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RESEARCH PAPER

Transnational Labour Vulnerability and Shared Precarity in the Neoliberal World Order: A Neo-Marxist Study of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to critically examine the global condition of working class under neoliberal capitalism as represented in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, contending that economic precarity and systemic vulnerability are transnational phenomena impacting workers across both the Global South and Global North. Neoliberalism—an advanced stage of capitalism— dismantles the welfare infrastructures, thereby intensifying labour insecurity and marginalisation. Engaging with contemporary neo-Marxist and leftist theorists such as David Harvey, Werlhof, and Rajesh Makwana, the study interrogates how neoliberal regimes facilitate upward wealth redistribution while undermining collective protections. Through close textual analysis, the novel is shown to destabilise the dominant narrative that migration to the West guarantees economic opportunity, exposing instead the transnational reach of neoliberal disposability. By situating *Exit West* within the framework of Anglophone Pakistani resistance literature, the research foregrounds the novel's critical intervention into global labour politics and its call for post-neoliberal solidarities transcending national and economic boundaries.

| **KEYWORDS** | Neoliberalism, Privatization, Lack of Social Protection, Retreat of the Welfare State, Shared Precarity, Migration, Marginalization, Obstruction, Economic Exclusion, Anti-immigrant Rhetoric and Insecurities |

Introduction

Neoliberalism produces a global condition of economic precarity in which the lived realities of workers in the Global South and Global North increasingly converge. In both regions, neoliberalism dismantles social protections, privileges corporate interests, and subjects labour to volatile market forces—ultimately rendering working-class life insecure and disposable (Werlhof, 2008). Migration, often viewed as a pathway to safety and prosperity, does not offer true escape from this condition; rather, it frequently reproduces the same systems of exploitation and neglect across borders. Within this context, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* emerges as a compelling critique of global capitalism and its transnational effects on displaced populations.

In the age of global capitalism, neoliberalism—often understood as the modern expression of capitalism or "late capitalism" (Sahlins, 2002, p. 59; Bell, 2016, p. 107)—has emerged as the dominant political-economic order, restructuring societies through market liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation, and the retreat of the welfare state. As Max Losche (2009) explains, neoliberalism promotes open markets, free trade, privatisation, and minimal government interference in private enterprise, with significant cuts in public spending on social welfare (p. 4).

While neoliberal rhetoric promises widespread prosperity, the system in practice protects the interests of dominant states and global elites at the expense of workers and marginalised populations across the world (Harvey, 2005). As Raggio (2016) succinctly notes, "through neoliberal policies the lives of the majority are made worse by the Minority" (p. 15). Rather than creating wealth for all, neoliberalism redistributes it upwards: "[neoliberal systems] redistribute, rather than to generate, wealth and income" (Harvey, 2005, p. 159). Walonen (2016) highlights this structural imbalance, observing that wealth shifts "from the periphery to the centre internationally and from the working and middle to the upper classes domestically" (p. 9). Thus, neoliberalism fuels inequality at both the international and national levels.

This economic paradigm has eroded worker protections globally, rendering labour more precarious regardless of geographic or developmental context. In both the Global North and South, neoliberalism advances privatisation, dismantles social security systems, and promotes deregulated labour markets that disempower workers. Harvey (2005) warns that the neoliberal turn leads to "lower wages, increasing job insecurity, and in many instances loss of benefits and of job protections" (p. 76), outcomes that are "readily discernible in all states that have taken the neoliberal road." This erosion of social support is not confined to less developed nations but is endemic across the capitalist world system. As Molé (2010) argues, "due to neoliberal policies of deregulation, casualization of labour market and the waning of social welfare state and safety nets, the life of workers has become uncertain, risky and precarious" (p. 38). Similarly, Makawana (2006) contends that in neoliberal regimes, living and working conditions deteriorate for most workers due to the lack of protections. The condition is further aggravated by the neoliberal tendency to offload responsibility onto individuals: as Solomon (2018) explains, failure to overcome structural hardship—including disability—is redefined as a personal failure to compete in the market, effectively stripping vulnerable people of political and social recognition (p. 63).

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* offers a powerful literary engagement with these global issues of neoliberal capitalism. Through its depiction of characters displaced by war and economic insecurity, the novel dismantles the illusion that migration to the West guarantees safety or opportunity. Instead, Hamid portrays a world where neoliberalism produces overlapping layers of displacement and precarity—both in countries like Pakistan and in so-called developed nations. As Werlhof (2008) notes, neoliberal privatisation strengthens corporate elites while eroding public services and social security (p. 97), leaving workers across the globe exposed to instability and exploitation. *Exit West* critiques this system by revealing that even after migrants escape conflict zones in the global South, they encounter the same structural neglect in Western societies. The novel, therefore, becomes not only a commentary on migration but also a critique of a global economic order that renders working-class life disposable—regardless of borders. By foregrounding the shared vulnerability of workers under neoliberalism, this research positions *Exit West* as a key text in Anglophone Pakistani fiction's resistance to global capitalist ideologies and the myth of post-migration security.

