

Pan-Asianism, Theory and Culture: A Nexus in Exit West by Mohsin Hamid

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Received: 29 Jun 2026; Received in revised form: 27 Jul 2026; Accepted: 02 Aug 2026; Available online: 05 Aug 2026

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Abstract— *Pan-Asianism, civilization and the actuality of globalization is ideated in Hamid's Exit West in a postcolonial actuality. The paper explores this idea through an analysis of the novel in the light of nationalism, violence, civilization and its adjunct idea of identity in a globalized world fractured by late-stage migration. The examination of these ideas takes place through Asian and Western civilizations as two different and opposing thought processes/philosophies in context with the novel that ultimately shape an ideological stance of the socio-political implications in neo-coloniality.*

Keywords— *Pan-Asianism, postcoloniality, cultural theory, multiculturalism, violence, peace*



I. INTRODUCTION

“ASIA is one. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilisations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas. But not even the snowy barriers can interrupt for one moment that broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal, which is the common thought-inheritance of every Asiatic race,” (Okakura 1) Pan-Asianist ideas have arisen mainly from political discourse with its roots being grounded in oppression politics. But perhaps the major prerogative of founding a common identity in the Asian context is that of spirituality and universalism. No discussion on Pan-Asianism can be undertaken without these atavistic words of recall by Okakura Tenshin that exemplify the essential nature of this philosophy. We have to look at Asian and Western civilisations as two different and opposing thought processes as that is what has been conceived by most scholars that have spoken on the matter. The idea of civilisation exists not only in the physical realm but as a reality that is lived in the minds of the people in the form of naturalised opposition springing from a need for carving self-identity unafflicted and unaffiliated from the “other”. However, there is also a major adjustment to this idea.

II. NATIONALISM AND CIVILISATION

Civilisation is remade in reference to itself in the modern context where, “the opposite of the West in Asian civilisations: ‘peaceful’ as opposed to ‘warlike,’ ‘spiritual’ as opposed to ‘material,’ ‘ethical’ as opposed to ‘decadent’” (Duara 108) are ways in which the Asian civilisation has tried to contest equivalence on the nature of living. “drawn to ideas of a common global civilization originating in the technological achievements of the West, but spiritually regenerated by the major world civilisations.” (Duara 104) Thus, the amalgamation of the eastern and western civilisational qualities can enable a reestablishment of the global code. The two opposite sides of the coin that live in perfect harmony so as to enable a more versatile and historically ingenious reflection of true globalisation. Or is it?

Tagore warned the world of an era where nationalism and globalisation need to be naturalised in a way that they don’t affect the idea of unity that has been perpetuated by the great saints of the country like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya etc, who established this with the idea of preaching one god to the diverse races in India (23). This again ties in with the aforementioned idea of universalism by Tenshin. The diverse nature of Asia has immense

cultural and traditional differences with pockets of commonality in Buddhism and Confucianism. However, one can argue that the idea of worship/spirituality is not only abundantly present but also serves as a symbol of Asia itself. This is explored by Tagore when he says that, “In these national carnivals of materialism are not the Western peoples spending most of their vital energy in merely producing things and neglecting the creation of ideals?” (32) The West serves as a competitive symbol of Asia in its materialism and ignorance of ethical discourse. This can be typified in simpler terms as the dichotomy of good and evil, religious and anti-religious, but such a gross simplification only aids in an ontological discussion and not lived realities in the current scenario of people that are a mixture of both.

III. EXIT WEST

Exit West serves as a perfect example of the ideas I intend to explore in this paper. In light of multiculturalism and global cultural flows, the fluidity of morality and perception of ideals as realities is in a flux. Hamid deals with precisely this problem in a rather allegorical tone if not a full fledged rendition through his magical realism and the idea of the doors. “When we live in a democracy, we assume that we’re living according to certain principles - equality, freedom, justice - and yet we’re constantly learning what freedom is.” (Big Think, 2023, 11:50) Hamid turns the tables on the global south’s idea of freedom by unrestricting borders and addressing the status quo, but the exploration that ideates freedom in the form of movement as a non-oppression. His attempt at forcing a chaotic world is actually as primal and atavistic as Okakura’s comparison of the East and the West. The love story at the heart of the novel in all its ‘despiteness,’ and normalcy is a depiction of the regular human’s condition. The precluded new generation of a world with no power to decide a future is given agency through company, and the magical doors serve as a political testimony of a migrant’s love affair with destiny. However, it stays that way, just as an affair. Saeed and Nadia never get married, they only provide each other love and intimacy, a sort of co-dependency that is withal unmarred from change, only silently metastasizing into separate lonelinesses, as symbols of the dichotomy of the East and the West, the shaken ideals of the contemporary world.

The element of anonymity by placing his characters in a setting that is a reflection of muslim society is an allegorical and politically subversive move. He intends on establishing an idea of universality by historiographically and culturally commuting the lines between fiction and reality, viz. meta-fiction or meta-reality. The bombs,

refugees and the romance as the centerpiece of the mantle are all indelicate indications of maybe not just Pakistani society but South East Asianism. Hamid introduces us to this in a macabre and somewhat of a post colonial re-narration, “The door to her closet was open... but the closet doorway was dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness— the heart of darkness. And out of this darkness, a man was emerging.” (Hamid 6). The man stumbling into a pale-skinned Australian woman’s home with strenuous effort through the door symbolises many things but the one we should focus on is that it is not just the one man but an entire people. “Minorities are part of that on-going process of ‘human artifice,’ as Arendt describes it, where ‘we are not born equal, but become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights.’” (Arendt qtd. in Bhabha xxiii).

