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Dispelling the Notion of West: A Parallel Study of Exit West and Meem Mashriq, Meem Maghrib

Maryam Amjad Ali

Lecturer Department of English, Kinnaird College for Women Lahore. Punjab, Pakistan/Corresponding Author. maryam.amjad@kinnaird.edu.pk

Abstract:

Art in any form be it fiction or painting encapsulates the nuances of the socio-political aspects of the era in which it is produced. Every art form presents semblance in few of the themes, despite using different mediums but there lies a commonality among them. The present paper is an attempt to draw a commonality of themes in Pakistani art. A parallel study has been done of *Exit West* and collection of painting *Meem Mashriq, Meem Maghrib*. Both forms of art enumerate a contemporary socio-political concern of the world i.e diaspora. Therefore, through a parallel study, the aspects of diaspora are explored. For this, the approach of diasporic criticism by Sudesh Mishra is employed. Mohsin Hamid has raised the problems of the migrants by presenting a trajectory of events from the beginning of the conflict to the migration and returning to homeland. Laila Rehman also captures the problems through an intricate colour scheme of red, black and blue in her paintings. Migrants despite being part of the host land receive few of the fundamental rights but are unable to resonate with the social fabric of that state. Although, the current trend is to migrate from East towards West, Hamid and Rehman emphasize on the hollowness of West. Thus, the sense of belonging to homeland prevails in both the works by dispelling the notion of West.

Keywords: Dispelling, Sense of loss, diaspora, trauma

Introduction:

Art in any form be it literature or painting is an embodiment of artistic expression of social, political, cultural and historical aspects of a certain time period. It has always proved useful to get an insight of the specific era by surfacing the social conditions as well as allowing to pull the strands of history in congruent to the social conditions. Every era of human literary history is marked by some grand narrative encapsulating the politics as the core of the hysteria prevalent in one specific timeline. The art and literature in Pakistan has evolved over the time. Soon after the partition most of the themes encapsulated in the art and literature drew attention towards the post-migration tales of loss, love and resilience. These themes were also replicated in the literature and art even in the post 1971 literature and art, after the separation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan. However, the art and the literature produced after 1998, in Pakistan received an international applaud. Shamsie describes in *Hybrid Tapestries: The Development of Pakistani Literature in English* the international recognition as: This period also witnessed an unprecedented flowering to international acclaim of new, multicultural, multidimensional art forms by Pakistanis, a fusion of old and the new across the borders and nations. Pakistani pop music, paintings, sculptures, and films drew audiences from New York and London to Dubai and Singapore. Pakistani

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-English- Literature was the leading light in the new firmament (2017). With the 9/11 incident, a new wave of themes emerged in the literature across the globe. Terrorism and migration dominated every other theme in art and literature produced in 21st century. The loss, violence and hate took an altogether another form in literature and art.

Furthermore, one of the prevalent themes in the art produced in Pakistan deals with the issue of the diaspora. It is reflected in both the literature and paintings. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* encapsulates the theme of the diaspora or alternatively refugee crisis, in the post 2015 world. Similarly, such concern is also painted by Laila Rehman in her collection *Meem Mashriq, Meem Maghrib*. The present research paper is an attempt to identify how the problem of diaspora is reflected in Pakistani art, in both paintings or literature. For this the first section deals with the review of the literature done to explore the diverse interpretation of diaspora in novels and then the representation of diaspora in paintings as well. Second part deals with explanation of the research methodology of the paper. Parallel study has been done by employing Sudesh Mishra's theoretical underpinning of diaspora. Last part is dedicated to the conclusion of the paper.

Literature Review:

The concept of diaspora has relevance in the contemporary times. Plethora of literature has been published on the issues of diaspora, which is termed as diasporic literature. For which various studies have been conducted to explore the problems faced by the people on migrating from their homeland. Not only the research papers on the diasporic novels but also various minimalist paintings discuss the idea of diaspora. Therefore, the literature review is an attempt to discuss the connotation of the term diaspora. Secondly, the review of research articles presenting problems faced the people on migrating has been incorporated. And lastly, the exploration of the relation between novels and painting representing the same issues is also included in the literature review.