Exit West exposes the persistent nature of economic and social vulnerability under neoliberalism, demonstrating that migration does not guarantee escape. Even after crossing borders through magical doors, the protagonists remain entangled in systems of exploitation and insecurity, revealing that precarity transcends national boundaries.

Thus in the context of global neoliberalism's widespread impact on labour conditions, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* offers a critical exploration of how economic

precarity affects displaced populations both in the Global South and Global North, challenging dominant narratives about migration and opportunity.

Literature Review

While neoliberalism has been widely theorised in global academic discourse, its exploration within Pakistani Anglophone literary studies remains comparatively limited. Much of the existing research on Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* tends to focus on migration, refugeehood, and identity formation. However, the novel's pointed engagement with the systemic conditions of neoliberal capitalism—especially its role in producing shared precarity for the working class across both the Global North and South—has received insufficient critical attention. Despite the fact that neoliberalism operates as a transnational economic system that dismantles labour protections and welfare structures across borders, there is currently no major scholarly study that examines how *Exit West* critiques the global uniformity of working-class vulnerability under neoliberalism. This marks a crucial research gap in both literary criticism and postcolonial studies of the novel.

Some existing scholarship has offered valuable thematic insights into *Exit West*, though often through other conceptual lenses. For example, Pérez Zapata (2021) uses postcolonial and refugee studies to examine the novel's treatment of time, arguing that magical realism is employed to collapse spatial and temporal boundaries, universalising the refugee experience. Yalçin (2024) applies Arjun Appadurai's "scapes" framework to unpack how the novel reflects global flows and uneven power dynamics, focusing on the dual role of technology as both enabler and divider in migration. Similarly, Ehtesham and Rahman (2024) adopt a psychoanalytic approach to explore how trauma disrupts symbolic orders and opens up new forms of freedom through the metaphor of magical doors. These perspectives, while rich, do not centre the novel's structural critique of neoliberalism or its economic consequences for marginalised populations.

Among the few scholars who explicitly address neoliberalism, Carter (2020) argues that *Exit West* challenges the dehumanisation of refugees through its symbolic reimagining of borders, focusing on the ethical imperative to recognise vulnerability beyond national exclusions. While his analysis touches neoliberal practices regarding refuge crisis, it remains largely confined to moral discourse, without delving into how economic systems structure the lived precarity of displaced and working-class individuals. In contrast, this study engages more directly with the political economic issues of neoliberalism under the neo-Marxist critique.

Beyond *Exit West*, Hamid's other novels have also attracted neoliberal critique. Poon (2015), for instance, critiques the portrayal of the "neoliberal self" in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, examining how the protagonist navigates capitalist structures through moral compromise, ambition, and consumerism. Raggio (2016) employs Judith Butler's concept of precarity to situate *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* within a post-9/11 neoliberal order, showing how the protagonist's resistance emerges from structural inequality rather than personal grievance. Shazeb and Khan (2017) focus on neoliberal commodification in Pakistani Anglophone fiction, arguing that capitalist logic erodes both cultural institutions and collective identities. Shah and Sheeraz (2025) adopt a neo-Marxist lens to show how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* critiques global capitalism's capacity to exacerbate inequality, economic alienation, and exploitation in postcolonial societies.

Later contributions like Farooq et al. (2022) examine *Exit West* alongside *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* using Kenneth Burke's Pentad Dramatism, focusing on the transformation of characters through cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan worldviews.

While insightful in their focus on identity politics, their study remains rooted in ethical and symbolic readings rather than economic critique. It foregrounds how Hamid's characters adapt to political disillusionment and transnational shifts, yet it overlooks the economic uniformity of working-class struggle that underlies these transformations.

To conclude, while *Exit West* has been studied in relation to identity, displacement, and ethics, there remains a major gap in analysing how the novel reveals the shared precariousness of working-class life under neoliberal capitalism—regardless of geography. Moreover, recent leftist critiques of neoliberalism—such as those by David Harvey, Claudia von Werlhof, and Rajesh Makwana—have not yet been systematically applied to Hamid's work in this context. This research fills that void by offering a postcolonial, counter-neoliberal reading of *Exit West*, foregrounding the novel's challenge to the myth of economic opportunity and security through migration, and exposing the transnational mechanisms that sustain global worker disposability.

