

The Ethical Re(turn) in Post-colonial Fiction: Narrating the Precariat in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West and Mohammad Hanif's Red Birds

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In 2019, according to the United Nations Migration Report, the number of international migrants across the world reached 272 million people or 3.3% of the world's population. The global refugee population accounted for 25.9 million people while the number of "internally displaced persons due to violence and conflicts reached 41.3 million" (IOM Report 2020 4-5). Although these figures make no distinction between the different circumstances of migration, the twenty-first century is an age of displacement, forced relocation and border crossing. Migrants and refugees are the new precarious

proletariat of globalization. The concept of ‘precariat’ has gained currency first in social sciences, and more recently as a new prism of interpretation in postcolonial studies. Guy Standing has delineated “a class-in-the-making” consisting of “a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development, including [...]migrants in their hundreds of millions around the world.” (Standing, 2011b). Precariat, a portmanteau word of “precarity” and “proletariat”, appeals not only to sociology but can also be used in literary criticism as it holds two opposite poles of tension. Primarily, the precariat is a mode of existence, a socioeconomic definition with shifting borders in the midst of a fluctuating world. It also defines a political identity with its own culture, organization, political representation, and demands. The representation of the precariat demands an ethical response to create awareness, and postcolonial authors are rising to the challenge. The connection between ethics – the deployment of a universal set of moral values (OED) – and postcolonial literature is quite fundamental and growing awareness of multiple forms of precarity have added renewed dimensions of exploration and interpretation within the realms of postcolonial studies.

The ethical turn in postcolonial studies concerns “issues of how humans live and what they live for” (Schwartz, 3). Indeed, “texts demand ethical responses from their

readers in part because saying always has an ethical dimension and because we are our values, and we never take a moral holiday from our values.” (ibid, 5) The new subalterns, who are assigned a place and a status on the margins of states or who are forcibly displaced by war, famine or natural disasters, are at the heart of two novels by Pakistani writers Mohsin Hamid and Mohammed Hanif, *Exit West* (2017) and *Red Birds* (2018) respectively. Both novels propose singular responses to the refugee and migrant crisis by combining political commentary and engagement with the norms of realistic representation. According to the editors of *The Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, the study of “forced displacement and forced settlement” (15) goes beyond the field of human rights and sociology and is connected with politics, ecology, and literature. Moreover, as the Mediterranean has become a graveyard for unmourned migrants, writers turn to ethics and literature to put the limelight on the anonymous people who “have been declared ungrievable.” (Kraal, 2) The ethical answers provided by the novels under scrutiny are, in the case of *Exit West*, a fable on the arbitrary nature of borders, while *Red Birds* is a political satire about Middle Eastern refugees in the context of the ‘war on terror’.

Philosophers have also written on the precarious lives of displaced populations and their conflicted relations with the West. Judith Butler’s *Frames of War* (2009) is subtitled *When is Life Grievable?* and a chapter is entitled “Precar-

ious Life, Grievable Life”. Like *Precarious Life* (2006), it deals with the aftermath of 9/11 and the way Western liberalism – Butler means U. S. foreign policy and its Manichean worldview – has downplayed the suffering of “collateral” war victims who are assigned to a blind spot of public opinion. The question of the “grievability” of people’s lives, and more specifically of Middle Eastern, Muslim refugees, is at the heart of *Red Birds*. Both novels are part of a wider ethical undertaking to theorize and represent the figures of the migrant. Migrants’ identities are often products of a legal discourse characterized by a permanent tension between the preservation of human rights and the state policies safeguarding national borders (Agier, Madeira 2017 9). Legally, the status oscillates between an economic definition – migrants are displaced populations in search of a better life– and a more political one which is contained by the term refugee¹. *Exit West* and *Red Birds* represent attempts to apprehend the migrant crisis and the consequences of the war on terror on the civilian populations through the prism of highly aesthetic fictional forms, and not by relying on actual legal definitions and population data. In fact, while *Exit West* and *Red Birds* are politically and ethically committed novels about the socio-economic category of the precariat, narrating precariousness draws attention both to the representation of the precariat as a category, and also to the self-reflexive nature of language. As we shall see, the figure of the migrant is the founding metaphor of the novel, and Thomas Nail’s theories provide a use-

ful tool of interpretation for *Exit West*, while Butler's reflections on grievability and precariousness will find connections with *Red Birds*.