The diaspora in the novel is one of the dominant themes. It considers how the concept of moving towards another area imbibes the sense of rootlessness. Considering, it the theme of diaspora has significance in the English literature. Many a times it is explored through the representation of African Americans or the diaspora of Armenians. Interestingly, the concept of diaspora is significantly changed from the previous century. In 20th century, diaspora was taken into account as a result of the war atrocities but in 21st century diaspora is considered as the dispersion due to economic reasons or as result of terrorism. Sonata Sarker in "Moving Target: The study of Diaspora Opens Up a Multitude of Paradoxes, Shifting Identities and Intellectual Challenges." writes; "the words transnational and migration, appears in the same frame as diaspora" (2002).

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With this interpretation of diaspora, the massive increase in the population of the western communities is due to seemingly, better economic opportunities and better civic rights. Thus, the notion of diaspora means migration on the basis of desire to have better life in the other part of the world, mainly West. Enoch Wan describes the massive increase in the population in UK in a report “Diaspora Mission Strategy in the Context of the United Kingdom in the 21st Century”; “from 2001 to 2007, though there was a general growth in population from 49 million to 51 million, the percentage of the white population decreased from 90.9% to 88.2%.” (2011) the report clarifies that how a massive shift is apparent that the people from the other part of the world mainly Asians have increased.

The diaspora is explored differently in the different novels. Difficulty, in adjusting with the community of the host country bore more anxiety and raises concern for identity conflicts. Toni Morrison explores the concern for identity crises in the *Tari Bay*. Moreover, she also explores the ambiguities of race, gender and notion in the novel. Morrison put emphasizes on the value of tradition, memory and continuity. In an article “Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morriossn’s *Tari Bar*”, Yogita Goyal writes; “Morrison resolution creates an impossible tension between realism and myth, between politics and fantasy, suggesting that diaspora as a viable option can only be represented with mythic terms and not with recognizable political content” (2006).

Not only literature explores such concerns of diaspora, various painters have explored the problems people encounter while they migrate through paintings. The theme of diaspora mainly revolves around the identity conflicts and sense of rootlessness. Thus, several prominent painters like Farida Kahlo explore the tensions of diasporic community through the use of colours and a specific scheme. Corrine Andersen in his article; “Remembrance of an Open Wound: Farida Kahlo and Post-Revolutionary Mexican Identity” writes; “with their stern gazes, the two Fridas confronts a viewer with their multiple locations of self. While some of the imagery suggests connection and interdependence, themes of interruption and violence also operate in the paintings” (2009). Thus, diaspora results into multiple identities of an individual.

Moreover, the art reflects about the anxieties a person face while encountering certain socio-cultural adjustments in the other part of the world. While few of the artists have tendency to negate the beauty and comfortability of their own land, rather applauds the foreignness of other lands. Suljuk Mustansar Tarar explores that a great number of visual artists and ceramist are exploring the roots and are covering the issue of identity in their works. One of the artists Latif Quershi in conversation with Tarar points out that, “it matters to me to understand the social reality of the people I live with, with their varied backgrounds and lived experiences” (2018). Consequently, identity crisis develops in the individuals who migrate. The portrait of the homeless people and the crisis of getting identity create havoc at two

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levels i.e internally and externally in the nature and the attitude of man. Therefore, the sense of not finding a root to anchor causes destruction and primarily conflicts. Brian Mc Avera describes in his article “Diaspora”, “These are layered and satisfyingly complex paintings, evocative, textured, subtle creating a dialogue between figurative and abstraction” (2002). The problems of homelessness are prevalent in individuals who are diasporic in other country.

