

The Other, Migration and Global Capital—A Review of Research on Mohsin Hamid's Novels

Wenhui Huang¹, Yuqing Wang^{2,*}

¹Hongzhi Experimental School, Shanwei City, Guangdong, China

²College of Foreign Languages, Minnan Normal University, Zhangzhou 363000, Fujian, China

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

In the present era of rapid globalization, research on transnational identities and critiques of capitalism has become focal concerns in Anglophone literary studies. Pakistani-born British writer Mohsin Hamid is especially representative due to his distinctive artistic techniques and focus on globalization themes. This paper focuses on three main topics—“the Other and identity” “migration and refugee writing” and “critique of global capital” to review the literature. By tracing the main research threads and representative viewpoints at home and abroad, one can observe that overseas scholarship has progressed from postcolonial cultural representations toward theories of biopolitics and capital critique, while domestic research shows a new trend of expanding from criticism of Orientalism to interdisciplinary integration. Overall, current research still has shortcomings in terms of textual coverage, analysis of textual language, and comparative studies. Future research could further explore dimensions such as the narrative language of the novels, cross-linguistic comparisons, and digital humanities methods to deepen understanding and interpretation of Hamid's works.

Keywords

Mohsin Hamid; the Other; refugee; global capital.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, population movement and cultural collisions are increasingly frequent, and the influence of “the Other” identity, transnational migration, and capitalist logic on individual fate has become increasingly prominent, emerging as core real-world issues in contemporary literature. Pakistani-born British writer Mohsin Hamid, with his transnational life experience and a perspective spanning East and West, was named one of the “Top 100 Global Thinkers”. To date, he has published five English-language novels: *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), *Exit West* (2017), and *The Last White Man* (2022). Hamid's novels have been shortlisted for international literary awards such as the Booker Prize several times and have been translated into more than 40 languages. His works closely address social issues in a globalization context, drawing widespread attention in international literary circles and academia. To date, scholars at home and abroad have explored Hamid's novels from multiple angles. Overseas research focuses on postcolonial narratives in his works, new explorations of migrant writing, and metaphorical critiques of the global capitalist system, among other topics. Domestic research started relatively late and the number of related studies is not large; however, since the publication of the Chinese translation and film adaptation of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the publication of the refugee-themed novel *Exit West*, academic interest has noticeably increased, and research has gradually focused on issues such as identity and narrative strategies. Currently, academic research on Hamid's novels roughly covers three main areas: “the Other and identity”,

“migration and refugee writing”, and “the critique of global capitalism”. This paper intends to review the domestic and foreign research findings in these three areas, and on the basis of summarizing existing research, to look forward to future research directions.

2. The Other and Identity Studies

The perspective of “the Other” and identity is an important thread in Hamid’s works. Through examining issues of “the Other” and identity, Hamid conveys to the world an aspiration for accepting “the Other” and coexisting peacefully with “the Other”. For example, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the Pakistani protagonist Changez experiences cultural conflicts and an identity crisis in the United States, embodying the typical binary opposition and its deconstruction between “self” and “the Other” in a postcolonial context. Domestic scholars often use postcolonial theory to explore how the novel subverts the stereotypical East-West dichotomy and reconstructs subject identity. For instance, Xie Lijun analyzed Changez’s process of seeking roots and identity, pointing out that his journey of identity is actually a process of “the Other” searching for a position of subjectivity [1]. Zeng Guie and Jiang Chunyuan noted that Hamid writes about the West from an Eastern perspective, demonstrating a distinct consciousness of intercultural communication and a subjective stance of voicing for “the Other” [2]. Xue Jiao offers an in-depth analysis of the protagonist Changez’s dialogue in the teahouse from a postcolonial perspective, revealing Changez’s identity crisis as “the Other” and the conflict of Eastern and Western cultures [3]. Wu Yeyun applied Homi Bhabha’s hybridity theory to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, arguing that the protagonist’s identity is hybrid and his existence oscillates within a “third space” between East and West [4]. Zhao Yonghe, based on Edward Said’s theory of “the Other” in postcolonialism, analyzed Changez’s process of pursuing, crisis, and reconstruction of identity in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In Hamid’s first novel *Moth Smoke*, the theme of identity and “the Other” is also present [5]. Gu Weiya and Sheng Xuemei, approaching from a feminist perspective, discuss the portrayal of female characters in *Moth Smoke*, arguing that the work critiques the patriarchal society’s othering and marginalization of women [6]. Most domestic studies commonly use a postcolonial framework to interpret character identities, emphasizing the East-West binary framework, but there are fewer analyses of narrative language and symbolic rhetoric of the text; to some extent, it constrains a deeper appreciation of his narrative strategies and literary artistry.