Material and Methods

The research draws upon recent leftist and neo-Marxist theoretical critiques of neoliberalism by scholars such as David Harvey, Claudia von Werlhof, Rajesh Makwana, and others to interpret and contextualize the novel's representation of global economic conditions. These critical frameworks provide the lens to understand neoliberalism's structural features—privatisation, deregulation, and the erosion of welfare—that produce precarity and inequality for working-class populations worldwide. Integrating literary analysis with socio-economic theory facilitates a nuanced critique of how *Exit West* engages with and resists global capitalist ideologies, making the novel a significant text in Anglophone Pakistani fiction that challenges prevailing narratives around migration and economic justice.

To interpret the novel under the theoretical framework, the research employs a close textual analysis to critically examine the *Exit West's* portrayal of neoliberalism and its impact on working-class precarity across global contexts. Close reading allows for an in-depth exploration of how the novel represents the socio-economic realities faced by displaced individuals, highlighting the intersection of migration, neoliberal economic policies, and labour vulnerability. By focusing on various characters, thematic concerns and situation in the novel, this method reveals how *Exit West* deconstructs the dominant myth of migration as a straightforward path to economic opportunity, instead exposing the continuity of systemic exploitation and insecurity in both the Global South and Global North

Results and Discussion

Exit West critiques contemporary anti-immigrant rhetoric such as "the West for the Westerners," while exposing the pervasive neoliberal conditions underlying migration and xenophobia. The novel reveals that neoliberal policies—marked by diminished social protections, job insecurity, and economic vulnerability—drive impoverished populations from the Global South to migrate towards the Global North, particularly Western countries. However, migrants often encounter identical or even worsened precarity in these destination countries, compounded by marginalization and stigmatization as economic threats. Faced with exclusion and hostility, migrants experience intensified neoliberal oppression, fostering resistance and contestation. This aligns with Werlhof's (2008) assertion that neoliberalism renders "the working conditions in the North akin to those in the South" (p. 97).

Employing a third-person narrative infused with magical realism, Hamid centres the story on Nadia and Saeed, residents of an unnamed war-torn city—implied through setting and cultural markers to be in Pakistan. The city suffers from poverty, social insecurity, and violent conflict exacerbated by terrorist sieges and drone strikes, likely reflecting U.S. military interventions. Economic devastation follows as local industries collapse and workers, including Saeed and Nadia, lose employment. Amidst this turmoil, the discovery of magical doors offering passage to Western nations symbolizes the allure of migration as escape.

Nadia and Saeed traverse these portals, journeying through Greece, the UK, and ultimately the United States, only to encounter familiar conditions of precarity. Nadia reflects on their displacement, as stated: "She wondered whether she and Saeed had done anything by moving, whether the faces and buildings had changed but the basic reality of their predicament had not" (Hamid, 2017, p. 69). This observation underscores the novel's critique of neoliberalism's global reach, illustrating how economic and social vulnerabilities persist across borders, negating the myth of migration as a guaranteed route to security or opportunity.

As the narrative progresses, the relationship between Nadia and Saeed deteriorates, reflecting their diverging responses to Western neoliberalism. While Nadia, despite facing racism and hardship, adapts and ultimately embodies neoliberal values, Saeed resists by maintaining a strong connection to his culture and homeland. His growing alienation in the West strengthens his cultural ties and distances him from Nadia. Near the novel's conclusion, Nadia's lesbian relationship with a woman described as having "extremely blue eyes" symbolizes her deeper immersion into Western neoliberalism, whereas Saeed's marriage to a preacher's daughter signifies his rejection of these values and reaffirmation of his roots.

The novel highlights the following themes of neoliberalism that work against the poor and working class at global level:

Poor Conditions of Third World Workers and Their Aspiration for Migration

Extensive scholarship reveals that under neoliberalism, working-class conditions have become increasingly precarious. Harvey (2005) observes that neoliberalism results in "lower wages, increasing job insecurity, and in many instances loss of benefits and of job protections" (p. 76). Molé (2010) concurs, highlighting deregulation, labour casualization, and the erosion of social safety nets as causes of growing worker vulnerability (p. 38). Similarly, Werlhof (2008) notes that neoliberal privatization enriches corporate elites while diminishing worker protections, leading to poorer, less reliable services and heightened inequality.