In addition to that, the parallel between art and literature draws more attention. It focuses on how aesthetics and the power of word both create amazing collage to comment on socio-political aspects of the contemporary era. A collection of poems of Rizwan Akhter and Yasmeen Hameed along with the paintings of Hira Khan establishes the co-relation between art and literature. Iffat Sayeed in *Three Contemporary Artsits*, intricately describes a persona of aesthetics and words she writes; “Poetry and the painting are the two panniers that balances and weigh equally on the scale that holds the world in balance” (2019). Words and colours hold power to convey meaning to the world in overtly and covertly.

In addition to that the economic condition of refugees is depicted by Guy Standing, a British economist in *The Precariat: A New Dangerous Class*. According to Standing precariat is an economic class which is instable and has precarious position in the economic strata, as the refugees who do not have any specific position to anchor (2016). The dislocated people are devoid of any economic and political security. Thus, they are most vulnerable to the political and economic decisions taken by the dominant powerful states.

Another research of this sort of combing the various forms of art is made by Hamid and Khan to explore the trauma through paintings and literature. To understand the relationship of the violence in *Scatters Here is Too Great* and paintings of Imran Quershi, Hamid and Khan in “Beauty out of Chaos: A Parallel Study of Pakistan’s Trauma Art and Literature”, writes; “The contemporary creative realm in Pakistan does not only aspire to discover new arenas with respect to aesthetics, but also delves into issues, which shape and are shaped by questions of culture, nationalism, and self” (2018).

To explore, the ideas of chaos, Laila Rehman in her paintings has used the current theme of diaspora and reflects that complexity through shades of colours. In the review by Nimra Khan of the art exhibition at Koel Gallery she writes about the collection Meem Mashriq, Meem Maghrib that; “her usual figurative imagery has been replaced with a more abstract approach, and themes of feminism give way to broader concerns about the state of the world” (2018).

Exit West is an attempt to discover the crisis of the Diaspora in literature through the fictions. Sukhdev Sandu analyzes the crisis of refugee in *Exit West* as; “a novel about migration and mutation, full of wormholes and rips in reality, begins as it mostly doesn’t go on” (2017).

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Thus, the contemporary fiction and art holds the significance in portraying the socio-political conflicts. There lies a strong relationship in conveying the problems related with the ideas of diaspora. Numerous works have been done on the theme but with the modernization the meaning of diaspora has transformed. Now it stands for the transnational settlement and the prevalent issue is with the reasons why people migrate and what problems do they confer there.

Research methodology:

The research aims to explore the representation of conflicts in different forms of art. For this the two primary resources have been selected i.e *Exit West* and a collection of paintings *Meem Mashriq*, *Meem Maghrib*. Main arguments revolve around how the different genres represent the problems of the contemporary era. In relation to that to explore the similarities and dissimilarities between the two by using one theoretical framework i.e Diaspora. For this various articles from Jstor and books have been consulted to collect the relevant argument in support of the research questions. The literature review of the research thus posits the problems faced by the people when they are dislocated from their places. Novels depict the problem faced by the people of the Twentieth century when they migrate from their homeland. Interestingly, there is a transition in the meaning of the migration. In twentieth century migration was mainly due to wars but with the globalization migration is for the economic purposes. The condition of people migrating and termed as refugees is portrayed by Guy Standing, a British economist.

Similarly, various works of art also represents the problems of diaspora. Specifically, the abstract art encapsulates the problems of people who are dislocated. For this research articles depicting the plight of refugees are incorporated to validate the arguments in literature review. The theoretical framework adopted is the Diasporic criticism by Sudesh Mishra. Mishra explains the condition of people who leave their own state through following certain characteristics;

“A common strategy among diasporists is to classify diasporic social formations by (1) identifying new structures of being (identity) of an uprooted ethnic collectivity as it oscillates between homeland (the absent topos) and hostland (the present topos), (2) by tabulating a set of defining characteristics of this collectivity and (3) by alluding to some kind of departure manifested on the plane of consciousness, as reified in memory” (2006, p.80).