The ethical concern with social and political precarity in the novels is shared by other Pakistani novelists, who likewise favour a modernist attention to experimentation with form. Like other anglophone Pakistani novelists, Mohsin Hamid and Mohammed Hanif focus on the aftermath of geopolitical upheavals affecting global Muslim populations, underlying their precariousness in the face of state violence. Within a short period, the 'war on terror' in the Af/Pak zone and the resurgence of homegrown jihadism in the UK, have formed the backdrop of a number of novels by Pakistani authors. Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) and *The Golden Legend* (2017), Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) offer strongly aesthetic answers to the fate of a marginalized population. Similarly, Mohsin Hamid's and Mohammed Hanif's fiction focuses on the plight of marginal and vulnerable characters. Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) describe the gradual disenfranchisement and marginalization of its main characters, respectively Daru, a Lahore mid-level banker who is expelled from the city's wealthiest circles and retraces his downward spiral in a wry confession, and Changez, an upwardly mobile Pakistani trader in a New York firm who finds himself victimised by racial labelling after 9/11. *How to*

Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia (2013) uses the same trope of precarity to describe, in the guise of a satirical self-help book, the rise and fall of a South Asian entrepreneur in the bottled water business. Mohammed Hanif's novels share the same attention to precarious characters. *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) is a hybrid text which is by turns a political thriller on General Zia-ul-Haq's death in a plane crash in 1988, a spy mystery with gothic undertones, a political satire on the dictator's bigotry and a revenge tragedy including a blind woman, a cursed crow and a case of mangoes. The political farce is present in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) which depicts the mishaps of a 'Choorā' (Christian) nurse, part of one of Pakistan's most precarious communities. The vulnerable lives described in these novels share a common approach: the representation of precariousness has moral and ethical obligations that call for the readers' engagement. In the two novels the represented voices are meant to be "unique", "narratable selves", which demand from the readers "an act of attention that registers the uniqueness of the other's narrative"(Couldry 2010, 8, 13).

As a postcolonial novelist, Hamid is the cultural interpreter of the global precariat, while at the time, keeping this rather unstable role at a distance: *Exit West* is thus the result of a shift from mimetic representation, to the expression of an aesthetically constructed experience. The representation of migrant precariat in the novel is the result of a linguistic, literary experience based on difference and metaphors. *Exit West* finds echoes of Thomas

Nail's *The Figure of the Migrant* (2015b) in its description of a world in constant flux and where borders are magically abolished, replaced by supernatural black doors linking the global south with the global north. Indeed, we can perceive a connection between Guy Standing's 'precariat', Judith Butler's 'precariousness' and 'grievability' with Thomas Nail's definition of the historically expelled groups from society:

the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletariat are four figures of the migrant. Each emerges under different historical and social conditions of expansion and expulsion, but each also invents a form of kinetic power of its own that poses an alternative to social expulsion. Although each figure of the migrant deploys this force in a unique way, each is also the social expression of a more general "pedetic" social force. (Nail 2015b, 123)

Exit West is about transforming the precarity of migrant lives into a utopia of displacement. It is an allegorical fiction about the abolition of borders and nation-states. Paradoxically, when it comes to the topography of migration, *Exit West* and *Red Birds* perform unlabelling and anonymization. At the same time, they never become completely culturally and politically opaque. The paper will explore how the precarious lives are represented in each novel and how each novel situates itself in connection with contemporary times and geopolitical ruptures. Narrating precariousness in order to ethically engage

with the reader needs distance from a mimetic representation of reality and produce texts which test the density of literature and the arbitrary nature of signs.

