intrinsically liberating. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), rather than universal paths of freedom, women's experiences of globalization and migration are shaped by historically ingrained power relations. Therefore, migration must be viewed as a gendered phenomenon that frequently exacerbates rather than lessens patriarchal domination.

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2004) and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) represent two different but complementary approaches to migration tales. Through inexplicable doorways that allow for immediate cross-national travel, Hamid's magically realistic story abstracts borders. Based on social realism, Ali's *Brick Lane* provides a close-up view of Bangladeshi immigrant life in London. Both texts accentuate gender as a crucial location where identity, power, and displacement converge, despite formal and tonal variations.

This paper makes the case that migration both challenges and permits the reconstruction of established gender norms in unique ways. While female characters negotiate evolving forms of agency despite being bound by household and cultural expectations, male characters often experience displacement as a loss of authority and coherence. This study shows how gendered subjectivities are changed in travel, exposing the inconsistent politics of diaspora and belonging through a comparative reading of *Exit West* and *Brick Lane*.

## Review of Literature

In order to examine the intersections of gender, mobility, and power, critical engagement with migration literature has increasingly relied on postcolonial and feminist theories. Early postcolonial theories placed a strong emphasis on cultural negotiation and hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). However, feminist scholars have since drawn attention to the limitations of these models when they are divorced from gendered and material reality. The base of postcolonial feminist analysis is still Mohanty's (2003) critique of Western feminist universalism. She argues that the particular social, economic, and cultural circumstances influencing the lives of migrant women are frequently obscured by representing them as a uniform and downtrodden group. Readings of *Brick Lane*, which resists easy victim narratives, are especially pertinent to this intervention.

Issues of speech and agency are problematized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) definition of the subaltern. The subaltern woman is frequently left out of dominant discursive frameworks because she is situated at the nexus of colonial and patriarchal power. While literary tales often examine fractured and incremental modes of resistance that complicate absolute silencing, Spivak expresses caution about recovering subaltern speech.

According to transnational feminist theorists like Grewal and Kaplan (1994), globalization facilitates movement but it also creates new regimes of control. The idea of "diaspora space," as proposed by Avtar Brah in 1996, sheds more light on how interactions between migrants and host societies relate to the production of identities. These viewpoints offer a vital foundation for examining the gendered negotiations portrayed in *Brick Lane* and *Exit West*. While Hamid's depiction of borderlessness and Ali's depiction of immigrant domesticity have been studied in the literature, there are still few comparative studies that highlight gendered subjectivity in both writings. This research fills that gap by placing both works under a common feminist-transnational framework.

## **Methodology**

In order to investigate how migration alters gendered identities, this study combines transnational gender studies with postcolonial feminist theory. Postcolonial feminism challenges universalist presumptions in mainstream feminist discourse by emphasizing the historical and cultural diversity of women's experiences (Mohanty, 2003).

Readings of migrant women's resistance are complicated by Spivak's (1988) examination of representation and agency. This article focuses on nuanced negotiations within domestic, emotional, and diasporic settings rather than locating empowerment just in overt disobedience. Furthermore, transnational feminist theory highlights that migration frequently reconfigures patriarchal systems across borders rather than dismantling them (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994). Migration can be understood as a place of continuous negotiation, where gendered identities are constantly produced and challenged, thanks to Brah's (1996) concept of diaspora space.

## **Gendered Mobility and Masculine Anxiety in Exit West**

Exit West places migration in a context of political violence and unpredictability, emphasizing emotional reactions to relocation over practical considerations. Geographical distance is eliminated by the novel's magical doors, but the emotional effects of migration are still very unequal and gendered.

Saeed's increased dependence on religious practice and cultural memory is indicative of his reaction to exile. He uses prayer to heal his broken sense of self after his father passes away. "Saeed prayed for Nadia as well, because she did not pray and because he worried about her," according to Hamid (Hamid, 2017, p. 56). This worry highlights a patriarchal desire to control women's independence, which is exacerbated by the uncertainty of exile. Saeed's masculinity becomes more closely associated with nostalgia and community loyalty as he moves through different diasporic locations. His feeling of authority is undermined by migration, and

as a way to make up for the loss, he withdraws within tradition. His perspective is consistent with Grewal and Kaplan's (1994) finding that, rather than empowering men, international movement frequently causes anxiety.

Nadia, on the other hand, rejects patriarchal enclosure right away. Although many people misunderstand her choice to wear a black robe, Hamid explains that "the robe was not a statement of belief but of intent" (2017, p. 23). The clothing serves as a tactical barrier that permits movement while thwarting surveillance. Nadia embraces relational fluidity and self-fashioning as her migration continues, refusing to tie her identity to rigid cultural conventions. *Exit West*, however, does not present Nadia's trip as a straightforward freedom. Her autonomy highlights the paradox of global freedom as it arises via ongoing negotiation within unstable refugee environments.

### **Domesticity, Surveillance and Female Agency in Brick Lane**

Brick Lane provides a thorough description of immigrant home life, in contrast to Hamid's metaphorical story. Due to her marriage, Nazneen is confined to a home where patriarchal power rules. She internalizes the idea that "what could not be changed must be borne" early in the book (Ali, 2004, p. 15), which reflects a profound acceptance of fate. Chanu's persona represents the frustrated aspirations of diasporic masculinity. He uses home authority to make up for the humiliations of racialized exclusion, which are exposed by his obsession with education and recognition. According to Chanu, migration makes patriarchal assertion worse rather than better. However, Nazneen's subjectivity develops via small actions of self-assertion.

A reorganization of power in the home is made possible by economic engagement through sewing. When Nazneen muses, "For the first time, she thought of her life as something that belonged to her," Ali encapsulates this change (2004, p. 320). This moment represents a reorientation of selfhood rather than a fundamental

rupture. Nazneen's decisions are nonetheless influenced by cultural norms and community scrutiny, highlighting the limitations of diasporic agency. However, she defies patriarchal fate by choosing to stay in London on her own, which is consistent with Brah's (1996) idea of diaspora as a negotiated place.

### **Comparative Perspectives on Gender and Migration**

When *Exit West* and *Brick Lane* are compared, it becomes clear how migration has similar but different gendered implications. Male characters in both books perceive displacement as an undermining of power. Chanu's intellectual posturing and Saeed's religious and cultural retreat are examples of attempts to restore male coherence in alienating settings.

In contrast, migration is an area of limited bargaining for female protagonists. Instead of escaping patriarchal control, Nadia and Nazneen navigate it while developing contingent kinds of autonomy. Their experiences support the postcolonial feminist emphasis on contextualized agency as opposed to universal liberation.

The variety of migration experiences is further highlighted by the contrast between Ali's material realism and Hamid's symbolic refugeehood. *Brick Lane* supports gendered subjectivity in work, language, and community, whereas *Exit West* emphasizes affective and relational transformation.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has looked at how gendered subjectivities are reconfigured within migration narratives in *Exit West* and *Brick Lane*. It contends that migration both disrupts and perpetuates patriarchal systems, drawing on postcolonial feminist and transnational theories. While female protagonists negotiate new but limited forms of agency, male characters frequently see relocation as a crisis of authority.

This study highlights the significance of contextual approaches

to diaspora and belonging and adds to feminist readings of migration literature by emphasizing gender as a key analytical category. In the end, these books show migration as a complicated and contentious process that constantly renegotiates identities.

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