Hamid's *Exit West* is set in an unnamed, war-torn city of the Global South—likely Pakistan—representing the pervasive plight of workers in underdeveloped countries under neoliberalism. The novel foregrounds the precarious existence of workers, Nadia and Saeed, who endure insecurity amid violence and social collapse. Terrorist sieges and drone strikes devastate the city's economy and industry, exacerbating joblessness and instability. Both protagonists, employed in modest positions—Nadia at an insurance company, Saeed at an advertising agency (Hamid, 2017, p. 9)—are ultimately dispossessed as the conflict escalates.

The city's poor and working classes are doubly vulnerable, targeted by militants and security forces alike. When militants seize the stock exchange and take hostages,

government forces prioritize national security over workers' lives, resulting in numerous worker casualties: "…initial estimates put the number of dead workers at probably less than a hundred" (p. 23). The narrative underscores that government neglect and war deepen precarity rather than alleviate it.

Respectable professionals like Saeed's parents—both teachers—face social decline despite lifelong service. His father, once a university professor, is relegated to a visiting faculty role with diminished status and income after retirement (p. 10). Their cramped, deteriorating flat, with broken windows barricaded by bookshelves, symbolizes the erosion of social security previously afforded to civil servants (pp. 10, 35). This stark contrast to affluent industrialists, whose luxury SUVs command deference on the streets (pp. 23–24), reveals the widening gulf between elite and worker, consistent with Harvey's (2005) critique that neoliberalism funnels wealth upward at the expense of the poor (p. 188).

Saeed and Nadia's employment conditions also mirror neoliberal precarity. Saeed's private-sector job offers no security; when his firm shuts down amid unrest, he and colleagues are laid off without pay (p. 34). Nadia's insurance company—ironically tasked with providing protection—fails to safeguard its own employees, ceasing salaries and ultimately disappearing from the country during crisis (pp. 27, 34). This abandonment exemplifies neoliberalism's prioritization of profit over social welfare.

With lost income and jobs, Saeed and Nadia's living standards rapidly decline. Nadia moves in with Saeed, enduring harsh conditions—sleeping on carpets in a cold, poorly lit room (pp. 38–39). Basic necessities are scarce; Saeed cannot even replace a worn toothbrush (p. 39). They subsist on cheap meals and relocate to a neglected, electricity-starved neighborhood, described as smelling "like a wood fire" and evoking "caveman" conditions (p. 39). Such depictions highlight the entrenched precarity faced by workers in the neoliberal Global South.

Neoliberalism's retreat from welfare compels individuals to bear personal responsibility for survival. Harvey (2005) stresses that as states withdraw social provisions, increasing populations face exposure to impoverishment (p. 76). The unnamed city suffers severe shortages of electricity, gas, water, and sanitation (pp. 40–43). Refugees, possibly Afghan migrants, live in extreme destitution, occupying makeshift shelters and enduring harsher conditions than even the local poor (p. 17). Their plight underscores the intersection of neoliberal global capitalism with forced displacement, war, and migration.

Poverty and Crisis: A Comparative View of the First World and Third World

The novel delineates a stark contrast between the impoverished masses of the city—representative of the Third World—and the affluent societies of the Global North. While the latter enjoys an abundance of resources and indulgent consumption, the former is systematically deprived of basic necessities. The narrator observes:

> But even now the city's freewheeling virtual world stood in stark contrast to the day-to-day lives of most people, to those of young men, and especially of young women, and above all of children who went to sleep unfed but could see on some small screen people in foreign lands preparing and consuming and even conducting food fights with feasts of such opulence that the very fact of their existence boggled the mind. (Hamid, 2016, p. 23)

This juxtaposition highlights extreme economic disparities at both the national and global levels. Domestically, the working classes are deprived of fundamental material needs, in

stark contrast to the business elites who luxuriate in excess. Globally, the wealth and resource consumption of the North stands in sharp opposition to the deprivation experienced by populations in the Global South, as epitomized by the unnamed city in the narrative. The novel thus critiques the perpetuation of inequality and uneven development characteristic of contemporary neoliberalism.

Moving for Prosperity: The Protagonist and His Girlfriend's Journey to the Neoliberal West

The novel illustrates how the precarious conditions of workers in impoverished Third World countries, marked by lack of job security and social protection, foster aspirations to migrate to developed Northern countries in pursuit of career advancement. Saeed's father acknowledges the futility and unprofitability of remaining in the underdeveloped context and thus expresses the desire to send his son abroad "to pursue wealth at all cost" (Hamid, 2012, p. 26).

In response to precarious socioeconomic circumstances, the unemployed increasingly seek emigration as a means of escape, particularly targeting prosperous European countries. At Saeed's office, the closure of the workplace and consequent loss of salaries motivate workers to plan migration abroad; a similar sentiment prevails at the insurance company where Nadia is employed (p. 27).