Mohsin Hamid, like Mohammed Hanif, connects writing with ethical and political commitment in order to represent the fractured lives of migrants and refugees. Hamid explained the political dimension of the novel — “Yes I’m pro-migrant.” (Hamid 2017) – and the writer’s necessary engagement with contemporary issues:

I understand that people are afraid of migrants. If you're in a wealthy country, it's understandable that you might fear the arrival of lots of people from far away. But that fear is like racism: it's understandable, but it needs to be countered, diminished, resisted. People are going to move in vast numbers in the coming decades and centuries. Sea levels will rise, weather patterns will change, and billions will move. We need to figure out how to build a vision for this coming reality that isn't a disaster, that is humane and even inspiring. (Hamid 2016)

The future of migration is therefore to be found in a utopian tension that reconciles the fears of “nativists” with the expectations of the newly arrived forced migrants. *Exit West* is structured around two almost symmetrical parts: the first part describes an anonymous Middle Eastern city “teetering on the edge of the abyss” (Hamid 2018, 1) then collapsing when religious “mili-

tants” take over the whole country, impose religious law, reminiscent of the Taliban and ISIS, and terrorize the inhabitants. Black doors appear at random throughout the city, but also throughout the global South. Some are guarded by the army or by militants, making the passage even more haphazard. Migrants emerge mysteriously on the other side in private homes or dark back alleys in the wealthier, urban North. But in *Exit West*, kinopolitics – defined by Thomas Nail as ‘the politics of movement’ (Nail 2015b 2) – is a universal force: inhabitants from the global north can also travel through the doors and settle in the south. For Hamid, the ‘pedetic forces’ of migration are not reserved to one social or ethnic group, it is a centrifugal force which favours mobility over settlement, universalism over ethnic and cultural idiosyncrasies. In a reversal of coordinates, time transforms migration into a universal given, a symptom of our very human condition. As one of the many aphorisms of the novel states: “we are all migrants through time” (Hamid 2018, 209). The second part of the novel turns into a utopian fiction on migrancy when not only the two protagonists, Saeed and Nadia have escaped through the dark doors, but “the whole planet was on the move [...] as much of the global south headed to the global north” (Hamid 2018, 167). The doors avoid the realistic description of long and dangerous journeys because the point of arrival is more important than the passage West.

Indeed, the appearance of doors is never explained, save as escape routes out of the horror of reality: the doors

are metaphors made literal in an otherwise mimetic novel as they bring together two adjacent territories. Hamid presents the black doors as “rumours”, normal doors becoming “special doors” which connect two distant places:

[a]ll 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 the desires of those who desired to go far away, whispering silently from its door frame that such dreams were the dreams of fools. (Hamid 2018, 70)

Furthermore, whereas the place of origin is never named – yet easily recognized as generically Islamic and Middle Eastern – the places of arrival are always carefully identified: whether it is “the Sydney neighbourhood of Surry Hills” (Hamid 2018, 5)², “the Tokyo district of Shinjuku” (Hamid 2018, 25), “the San Diego locality of La Jolla” (Hamid 2018, 45), “Jumeirah Beach Residence” in Dubai (Hamid 2018, 86), “the Greek island of Mykonos” (Hamid 2018, 100), “Vienna” (Hamid 2018, 101), “Kensington, Chelsea”, “Kentish Town” (Hamid 2018, 126), “Palace Gardens Terrace” (Hamid 2018, 136), “Vicarage Gate” (Hamid 2018, 148), “the hills above Tijuana” (Hamid 2018, 156), “Prinsengracht in Amsterdam” (Hamid 2018, 172), and finally “the new