In international studies, discussions of “the Other” in Mohsin Hamid’s works have developed into a relatively systematic academic discourse. Scholars have not only drawn on classical postcolonial theory, but have also incorporated approaches such as whiteness studies, critical race theory, psychoanalysis, and trauma narratives to explore how Hamid deconstructs racial and cultural binaries at the narrative level, thereby revealing the intellectual depth and critical force of his fiction within a global context. Munos, drawing on whiteness studies and psychoanalytic theory, examines the interracial dynamics in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. He points out that after the 9/11 attacks, the protagonist Changez, presented as a model Pakistani, falls into an identity crisis. The white ideals represented by his mentor Jim and his American lover Erica impose an invisible form of racial oppression on him, revealing the profound exclusion of “the Other” that lies beneath the surface of the contemporary New American Dream [7]. Malik et al. focus on the construction of hybrid identity in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, using Homi Bhabha’s hybridity theory to explain that the identities of the colonizer and the colonized are not completely opposed but are interactively produced in a “third space.” They analyze the complexity of Changez’s identity transformation after 9/11. Similarly [8]. Qadar et al. explicitly used the concept of “the Other” in the study of Hamid’s works, comparing the representation of “postcolonial othering” in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West* [9]. This aligns with the viewpoints of domestic scholars like Zeng Guie and others. Scholars have

also discussed identity from other dimensions. For example, Braz placed *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in a broader historical context, contrasting the 1973 Chilean coup and the 9/11 attacks to explore the novel's analogical portrayal of trauma across different times and spaces, highlighting the complexity of identity in a global perspective [10]. Ghosh focused on the protagonist's integration and alienation in American society, pointing out that Changez is constantly torn between assimilating into America and returning to his homeland, reflecting the tension in immigrant identity [11]. Notably, Hamid himself has also discussed issues of identity and the Other in interviews and essays. For instance, Hamid, in an interview, revealed his thoughts on identity crisis and cultural barriers when writing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. These first-hand materials provide valuable perspectives for scholars to understand his work [12].

In comparison, foreign scholars' research is theoretically richer, but most of it revolves around the post-9/11 American context, with relatively less discussion of topics such as religious diversity and class stratification from local perspectives. In summary, research on "the Other" and identity enriches our understanding of Hamid's novels. Whether it is domestic scholars emphasizing postcolonial identity dilemmas and discourse power, or foreign research focusing on racial anxiety and hybrid identities, they all indicate that Hamid, through his novels, has powerfully given voice to Eastern subjects. These studies provide typical cases and theoretical references for readers to understand the multiple facets of personal identity in the postcolonial era.

3. Migration and Refugee Writing Studies

As a core theme in Hamid's recent works, migration and refugee narratives are concentrated in *Exit West*, which has attracted widespread attention and discussion in academic circles both domestically and internationally. *Exit West* tells the story of Saeed and Nadia, a couple from a Muslim country, who escape their homeland through a "magical door" and travel through various places. It is widely regarded as a literary response to the contemporary global refugee crisis. Domestic research first focuses on the transnational diasporic spaces and identity issues in the novel. Zhao Jianhong notes that the overlapping "diasporic spaces" in *Exit West* give the characters' identities a fluidity and hybridity, with the protagonists continuously reconstructing themselves through migration [13]. Zhu Ronghua, from the perspective of an ethico-community, analyzes how the novel transcends the nation-state framework and constructs a "post-national" ethical community to accommodate the identities of diasporic refugees [14]. Huang Chao and Lou Hongliang further point out that, by depicting the migration experiences of Saeed and Nadia, the novel profoundly presents the difficulties that refugees face in changing geographic, cultural, and spiritual spaces, thereby calling for greater understanding and support from society for the acceptance and integration of refugees [15]. At the same time, some scholars pay attention to narrative innovation in the novel. Wang Xue focuses on the transnational narrative characteristics of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West*, exploring their portrayal of the identity dilemmas of immigrants and refugees, and emphasizes the ideal of constructing a transnational community and humanistic concern [16]. In another study, Wang Xue specifically analyzes the magical "doorway" and elements of technological intervention in *Exit West*, arguing that this device provides a new narrative path for refugee migration and reflects the novel's exploration of contemporary refugee storytelling [17]. The current domestic research widely acknowledges Hamid's profound concern for refugee issues and innovation in literary forms, emphasizing his artistic approach of integrating grand themes into individual narratives while highlighting the humanitarian stance of his works. However, existing studies remain mostly confined to identity construction and ethical considerations, exhibiting limited theoretical depth. Particularly, there is a lack of interdisciplinary analysis

regarding key symbols like the “magic door”, future research could further explore spatial politics and techno-humanism theories to deepen the understanding of refugee narratives.