Due to stringent visa restrictions imposed by developed countries, formal migration avenues remain inaccessible for many poor workers. Consequently, clandestine routes become the preferred option. Saeed and Nadia learn of "black magical doors" that purportedly transport individuals to distant, safer places: "Rumours had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country" (p. 35). These black doors serve as metaphors for illicit migration pathways facilitated by human smugglers, enabling entry into affluent nations.

Driven by the desire to escape their war-torn city's impoverishment, Saeed and Nadia focus exclusively on securing passage through these magical doors. Given the perils and difficulty associated with overland travel, described as "too perilous" (p. 41), they seek an agent "operating in secret" who controls access to the doors. The agent demands a substantial sum as a down payment, which Saeed provides despite uncertainty about its legitimacy: he contemplates whether it is "a down payment" or a potential robbery (pp. 41–42). Ultimately, Saeed's payment secures their passage through the door, which transports them to Mykonos, a Greek island.

Migration to the West

Following their arrival in Greece, and subsequently in England and the United States, Saeed and Nadia encounter conditions that are as dire, if not worse, than those they experienced in their home country. *Exit West* problematizes the assumption that migration from impoverished regions to wealthy nations guarantees improvement, demonstrating instead that such journeys frequently exacerbate vulnerabilities.

Upon entering the black door that promises escape to the West, Saeed and Nadia confront its ominous nature, which sharply contrasts with their hopeful anticipation of a brighter future. Migration under neoliberal conditions is depicted as fraught with fear, hardship, and disillusionment. The door—symbolizing the illicit migration of the marginalized from the Global South to the Global North—is described thus:

…. drawing close she [Nadia] was struck by its darkness, its opacity, the way that it did not reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end, and she turned to Saeed and found him staring at her, his face was full of worry and sorrow…. (p. 47)

Saeed and Nadia arrive in Mykonos Island, Greece, where they face adverse conditions. They reside near a cold beach in tents alongside other refugees predominantly from the Global South, living without basic necessities (Hamid, 2017, p. 48). The island, frequented by tourists in summer, becomes inhospitable in winter, exacerbating their hardship (p. 48). In the absence of collective support, they must secure food, water, and shelter themselves. Saeed's frustration surfaces when he rebuffs Nadia's attempt at intimacy: "he turned his face away angrily" (p. 49). Their shelter is insufficient, relying on a single blanket that offers minimal protection from the cold and uneven ground (p. 50).

Resources are scarce; Saeed borrows a beard trimmer (p. 51), and both restrict movement to conserve energy amid food shortages (p. 52). Their attempt to fish fails (p. 52). Refugees are confined to the camp, barred from the affluent old town, illustrating spatial segregation and exclusion (p. 52). The contrast between the "exquisite" old town and the migrants' dilapidated encampments highlights economic disparities and selective inclusion in Mykonos (p. 53).

The island functions as a liminal space where access to richer Western countries is heavily guarded, while returns to poorer regions remain largely unmonitored: "[t]he doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured" (pp. 48-49). As resources deplete, Saeed and Nadia fear forced repatriation (p. 52).

Nadia employs her sexual capital, entering a lesbian relationship with a local medical volunteer from the prosperous district who promises assistance: "the girl said she might be able to do something" (p. 53). This connection enables their passage to England, illustrating neoliberal survival strategies within restrictive migration regimes (p. 53).

Arrival in the UK: British Neoliberalism and its Anti-Migrant Movement

Upon arriving in London, Nadia and Saeed are thrust into a radically different socioeconomic context that reflects the stark inequalities between the Global South and the Global North. Their residence in an abandoned yet lavish mansion underscores the contradictions of neoliberal accumulation: "… furnishings so expensive and well made that Saeed and Nadia thought they were in a hotel… with pale woods and cream rugs and white walls and the gleam of metal here and there… for they had no experience of acoustically insulating glazing" (Hamid, 2017, p. 55). The luxury of the disused home starkly contrasts the crumbling infrastructure and poverty of their homeland, reinforcing the spatial inequalities that Harvey identifies as endemic to neoliberalism: "the vast wealth differentials of neoliberalism tend by nature to produce greater rather than lesser degrees of spatial differentiation" (cited in Walonen, 2016, p. 126).

This disparity is further emphasised through sensory contrast. Nadia's experience of a hot shower, scented soap, and plush towels—"a kind of heaven" (p. 56)—is juxtaposed with the discomfort of her former life in her homeland, where water scarcity was routine. These domestic luxuries symbolise the uneven global development and hoarding of resources in Western metropolises.