city of Marin, on the Pacific Coast, close to San Francisco” (Hamid 2018, 189). Hamid chose to leave out the specific name of Saeed and Nadia’s point of departure: it could be Lahore, Raqqa, or Bagdad. Country names are also left out – except for Nigeria (Hamid 2018, 144). On the other hand, neighbourhoods and city names are mentioned: scale matters, and by avoiding the wider, political denominations of states, Hamid narrowed the scope of the point of view to a more human, immediate, and almost neighbourly experience. Identities are local and global, national identities are problematic. In other words, migration in *Exit West* is exclusively pedetic: thanks to the black doors, migrants are literally within walking distance of radically different worlds and cultures. Saeed and Nadia reach three successive places: Mykonos, London, and Marin County. Each corresponds to a different aspect of Nail’s kinopolitics.

The first place is a liminal location: Mykonos, like Ikaria and other Aegean islands, is a well-known hotspot for migrants and refugees as it stands close enough to Turkey, half-way between Asia and Europe. It is also a famous tourist destination, and the ironic overlapping of the two forms of displacement is underlined by the description of the beach. First, Saeed and Nadia emerge from the black door near a “beach club [...] its signs [...] written in English but also in other European tongues”. Their first human contact with the island is “a pale-skinned man with light brown hair [who] came out and

told them to move along making shooining gestures with his hands, but without any hostility or rudeness, more as though he was conversing in an international pidgin dialect of sign language”. As they walk away, they see “in the lee of a hill [...] what looked like a refugee camp, with hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colours and hues – many colours and hues but mostly falling within a band of brown that ranged from dark chocolate to milky tea – [...] speaking in a cacophony that was the languages of the world [...]” (Hamid 2018, 99-100). In Hamid’s description the migrants form a global disenfranchised precariat: they are expelled from known social and political territories – the ironic beach club standing here for an outpost of Western civilization. Moreover, the “cacophony” Nadia and Saeed – or the narrator – perceive are yet another sign of the migrants’ absence of unity. The vision might correspond to what Nail describes as the result of “external expansion by expulsion” (2015b, 17) when the centrifugal power of the state expels marginal groups from its borders, and when “political kinopower produces barbarian migrants.” (2015b, 17) But as Nail also outlines in his study, the different figures of the migrant undergo the opposite dynamics of centripetal forces, in a constant oscillation (2015b, 137) between expulsion and confinement.

Perhaps the most magical part of the novel is not so much the black doors but the dramatic moment when migrants submerge London, and when the government

accepts their presence, thereby ushering an era of cohabitation between the newcomers and the “natives”. Although fragmented and limited in time and space, centripetal forces dominate as new forms of micro-societies emerge. In an era of rising nationalisms, with progressive values on the wane everywhere around the globe, with leaders of the free world erecting walls and reinforcing existing barriers, Mohsin Hamid’s words sound here like magic realism: “Perhaps [the natives and their governments] had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist [...] Or perhaps the sheer number of places where there were now doors had made it useless to fight in any one.” (Hamid 2018, 164) London, as the second stage of Nadia and Saeed’s peregrinations, is also a significant location. The city is strongly associated with a tradition of cosmopolitanism. While apparently universalist and humanist, in fact, this political philosophy carefully established modes of control and exclusion. In other words, “republican cosmopolitanism” (Nail 2015a) meant that states and government bodies could define “the right to leave a territory as a human right, but not the right to enter a territory”. On the contrary, “migrant cosmopolitanism” is based on new dynamic forces based on solidarity and a decentred form of self-government leading to empowerment. Significantly, new transnational and multilingual solidarities emerge in London, as a counter-power to the established government. But as new

land developments emerge around London, “the London Halo” (Hamid 2018, 167), and as migrants and natives work side by side, they still live “under an invisible network of surveillance” Hamid 2018, (188) and are part of a disenfranchised precariat. The third and last place Saeed and Nadia reach through the supernatural black doors is Marin County, “on the edge of a continent” (Hamid 2018, 193), the last American frontier.