Bhabha pontificates on the way minorities are able to assert their human rights through ‘human artifice’ but we can suspect that the same applies to the mass migrations in *Exit West* as the people from the third world boil unto the first as a modicum of reckoning from the “heart of darkness.” The rights are granted to the self by the person, and by extension to the people through the doors ability to transport them. “he was aware of the fragility of his body. He knew how little it took to make a man into meat: the wrong blow, the wrong gunshot, the wrong flick of a blade, turn of a car, presence of a microorganism in a handshake, a cough. He was aware that alone a person is almost nothing.” (Hamid 7) The “wrongness” of existence is wrought out by the doors as they provide a meaningful way in which the person alone can change his destiny, by which he would be changing the course for the rest of his people. The “wrongness” of circumstances is thrust upon him as a disbalance in the scale of the idea of violence as described by Galtung, “the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is.” (Galtung 168) If violence is thought of in these terms, the disbalance of lived realities perpetrates the clear demarcations between not just class but also temporal switches of destiny. Bhabha talks of going “beyond” the markings and location of culture in one particular point of time but tries to approach it dynamically, in a sense that with global confluence, everything everywhere happening all at once has implications that are farther reaching than just one point in time, one place at a time. Hamid’s idea of the doors does exactly this; the man is not just travelling, but transcending from his homeland of utmost danger to a safe haven flipping the destiny wherein the idea of violence is resisted, the beyond is flipped and temporality shifted.

“for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind.” (Hamid 94) Violence according to Galtung’s notions can rear its head in many ways. This idea in fiction has many connotations similar to the multiversal and butterfly effect respectively, however, that is not the meta-reality we need to delve in. The obvious post-colonial sentiment that arises when we consider Saeed’s father being left behind is obviously an indication to the greater violence that transcends the journey specific that a surface level reading may present. Hamid’s notion drives deeper, but how so? “When he prayed he touched his parents, who could not otherwise be touched... this loss unites humanity, unites every human being, the temporary nature of our being-ness, and our shared sorrow” (Hamid 201, 202) The civilisational context of humanity being tied by sorrow and death is in essence a signification of human memory as a catalyst. Memory as trauma, of the many violences that seep into the mind with time and are displayed as ‘what ifs’ in vicarious expressions. This vicariousness is how we can understand Galtung’s idea of violence and its non-somatic/mental implications in characters actions and narrations, and this is what ties it with the identity of disjuncture and omnipotence of violence. Violence once committed, is forever enacted.

IV. ASIANISM

“She understood more and more, and she understood also that the Nigerians were in fact not all Nigerians, some were half-Nigerians, or from places that bordered Nigeria, from families that spanned both sides of a border, and further that there was perhaps no such thing as a Nigerian, or certainly no one common thing,” (Hamid 144) Pan-Asianism as a concept is of course politically linked to Japanese imperialist and Indian anti-imperialist stances but if we talk of the philosophers and thinkers who engaged with the ideas of “Asianism,” we discover that the school of thought that it presents is similar to Voltaire’s liberty and Gandhian monotheist theology. One “Asianism” in particular is the question of universalism in the face of oppression. Although, “Asia is one,” and “a single ancient Asiatic peace,” (Okakura 4) is at the helm of its focus, universalism as a force of idealism is in direct contradiction with a Pan-Asiatic identity ironically linked only to Asia. To think of Asia as a nation would be to fail the unifying, humanist and atavistic philosophy of Pan-Asianism. Therefore, “... the spiritual impulse of a civilization tends to be universalizing, national boundaries are ultimately artificial and limiting.” (Duara 107) Migration in the novel is precisely the negatory mechanism through which the structure of nationalism itself collapses.

That is how political power is usurped or rather, re-usurped from the structure in the novel. Boundaries are fragmented and dismembered as refugees pour in from all corners of the world into the first world as a reclamation of pre-coloniality. However, among the chaos there is a startling unity that can be seen as Nadia navigates this primordial non-division by securing a place in the Nigerian council. The unity and universalism of kindness that people in distress exercise as a defense mechanism seems to be the motif that aligns parallelly with the Pan-Asiatic philosophy of universalism. It is not only that Asia is one, perhaps the entire world is one before the boundaries were broken and remade into a plethora of odious symbiotic division of individuation. And Pan-Asianism as a civilisation and not as a nation stands in the way of such divisive realities through the synthesis of theology as an antithetical ideological position to the Western front of, “hedonistic materialism.” (Duara 119)

V. CONCLUSION

Multiculturally speaking, Saeed and Nadia as the two nodes of representation of repression embody the philosophy of Pan-Asianistic spirituality and universalism in a context removed from theoretical discourse. Their lives are as real as it gets in a world that is disjunctured, especially in reference with the current scenario. “Hamid’s reply to a question on president trump’s order banning Muslim migrants in America shows that such bans will not work as migration is inevitable. It’s a global phenomenon and it only reflects a mind colored by hatred.” (Shakir 840) The inevitability of migration as a human activity is precisely what Bhabha refers to as political performativity. “a movement away from a world conceived in binary terms, away from a notion of the people’s aspirations sketched in simple black and white.” (Bhabha 21)

Although Bhabha dwells temporally on this concept; from a philosophical and ideological sense, we can assume that in reality, migration is also an act of transfiguration, an eclosion of the self. Saeed and Nadia in their many migrations turn into many selves and leave them behind. Perhaps the message here is that in migration and as representations of the modern refugee/global citizen Pan-Asianism is not just a centering locus of spirituality and permanence, it shifts from being an anchor to the large universalization of change itself. Universalism and acceptance that are the creed of Pan-Asianism undergoes a transition into many “transiencies” and becomes the overlying actuality of identity.

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