Yet the migrants' occupation of this opulent yet vacant space becomes a site of political tension. As Lazarczyk (2017) observes, the 2008 financial crisis and wealth concentration in the few hands provoked populist scapegoating of migrants in Britain, particularly Muslims and Eastern Europeans. Rather than interrogate neoliberalism's structural failures, right-wing discourse attributes economic insecurity to migrant influx, fuelling xenophobia and Islamophobia. *Exit West* reflects this fact as the UK government, media, and public depict migrants like Saeed and Nadia as a burden on national resources. Though occupying uninhabited buildings, migrants are vilified as threats to private property. The local press brands their presence as "the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation" (p. 58). The novel critiques this paradox where abundance exists alongside exclusion: despite vacant housing and the state's capacity to support them, migrants are criminalised and forcibly evicted. The house they inhabit—"home perhaps to fifty squatter" (p. 50)—becomes a symbol of contested space under neoliberalism.

When property owners alert the police, tensions escalate. While some migrants comply, others resist, provoking violent crackdowns. The novel allegorises neoliberal England as a territory that prioritises property rights over humanitarian need: "they savoured being indoors... but they knew deep down... a palace like this, would not be surrendered so easily, and their relief was therefore fragile" (p. 58). Despite lacking food and basic necessities—"most had to spend their time foraging" (p. 59)—migrants are met not with aid but hostility.

This hostility culminates in mob violence. Saeed and Nadia are attacked by a nativist group: "they heard shouting up ahead... their street was under attack by a nativist mob" (p. 59). Nadia's veiled appearance leads the mob to perceive her as a terrorist: "The mob looked to Nadia like a strange and violent tribe... some armed with iron bars or knives" (p. 59). These scenes resonate with Lazarczyk's (2017) analysis of neoliberal regimes stoking anti-Muslim racism to deflect economic critique.

The novel draws a disturbing parallel between the nativists of London and the militants in Nadia's homeland, possibly Pakistan, situated in the Global South. Nadia recognises the same "fury" and "wholesale slaughter" mentality in both (p. 69), prompting her to question whether they have truly escaped violence or simply encountered a new iteration of it. The West, which claims moral superiority, mirrors the authoritarian violence of the Global South under neoliberalism.

The government's response—militarised raids and aerial bombings that kill over two hundred migrants, including children (p. 70)—reveals the brutal mechanisms through which neoliberal states enforce borders. Rather than redistribute resources or offer sanctuary, the British state protects property and capital by violently expelling the marginalised.

In contrast to the West's hostile reception, the novel notes that countries in the Global South, despite poverty, did not expel refugees: "Millions arrived in our country," Saeed remarks. "When there were wars nearby." Nadia counters, "That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose" (p. 70). This exchange underscores the West's possessive nationalism, where economic interest supersedes ethical responsibility.

Ultimately, *Exit West* condemns the violent logic of neoliberalism that, in the name of protecting property and capital, marginalises and brutalises the very populations it has displaced. The migrants' fate in London exemplifies the system of global apartheid that neoliberal capitalism sustains.

The Glaring Disparity between the Haves and Have-Nots

Hamid's *Exit West* portrays a stark division within London, symbolised through the spatial and socio-economic segregation of its inhabitants into two classes: the "natives" and the "migrants." This division reflects the broader neoliberal mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. The natives inhabit "bright London," characterised by stability, privilege, and infrastructural abundance, while the migrants are confined to "dark London," a deprived and marginalised space where basic necessities such as electricity and water are routinely withheld.

The metaphor of light and darkness functions as a powerful visual representation of inequality. Migrants are cast into literal and figurative darkness, as the government cuts off electricity to neighbourhoods like Kensington and Chelsea, where many migrants reside: "descended into darkness" (Hamid, 2017, p. 62). In contrast, bright London glows with excessive luxury: "In their own fled city, when the electricity had gone, it had gone for all. But in London there were parts as bright as ever […] and in contrast the city's dark swaths seemed darker, more significant…" (p. 64). This passage highlights the uneven distribution of resources that neoliberal urbanism imposes. While in their native country electricity cuts affected both rich and poor alike, in London the neoliberal divide ensures that only the excluded—the migrants—are subject to scarcity.

The socio-spatial differentiation is further illustrated through the migrants' lack of access to clean surroundings, transportation, and security. Their perception of bright London includes images of freedom, elegance, and affluence—"shiny black cabs," "elegant restaurants"—while their reality in dark London is one of "rubbish accrued, uncollected," with "underground stations […] sealed" (p. 64). Here, Hamid critiques the neoliberal city as a site of extreme inequality, where the urban poor are criminalised and contained within zones of decay and precarity.

