

Borders and Postimperial Melancholia in the Works of Mohsin Hamid and Raja Shehadeh

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Abstract

Border studies have paid much attention to borders and mobility, conceptualizing borderlines and the power politics that manipulates bordering and border crossing. The work of David Newman, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Henk van Houtum has sketched useful ways to conceptualize borders and analyze the processes of border making. This paper investigates borders and mobility in Raja Shehadeh's *A Rift in Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle* (2010) and Mohsin Hamid's more recent novel, *Exit West* (2017). Shehadeh's localized representation of a postimperial Mediterranean geopolitics is countered by Hamid's more globalized context of postcolonial worlds. With a nostalgic political impulse, Shehadeh, a Palestinian writer, recounts the travels of his Ottoman uncle through the Great Rift Valley, along the Lebanese mountains and the Palestinian Galilee, highlighting the openness of borders under the Ottoman Empire and the greater mobility they seemed to have enjoyed. That mobility is now challenged by the highly bordered space of colonial Palestine, marked by checkpoints and barbed wires. The borderless imperial paradigm of the Ottomans as reimaged by Shehadeh is analyzed in relation to Hamid's representation of the border legacy of Western colonialism. The Pakistani novelist offers an exploration of the migration experience from an unidentified city, moving west to metropolitan centers in Greece, London and California. Mixing real and surreal elements to reconfigure the experience of border-crossing, the novel sheds light on the limits imposed on mobility, featuring borders as sites of opportunities, but more often than not of separation and global displacement.

Keywords: Borders, postcolonial, post-imperial, mobility, nostalgia