Leaving one’s own state begins with the new social formations. New forms of socio-economic and political patterns are formed. With them lies the difficulty to properly adjust in such a changing environment. Moreover, this makes people aloof of their existence and surroundings, they simply are able to get few of the rights while major are neglected. In addition to that people are unable to resonate with the basic unit of societies and cultures of that particular area. This also imbibes a sense of alienation among people, as they cannot erase their unconscious formations. Mishra

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writes about such difficulties as: “Diasporic clusters may enjoy the abstract rights and privileges of citizenship manifested in a juridical or constitutional sense. Since, however, they may not share a common cultural ground with the hegemonic community whose particular values and goals are, at least in an ideological way, mediated by the nation-state and subtly incorporated into its laws, the right to culture-specific practices may be denied them” (2006, p.84). In conclusion, the research aims to explore the problems faced by people due to new social formations as a result of diaspora. The research is done through an analysis of articles and books to expand the idea of diaspora. Also, the theoretical framework has been applied to make it more relevant and authentic in the domain of academic research.

Discussion:

With the emerging technology the world has been recognized as global village. In this progressive and post-modern world the crisis and the problems of people have increased, with this tremendous globalization. Living in twenty first century, the problems faced by the people have multiplied with the institutionalized power politics and control over societies. Mohsin Hamid’s novel *Exit West* is conjured with the current issue of refugees. From last few years, the refugee crisis has swarmed in the political and societal scenario in the East and the West of the world. *Exit West* describes Nadia and Saeed as two the representatives of the unheard and the unaddressed voices in the globalized world. In the beginning the reader is exposed to an anonymous city where there is a forced religious authority. The militants are present everywhere in the city and through their religious fanaticism they have taken control over the entire city. In such repressive and the claustrophobic spaces the ability of mental, emotional and psychological growth seems impossible to a degree that human beings are devoid of basic amenities of life.

Saeed is religious in his thoughts but is liberal enough. While Nadia is liberal but has just adopted a religious dress to calm down the marching militants in the society. The romantic relationship between Nadia and Saeed in such oppressive society is also reflection of a complicated relationship which is culturally unacceptable. Both of them have been financially weakened due to sudden shut down of their offices and the penetration of the militants have deprived them of power and water. Such a condition is capable of escaping from the mainstream to live a normal life. Hamid has described the home of Saeed as: “with view down an alley and straight up a boulevard to a dry fountain that once gushed and sparkled in the sunlight” (2017, p.12). Subsequently, the transformation of the building from the sparkled to a dry fountain reflects the change in the space, devoid of development under the militant control. Saeed’s mother has been killed by a stray bullet and his grieving father has refused to accompany them. Within the oppressive society, the mysterious doors have been growing at a rapid pace everywhere to rescue the oppressed. Therefore, Nadia and Saeed also escape through such doors to find a life from the disorder to an

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ordered world. The technique of magical realism has been employed in the novel for the doors. Hamid describes the experience of doors as: “it was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born”(2017, p.40). For Nadia the experience of exiting the city and getting new identity as refugee is congruent to cripple down own identity and to born again with the new identity as refugee. From their escape, they encounter several other refugees in the world escaping through mysterious doors and fences to live a life.

Militants also cross these mysterious doors and attack civilians to bough before them. When Nadia and Saeed escape they find people facing similar circumstances in other parts of the world. The novel alludes to the present political circumstances of refugees across the globe. Therefore, doors serve as a symbol of freedom exposing the desire of people to live in the world. In contrary it also points out the deplorable attitude and behavior of anti-migrants towards migrants. Also, it refers to the political discourse of not accepting the refugees, the constructed borders and the invasion of the certain natives across the land. The political agenda of war in name of prevailing peace and ultimately becoming the cause of refugee depicts the duality of diplomatic strategies of states. Thus, causing impediments to live safely in this world. Hamid mentions the condition of refugees as:

“an invisible world, as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be”(2017, p.56).