Mohsin Hamid delineates in the antepenultimate chapter of the novel a summary of the history of the United States- without naming the country - through the prism of violent kinopolitics and by describing the changing figure of the migrant. For the narrator, there are three layers of nativeness. The first layer is made up of the dwindling number of actual Native Americans, “these people having died out or been exterminated long ago” (Hamid 2018, 195). The second layer of nativeness is made up of people who claim “they or their parents or their grandparents had been born on the strip of land that stretched from the mid-northern Pacific to the mid-northern Atlantic” and whose “existence here did not owe anything to a physical migration that had occurred in their lifetime.” (Hamid 2018, 196) The “third layer of nativeness” is the most violent: “those who thought directly descended [...] from the human beings who had been brought from Africa to this continent centuries ago as slaves” (Hamid 2018, 197). By reintroducing a kinetic dimension to American history,

Hamid not only places the figure of the migrant at the heart of its national narrative, but it also puts into perspective the precariousness of the different figures of the exploited proletarian groups. The peregrinations of Saeed and Nadia end in a loop, or rather two loops as they part ways in Marin, before returning to their point of departure “half a century later ” (Hamid 2018, 227) and meeting again. Hamid’s narrative shifts the migrant’s trajectory from a spatial to a temporal plane, as the novel bifurcates towards utopia and post-history. Like Nail’s theory, in Hamid’s novel the hybrid, oscillating figure of the migrant becomes the central metaphor, reversing the question of border-crossing from a state issue to a personal, subjective, almost magical experience, thus engaging with the reader’s ethics.

In contrast with the optimistic utopia about the possibility of precarious existence to find a point of equilibrium, Mohammed Hanif offers a darker vision of the present, marked by disappearance and haunted by death. The two incipits, one verse from sixteenth-century Punjabi Sufi poet Mahdo Lal Hussain, and part of the last words pronounced in public by human rights activist Sabeen Mahmud, point at the two poles of tension present in the text. The first quotation, “And when I look through it, it’s red”, is from an oft-quoted figure of traditional Punjabi Sufi poetry who, like Bulleh Shah, excelled in the traditional Kafi form of poetry, part of the qawwali repertoire. Shah Hussain saw Sufism as a

mode of emancipation from and rebellion against the norms of religion and society. This remark points to the main trope of the novel – and perhaps a theme central to Hanif’s writing – the transience of life and political disappearance³. But the quotes also point to the possibility of transgression and resistance: Shah Hussain apparently added his lover’s first name, Mahdo, to his own, thus somewhat transgressing the social norms of the period, while Sabeen Mahmud, the founder of Karachi’s T2F café, was a household name among Pakistan’s “liberal, urban, globalized civil society”⁴. The quotations point to the two aesthetic and moral poles of the novel, equidistant between an inclination towards Sufi mysticism, a poetic and magic representation of reality on the one hand, and on the other, an inclination towards political commitment. Hanif recalls the circumstances when he started writing his third novel: “While I was writing it I lost people very, very close to me, just randomly. First, my best friend, then my second-best friend, then Sabeen – all in a row in, like, 15 months.”(McHugh 2020). It appears that writing is for Hanif a refuge from loss, and *Red Birds* is perhaps an attempt to reconnect the living and the dead.

Like Hamid’s novel, places and people are unlabelled and anonymized in *Red Birds*, and everything conspires at resisting interpretation, presenting instead shifting, precarious identities and places. The novel is a chamber opera for three main voices⁵: Major Ellie, an American

fighter pilot stranded in the desert, Momo, a refugee, denizen of the very camp Ellie was meant to bomb, and Mutt, a philosopher dog “who can excrete gold and spout Rumi” (Hanif 2018, 137) and probably a distant relative of Orhan Pamuk’s narrator dog in *My Name is Red* (2004). Each of them voices an ironic and sarcastic vision of the consequences of the war on terror and complement each other, forming a polyphonic satire. Ellie speaks like Yossarian, the main protagonist from Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, and deconstructs the metanarrative of the war on terror as a cultural war. Space is divided into three places: “the Desert”, “the Camp” and “the Hangar”: while the first two are generic places, the Hangar appears to be an abandoned U. S. Air Force outpost from which missions were flown into enemy territory. Language, like the political motivations and the help provided by American aid agencies, sounds hollow and seems to have exhausted its possibility of expression. Ironically, Mutt is the most articulate and clear-sighted among all the characters.