This segregation extends to basic rights and safety. The migrants are subjected to surveillance, violence, and neglect. The text details a context where "murders, rapes, and assault" become commonplace in dark London (p. 64), while the British state deploys "powerful forces" and advanced technology to dominate the defenceless migrants (p. 67). During conflicts, the nativists even weaponise hunger, banning food and water supplies to dark London: "a handful of almonds each one day, and a tin of herring to share.... rainwater clattered in the pots" (pp. 70–71).

This stark contrast encapsulates the neoliberal regime's abandonment of social welfare and its relegation of survival responsibilities onto the individual, disproportionately harming displaced workers from the Global South.

Individual Responsibility and Competition

After the violent raids by British authorities and the deaths of over two hundred migrants, a temporary détente is reached. However, the post-conflict settlement is not a gesture of humanitarian concern but rather a calculated imposition of neoliberal logic—placing the burden of survival and integration solely on the migrants themselves. Under this agreement, the migrants are relocated to a "worker camp," tasked with constructing a new city for themselves. Their labour is exchanged for a minimal promise of security: "In exchange for their labour […] migrants were promised forty meters and a pipe […] a connection to all the utilities of modernity" (p. 73). This phrase—"forty meters and a pipe"—is a direct allusion to the broken post-slavery promise of "forty acres and a mule" in the United States. As *LitCharts* notes, this historical reference undercuts the supposed

benevolence of the British government and reveals the continuity of exploitative structures disguised as opportunity.

The camp system enforces a regime of meritocracy, where access to housing is determined by one's productivity and participation in a competitive labour market. Saeed and Nadia, like many others, are drawn into "ceaseless competition" to maintain their place on a housing waitlist. Despite taking on additional shifts—"Saeed's additional efforts served to maintain his and Nadia's ranking on the list" (p. 74)—there is no real mobility, only stagnation and exploitation.

Nadia, working in a mostly female pipe-laying crew, endures similar conditions: "colossal spools and pallets of it in different colours" (p. 77). This system places gendered and racialised migrant bodies at the centre of urban reconstruction while denying them rights, safety, and privacy. Saeed and Nadia reside in a curtained-off cubicle: "The two of them occupied a small curtained-off space in one of these dormitories […]" (p. 73), and live on modest meals—"grains and vegetables and some dairy"—as they endure "lengthy and rigorous" labour (p. 73).This environment erodes their personal relationship. Their physical and emotional connection fades under the burden of work and survival. Nadia, though still attracted to Saeed's appearance, no longer feels the same desire for him (p. 79), while Saeed's conversations become mechanical, focused solely on logistics and labour: "When he spoke he spoke of paving and positions on waiting lists and politics" (p. 79).

Thus, the novel suggests that neoliberal systems not only marginalise migrants economically but also corrode their affective and emotional lives. Their intimacy and solidarity are casualties of the relentless competition imposed by neoliberal structures. Eventually, disillusioned by the impossible promise of housing and opportunity, Saeed and Nadia abandon London: "[Saeed] did not argue, or even resist […] and both of them were filled with hope, hope that they would be able to rekindle their relationship" (p. 80). This departure represents not just a personal decision, but a broader act of resistance. By rejecting London's neoliberal social contract, Saeed and Nadia symbolically reject a system that dehumanises them.

Arrival in the US

Both Saeed and Nadia enter the United States hoping to rekindle their strained relationship after their time in England. However, upon arrival in Marin—a predominantly migrant worker settlement in the northwestern San Francisco Bay area—they encounter harsh conditions that closely mirror those they previously endured. Settling on a hill overlooking a refugee encampment, Saeed and Nadia find that migrant workers live without social protection, security, or adequate housing.

Forced by circumstance to build their own shelter, they construct a shanty from "corrugated metal and discarded packing crate sides" (Hamid, 2017, p. 82), highlighting the precarity and informality typical of migrant labour under neoliberalism. Despite residing in a developed country, they lack basic utilities such as electricity and clean water, reflecting the state's retreat from welfare provision and the vulnerability of migrant workers. Their "earthquake-friendly" shelter, equipped only with a solar panel, battery, and rainwater collector, symbolizes the stark intersection of technological advancement and social deprivation (p. 82).

As late arrivals, Saeed and Nadia are relegated to the upper slopes of the hill, where access to services is even more limited: "In Marin, the higher up the hills one went, the fewer services there were" (p. 82). The persistent fog enveloping their settlement intensifies

their isolation and hardship, becoming a metaphor for the obscured visibility and marginalisation of migrant labour: "the fog was a living thing… It seemed to Nadia and Saeed that somehow they lived at once on the ocean and among the peaks" (p. 82).