Exit West is also about the life during war-time and is a document about sexual molestation in the claustrophobic spaces, evident of the heinous acts in the narrative. The narrative of the novel is not linear rather it shifts between forms and experiments a lot with spatial and temporal conflicts. Moreover the skies in the novel are filled up with the helicopters and the drones indicating surveillance and their inability to live peacefully in the transported world as well. The migration from place to other place is presented as an illusion. Hamid writes: “All their doors remained simple doors, on/off switches in the flow between two adjacent places, binarily either open or closed, but each of their doors, regarded thus with a twinge of irrational possibility, became partially animate as well, an object with a subtle power to mock, to mock the desires of those who desired to go far away, whispering silently from its door frame”(2017, p.80).

The novel is also provocative of the emotional health and trauma of people leaving behind in their countries. Hamid has described the migration as a double catastrophe for people who are leaving and for those who are left behind. When Saeed and Nadia leave for migration the condition of father is described as; “when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind” (2017, p.98). *Exit West* is an effort to address the crises of refugee in the post-colonial world. It is teamed up with the emotional, psychological and the physical trauma faced by the migrants. Also, it points out the inhuman attitude of states towards refugees seeking asylum in

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Western states. Novel has strong contemporary resonance claiming to give identity and value to the refugees as victims of militancy. Thus novel points out the dark and bleak future of the refugees in the world and novel is an attempt to give voice to the unheard. The collection of Laila Rehman named as *Meem Mashriq, Meem Maghrib* is the representation of turmoil. Rehman has also focused on the idea that leaving homeland for the desire of a better life is an illusion. Although the discomfort, chaos and turmoil exist everywhere. The question for getting any sense of satisfaction lies with the discovery of self and nourishment of self. Considering the ideas of Mishra about the dislocation and oscillation between homeland and host land is well depicted in the following painting.



Fig.1.Raham, Laila. Art Review: *Meem Mashriq, Meem Maghrib* by Laila Rahman at Koel Gallery. Youlin Magazine. Accessed 5 January, 2020.

The collection is an attempt to identify the problems of people when they desire to leave their homeland. The restlessness and directionless life can be illustrated through the dangling roots spread all around with no definite existence. Such directionless life and fate is emblematic of people who desire or are force to leave their country. Seemingly, in another painting Rehman has intricately defined the boundaries with the maghrib at one end and the mashriq at another end. Mashriq represented with red colour, while maghrib with the black sets a contrast between two. It is clearly mentioned that passion lies with one being part of own community. So the black clarifies that the other part is bleak and one cannot find any meaning in other part. Thus, the self is needed to be nurtured and looked upon for the better understanding of life and the world around. It is an absolute an abject pitiful condition to run away from the difficult situation. No matter where one goes the self would be in state of distraction. Rehman captures the anxiety in a delicate manner to give a semblance of thought to the entire paint work. The use of several other tones in the silhouettes of pale pink, pale light black and ivory casts an impression that overall things are unifying and diverging.

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In the very right corner of the painting Rehman has written mashriq. To analyze it microscopically it is revealed that the word is between the transitory tones of red. Red symbolizes extreme passion and it is notable the representation of word mashriq in the transitory phases of red is reflection of the transition of mashriq. By transition it means that passion of people is lacking and they are moving astray from the right path. It is to be noted shamaal and janoub are also mentioned in the work, but they are allocated a very a little attention. A lot of attention is captured by the contrast of the painting of mashriq and maghrib. Interestingly, the three direction mashriq, shimal and januob are mentioned but no there is no such mentioning of maghrib in Urdu. Only a colour is used to represent maghrib. This is quiet prominent through the use of black colour in combination with the blue colour. The non-recognition of west is an attempt to identify that west is also lacking to impart any meaning to the life. Moreover, the socio-economic benefits are also proving to be an illusion. Rehman depicts such concerns in her work which is as follows:



Fig 2. Raham, Laila. Art Review: Meem

Mashriq, Meem Maghrib by Laila Rahman at Koel Gallery. Youlin Magazine. Accessed 5 January, 2020.