Foreign scholars have also given high praise and in-depth analysis to Hamid’s refugee narratives and migration themes. Carter, from a political-philosophy perspective, analyzes the mechanisms by which neoliberalism conceals the vulnerability of refugees. He points out that contemporary discourse often uses refugees’ “vulnerability” to justify exclusionary policies, whereas Hamid in *Exit West* questions the neoliberal narratives about the refugee crisis, stripping away the discursive veils that otherize and dehumanize refugees and telling a new story of the refugee crisis [18]. Karki, using Agamben’s theory, points out that in *Exit West* sovereign states exclude refugees from the political community through “states of exception,” leaving them trapped by layers of border barriers. However, the novel also, by depicting the goodwill of some “Good Samaritans” toward refugees, shows that even in a highly tribalized world, people still do not abandon the pursuit of a “global village” [19]. Knudsen and Rahbek believe that *Exit West* conveys a hopeful worldview: in today’s context of intensifying globalization and population mobility, humanity should not be limited by borders or origins, but should establish connections through empathy, migration, and prayer, pursuing the ideal world of “coexistence” [20]. In Perfect, combining elements of magical realism, the author notes that *Exit West* uses the magical door imagery to depict refugees crossing borders, not only showing their humanity and hope, but also reflecting on how contemporary technology reshapes our understanding of migration and refugees [21]. In the era of globalization, people, like information, can move rapidly, but this also brings new dilemmas of identity and belonging. Aside from discussion of *Exit West*, scholars have also extended the migration theme to Hamid’s other works and a broader context. Farooq et al. compared the different expressions of the ideal of “world citizenship” in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West*, pointing out that the protagonist of the former experiences a shift from an internationalist elite to an anti-globalization stance, whereas the characters in the latter gradually move from local identification toward a more universal consciousness of global citizenship [22]. Lagji, from the perspective of the “new mobilities paradigm”, regards Hamid’s work as a postcolonial literary exploration of global mobility, noting that *Exit West*, through its “magic door”, mirrors new patterns of contemporary migration [23].

In addition, with regard to Hamid’s new work *The Last White Man* in 2022, some scholars have already begun discussion. Zahra et al. from a postcolonial feminist perspective, deconstruct the portrayal of Third World female images in *The Last White Man*, indicating that research on Hamid’s themes of migration and identity continues to expand in new directions [24]. Overall, both domestic and foreign research fully affirm Hamid’s literary contributions to global migration and refugee issues. On one hand, through personal stories he reveals the humanitarian concerns behind the vast refugee crisis; on the other hand, he boldly uses magical and metaphorical techniques to inject new meaning into refugee narratives. As some scholars have noted, the “doors” in Hamid’s works symbolize new possibilities for crossing borders, reflecting an idealistic belief in global interconnectedness and a human community. These studies provide important examples for understanding how contemporary literature reflects and engages with global migration issues.

4. Critique of Global Capitalism Studies

Another important theme in Hamid’s novels is the exploration of global capitalism and issues of modernity. His works often depict individual destinies and social landscapes against a backdrop of globalization, involving topics such as financial capital, consumerism, and inequality, all of which have been interpreted in various ways in scholarly research. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the protagonist Changez was a Wall Street financial elite; his pursuit

of the American Dream and subsequent disillusionment metaphorically reflect the temptations and pitfalls of global capital. Some domestic scholars have focused on this dimension of capitalist critique. Zhang Jiasheng concentrated on the symbolic significance of the novel's title and the protagonist's name, revealing how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the name "Changez" symbolize the tearing of identity under the global capitalist system. The protagonist experiences both passivity and resistance under the logic of global capital as he is alternately embraced and rejected by transnational capital [25]. Qu Tao and Wei Yiting analyzed the narrative aesthetics of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, pointing out that the novel, through its intricate structure and narrative strategies, reveals the corruption of human nature by profit-driven capitalist logic [26]. Wei Yiting, further interpreting *Moth Smoke* from a consumerism perspective, suggests that the novel's protagonist Daru sinks into desires for money and luxurious consumption while his spiritual world becomes increasingly desolate, symbolizing the loss of the emerging urban middle class under the tide of global capital [27]. These studies indicate that domestic scholars have already noticed Hamid's reflections on capitalist modernity in his works.