Their living condition is very poor: without chairs or sofas, they sit on a bartered car seat, and hunger is a constant presence. Nadia's employment at a food cooperative located outside Sausalito entails a long, difficult commute through areas with patchy infrastructure. This workplace provides no social protection or labour rights, reflecting the informal and insecure nature of many jobs available to migrant workers. Initially alienated and viewed with suspicion—as her long flowing robe is seen by some coworkers as emblematic of terrorism—Nadia gains respect after courageously confronting a robber, earning a room to live in. However, this room, essentially a storeroom in poor condition, mirrors her previous impoverished accommodation, underscoring that poor working-class conditions persist irrespective of geography (p. 91).

The novel draws a sharp contrast between the migrant worker enclave of Marin and the affluent native community in San Francisco. Marin is "overwhelmingly poor… in comparison to the sparkling affluence of San Francisco" (p. 82), primarily inhabited by migrant workers, whereas the native population enjoys abundance and security. This disparity is poignantly expressed when Saeed and Nadia, deprived and hungry, smell the food cooking "somewhere down there [in San Francisco]… everything in the world anyone could want to eat" (p. 87).

Despite their poverty and vulnerability, migrant workers like Saeed and Nadia are perceived as threats and heavily surveilled by drones that "crashed into the transparent plastic flap that served as both door and window of their shanty" (p. 86). This surveillance epitomizes the paradox faced by migrant labour: dispossessed, excluded, yet closely monitored as potential security risks.

Hamid extends his critique to the global South in the novel's final vignette, portraying a female domestic worker in Marrakesh whose labour has prematurely aged her. Though younger than her mistress, she appears older, "as if her occupation had been to age, to exchange the magic of months for bank notes and food" (p. 93). Despite her daughter's call to join her in Europe, the maid refuses, highlighting how poor but available labour opportunities at home can bind workers to their country.

Exit West thus reveals that under neoliberal global capitalism, working-class migrants and labourers from the Global South face exploitation and exclusion both within their own countries and as migrant workers abroad. Migration to the Global North offers no guarantee of improved conditions; instead, migrants are marginalized, denied social protection, and confined to precarious labour. They become surplus populations that neoliberal economies deem economically burdensome, often pressured to "exit the West."

Thus, Hamid's *Exit West*, through its focus on the lived realities of migrant labour and the poor working class, provides a powerful leftist critique of neoliberalism. It voices the systemic injustices endured by migrant workers and labourers caught in the contradictions of global capitalism, whose lives are shaped by vulnerability, exclusion, and economic inequality across borders.

Conclusion

In *Exit West*, the journey of Saeed and Nadia as migrant workers in *Exit West* reveals a sobering truth: while they may physically exit one country for another, they cannot

escape the precarious conditions that define their existence under global neoliberalism. Their migration—from their homeland to England, and finally to the United States—exposes the structural vulnerabilities faced by working-class migrants across the Global South and North. Despite crossing borders in search of safety and opportunity, Saeed and Nadia encounter similar exploitation, marginalization, and deprivation at every stage.

This continuity of precarity—marked by lack of social protection, insecure labour, inadequate housing, and social exclusion—is not incidental but a defining feature of neoliberal capitalism's global order. The novel illustrates how neoliberal policies, with their emphasis on market deregulation, privatization, and the rollback of welfare, produce a transnational working class whose vulnerability transcends geography. Migrant workers are commodified and surveilled, their labour exploited while their basic needs are systematically denied.

The novel thus critiques the myth of migration as a guaranteed path to economic stability and social inclusion. Instead, it exposes how neoliberal globalization perpetuates inequality, forcing migrants like Saeed and Nadia into cycles of poverty and insecurity regardless of their location. Their story underscores the urgent need to address the structural causes of labour precarity that bind workers globally, rather than focusing solely on the politics of borders and migration.

In this way, *Exit West* offers a profound reflection on the global condition of migrant labour under neoliberalism—highlighting that while one may exit a country, one's precarious condition often remains inescapable.

Recommendations

This study has demonstrated how *Exit West*, through a neo-Marxist lens, critiques the global operations of neoliberal capitalism and its role in producing shared precarity across borders. Future research could extend this analysis beyond Anglophone Pakistani literature to explore how similar conditions are represented in global literatures. Comparative studies focusing on labour precarity, migration, and economic marginalisation across diverse cultural contexts would enrich this field. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches can offer deeper and more comprehensive understandings of how literature engages with the complexities of neoliberal restructuring and systemic injustice on a transnational scale.

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