Furthermore, in another work of Rehman there is again a unique depiction of meem with different representation. Again the references are made to the fact that meem is the first sound of both mashriq and maghrib. Both have different connotations in multiple ways. Primarily, Rehman has made an effort to highlight that this urge of leaving mashriq and moving towards the maghrib is a useless effort. The spiky tails of meem in the painting represent lack of linearity in the path. Discomfort and chaos are the two key features presented in the following painting.



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Fig 3. Raham, Laila. Art Review: Meem Mashriq, Meem Maghrib by Laila Rahman at Koel Gallery. Youlin Magazine. Accessed 5 January, 2020.

The use of circular frame to paint also posits how a thing does not follow a straight path. When somebody wants to escape from the existing situations he/she ultimately comes at the point which is left. Also, the 3D aspect of the painting also reflects on looking at multi-dimensional aspect of life. This is the only painting in her collection in which the word maghrib is mentioned. It is of immense importance to highlight that mashriq is given prominence again in this piece over maghrib as its position is towards the bottom. Rehman inculcates a sense of chaos and discomfort through use of black colour and position of maghrib towards the bottom. Also, the minute details reveal that at the bottom the meem is being blurred. One of the meem's head is not visible rather the tail is visible along with the another whose tail is diminishing. Such blurring reveals that maghrib is also in chaos so the image of west being perfect is also blurred. While the meem above the mashriq are neither blurred nor diminished all are prominent. This points to that mashriq also has perfection, its own culture and own identity. The intensity of the situation is revealed through the use pale ivory colour for meem against the black colour. Such use of color intensifies the theme and directs attention toward the greater reality.

The title of the collection *Meem Mashriq, Meem Maghrib* is also captivating and draws attention that how indigenized title is. Again the concentration is on meem in the title which alludes multiple meanings to the collection. Primarily, the central theme is to focus on mashriq, and stop idealizing the maghrib. This is to value what is present in mashriq. Similarly, the title of the novel *Exit West* has also double meaning. At a first glance that the novel has interpretation leave whatever west is offering and focus on east. Simultaneously, it also offers that exit east and move to west. Thus, panacea of every problem is in West. Thus, the theme of diaspora is prevalent in the work of Laila Rehman and Mohsin Hamid. The notion of West as a perfect place to live in is dispelled. Rather the problems faced by the diasporic community are

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highlighted. Therefore, the identity crisis faced by the individuals is at the core of their works.

Conclusion:

The parallel study of the *Exit West* and *Meem Mashriq*, *Meem Maghrib* points out the primary concern is to focus on East. By focusing on East, connotes to value it. The problems faced by Nadia and Saeed on leaving the homeland are encountered with the feeling of alienation in the other states. Even though the magical doors appear to be the sign of resolution of the conflicts. But their inability to relate to the social formations of the other countries does not satisfy their needs. For this, Hamid presents a trajectory of paths followed by them. Their journey of leaving homeland due to terrorism to other states culminates at coming back to their homeland. Diaspora despite being the political or economic cause creates a sense of alienation among the residents. As Mishra clearly describes the incapability of them to be part of the hegemonic culture. Similarly, the painting of Laila Rehman also considers the same notion that west has failed to offer solution to the people of east. She has presented such concerns through the mentioning of discomfort and chaos. A dichotomy between mashriq and maghrib is established. Rehman establishes the stance by the intricate patterns with a mixture of bright and light colour scheme. Thus, the parallel study of the novel and the paintings establish the fact that both encapsulate the theme of dispelling the notion of West. As evident through their titles and themes. The research is an attempt to develop a relation of common thematic concern over the same issue of diaspora. It is revealed that image of West being perfect needs to be questioned and the sole concern would be on east to enhance its value. Irrespective of the socio-economic and political concerns the solace lies in being part of homeland rather than host land.

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