Foreign research delves even deeper into the relationship between Hamid's novels and the global capitalist system. Bağlama explicitly states that *Exit West* narrates the process of "incorporating refugees into global capitalism," pointing out that the novel reveals how the capitalist system assimilates and even utilizes refugees, placing them within the logic of the global market [28]. This viewpoint links Hamid's refugee narrative with a critique of capital and is of enlightening significance. Akers, using world-systems theory, systematically analyzes how Hamid's novels reflect the world-systems structure of core-semi-periphery-periphery, revealing the penetration and disintegration of the capitalist system. He suggests that Hamid not only depicts the disintegration of global hierarchical order, but also guides readers to reflect on their own positions and complicity in the global structure [29]. Finch focuses on the style and economic implications of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, noting that Hamid, by borrowing the self-help genre, ironically highlights the absurdity of the myth of personal wealth in a neoliberal context. The novel, through second-person narration and a fragmented life-guide format, reveals individuals' struggles to maintain self-identity under profit-driven capital and highlights literature's unique function in examining economic realities. It is worth noting that Hamid often blends grand narrative critique with microscopic personal experience [30]. Jay, in an early analysis of *Moth Smoke*, proposed that in a "post-postcolonial" context, Hamid employs historical allegory to examine Pakistan's social changes within a globalized backdrop [31]. Moore-Gilbert, in a study focusing on the fiction of contemporary writers of Muslim background, points out that Hamid, in his novels, examines modern technologies such as nuclear weapons from a critical perspective, revealing their potential to exacerbate power inequalities [32]. Poon suggests that Hamid cleverly combines the self-help genre with the traditional realist novel, on one hand satirizing the neoliberal emphasis on individual success, and on the other hand using metafictional techniques to reflect on the self itself [33]. This approach, further employing modern elements such as urbanization and commercial media, reveals the contingency and vulnerability of individual fate in the age of global capital.

Research on the critique of global capitalism in Hamid's works has also extended to other aspects. For example, Liaqat and Raza explore the relationship between humans and automobiles in *Moth Smoke*, arguing that the protagonist's obsession with luxury cars demonstrates the emergence of a cybernetic consumer subject from a non-Western perspective, reflecting material desire and identity construction in modern experience [34]. Knudsen and Rahbek's notion of "radical hope" can also be understood as a response to capitalist reality: in the face of the injustices brought by global capital, the novel still seeks opportunities for change and sparks of hope [35]. Mahmutović argues that in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, through the protagonist's ambiguous response to binary political positions, the novel presents a form of

cross-border multiple identity, revealing Hamid's profound reflection on the unequal relationship between the free flow of capital and the restricted migration of people [36].

In summary, research on global capitalism-related topics shows that Hamid's novels do not merely depict personal stories, but contain deep reflections on the contemporary global system. Whether it is the satire of neoliberal individualism, the critique of consumer culture, or the examination of the power structure of the world-system, scholars' research reveals the sharp social criticism inherent in Hamid's works. These studies have expanded the scope of postcolonial literary research by introducing economic and political perspectives into literary analysis, providing new theoretical resources and methodological insights for understanding how literature reflects and challenges the global capitalist order.

5. Conclusion

A review of the foregoing three thematic clusters shows that scholarship on Mohsin Hamid's fiction, both in China and abroad, has already attained considerable breadth and depth. Studies on "the Other" and identity illustrate how, in a postcolonial context, Hamid lends a voice to marginalized groups and challenges Western-centric narrative paradigms. Studies on migration and refugee writing present his work as a cultural response to the global refugee crisis, portraying the hardship of displaced people while envisioning the possibility of peaceful coexistence across borders. Analyses focusing on critiques of global capitalism further demonstrate Hamid's ability to situate individual destinies within the structures of globalized capital and to expose the maladies of modernization through fiction. Across the existing literature, scholars employ a wide range of theoretical perspectives, such as postcolonial theory, intercultural studies, feminist criticism, testifying to the richness and openness of Hamid's texts. It is worth noting, however, that Chinese scholarship remains relatively thin on his later works, such as *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *The Last White Man*. Domestic research also pays more attention to refugee themes than to Hamid's critiques of capital or his formal experimentation, a tendency likely linked to the late translation and limited circulation of these texts.

Looking ahead, Hamid's newest novels and short fiction offer fresh material: interpreting the racial metaphors in *The Last White Man* or *The Door and the Window*, and conducting close analyses of their narrative discourse, are promising directions. Incorporating digital-humanities tools, corpus-based methods, and cross-media approaches may further widen the horizons of textual interpretation and invigorate the field. Moreover, situating Hamid within the broader currents of South Asian migrant literature and world literature through cross-cultural and translingual comparisons will yield a more comprehensive understanding of his literary position and intellectual reach. In sum, scholarship on Mohsin Hamid has already produced substantial results. As an active contemporary writer, Hamid keeps pace with the pulse of globalization, combining intellectual depth with artistic innovation. His work furnishes fertile ground for literary criticism and offers a distinctive cultural perspective on twenty-first-century questions of identity, migration, and global capital.

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