At the heart of the novel’s absurdist satire is a missing character, Bro Ali, Momo’s elder sibling, whose role was to pinpoint enemy positions to the American forces. In order to cover his identity as a spy in the eyes of the community, Bro Ali’s own family was bombed out and has to live the life of refugees. Ellie puts into question the syllogism of bombing precarious civilian populations then sending “humanitarian aid [...] a plane load

of rations, lots of footballs and candy” (Hanif 2018, 90). The logic of war is summarized by its circular logic: “We used to have art for art’s sake; now we have war for the sake of war.” (Hanif 2018, 32), without forgetting that “war has been condensed to carpet-bombing followed by dry rations and craft classes for the refugees” (Hanif 2018, 32). The paradoxical absurdity of war is wryly described by Ellie as not only a morally sanctioned aggression against those “planning to bring down western civilization” (Hanif 2018, 93), but also as an attempt to comply with ethical standards. As an obvious dig at Western opinion taking the moral high ground on the war, and perhaps also wryly mocking the west’s more liberal sensitivities and political commitments, Hanif satirizes the incongruous “ethical turn” taken by the war. Major Ellie received a series of classes – inaugurated by “Desert Survival Level 6B” (Hanif 2018, 10) – dictated by a cultural studies agenda that tries to understand the “other’s” cultural identity. The capitalized words underline the hollowness of the concepts: “Cultural Sensitivity course” (Hanif 2018, 5) or “Cultural Sensitivity 101” (Hanif 2018, 32), “Moral Enigma, Moral Wars’[...] ‘How to Conquer Yourself Before You Conquer Your Enemy” (Hanif 2018, 12), “Cultural Sensitivity Towards Tribals” (Hanif 2018, 60) or “How To Defend American Values Without Offending Their Own” (Hanif 2018, 88) all tend towards the description of a morally dubious and biased perception of the Muslim Other. The accumulation of such absurd course and seminar

titles underlines the absurdity of the war and the fake moral conundrums it entails. Language, in the emphatic beckoning of its capital letters, utterly fails at describing reality.

The description of space condenses the flawed logic of the war. The three capitalised places, the Desert, the Camp, and the Hangar point at shifting coordinates on an imaginary map. For Major Ellie's superior "There's a Hangar, and there is a Camp" and with the aid of "a pointer" [...] [i]n a world of uncertainty, if you can nail them down on a paper map the enemy's existence becomes much more real" (Hanif 2018, 7). On the contrary, once on the ground, what Ellie sees is the utter discrepancy between the narrative of war (and US AID) and the precarious reality of the life of refugees. The description of the Camp evokes Zygmunt Bauman's description of refugee camps as both enclaves where "wasted lives" are assigned and a place outside the limits of human life. For Bauman refugee camps are "hors du nomos – outside law as such" (2004, 76) and the "inmates are stripped of their identities except one: that of the placeless, functionless refugees." (2004, 76). Indeed, "refugees are human waste [...]; from their place, the dumping site, there is no return and no road forward [...]. Nothing is left but the walls, the barbed wire, the controlled gates, the armed guards [...], inside that place, they are forgotten." (2004, 77-78). Bauman continues, borrowing religious imagery which can also illuminate

Red Birds: “Roads back to the lost [...] homely paradise have been all but cut, and all exits from the purgatory of the camp lead to hell...” (2004, 79). What Major Ellie describes echoes Bauman’s words:

The top of the gate has something written on it [...] USAID FUGEE CAMP. The RE seems to have dislodged itself out of embarrassment. I have never seen a refugee camp for real, only in pictures and TV news. I expect rows of tents, gleaming ambulances, people standing in orderly queues waiting to get their rations from gap-year students with dreadlocks and nose rings. What I see I have already seen on my Strike Eagle’s monitor, just before I hesitated to press the button: a series of junkyards, rows of burnt-out cars piled on each other, abandoned tanks and armoured vehicles, a small mountain of disused keyboards and mobile phone shells, piles of rubbish with smoke rising off them.

The camp is a sea of corrugated blue plastic roofs, stretching like a low, filthy sky, broken by piles of grey plastic poles and overflowing blue plastic bins. (Hanif 2018, 91-92)

The camp’s description embodies the refugees’ precarious existence. The name itself is erased as it literally falls to pieces. A place of waste and disruption, absurdity and paradox, the camp embodies the refugees’ precariousness. The connection between the signifier, USAID REFUGEE CAMP, and the signified, the place

of relegation for an internally displaced population, is dislocated, creating a rift within the logic of language. Moreover, Ellie's gaze changes and this awareness modifies his focal point: instead of seeing the camp mediated through Western television coverage or the technological weaponized gaze of his jet, Ellie encounters a different, ground-level reality. The description of the "FUGEE CAMP" can be read as an attempt to appeal to the reader's attention, beyond the text's self-conscious textuality. Indeed, perhaps framing the character's sarcastic gaze, we can maybe recognize the author's gaze, or at least a represented author's gaze, reminding us of our indifferent vision of the "true", unmediated realities of war. Beyond the failure of signs, the failure of our ethics of precariousness is suggested. The territory where the refugees are assigned is both a zone of relegation and a wasteland of exhausted signifiers. As Major Ellie remarks: "When you see something shiny in the desert [...] most likely it's something useless like a mirage, or a mirage of something that's useless, like a wrecked plane." (Hanif 2018, 9) In *Red Birds*, everything is a sham and a parody, and reality itself has become elusive.

Red Birds constantly oscillates between two types of movement: the first one follows the circular trajectories of the characters lost in the no man's land of the camp. The generically labelled Desert, Camp, and Hangar are the coordinates of a triangular territory from which no one can escape. The other trajectory is suggested by

the skyward flight of the red birds that “emerge from the sands and take flight” (Hanif 2018, 62) or “shoot up from the sand” (Hanif 2018, 80) and disappear. Or downward, like the crash of Major Ellie’s F 15. Place in *Red Birds* is a limbo where characters mull over the same obsessions: home, flight combat briefings, becoming a multimillionaire overnight, bones, or a disastrous encounter with an electric pole. They are caught in the vicious circle of repetition and claustrophobia. Everything in the text conspires against a transcendental, symbolic interpretation outside the novel. As Hanif explains:

Red Birds seems symbolic, especially in its settings like Hangar and the Camp. The situation is surreal at times... At the centre of the novel is a house destroyed and a missing brother. I don’t think there is anything symbolic there. Sometimes we look for symbols when there are none. Sometimes we wish there were symbols instead of bombs, or missing boys were allegories for something, but they are not. I am sure we have all had a glimpse of a refugee camp or an abandoned army base. Yes, ordinary life can be surreal at times. (Aslam, 2018)

The novel indeed navigates between symbolism and mimetically anchored realism and keeps pointing to the precariousness of its language: hence, as Mutt the philosopher dog muses, “A bone is not a metaphor. An electric pole doesn’t symbolize phallic fantasies, it’s a public convenience, and as I learnt to my cost, a brain-damaging

hazard” (Hanif 2018, 84). While Mutt expounds, very ironically, his literalist, one-dimensional interpretation of language, he also explains that “red birds are real[...] when someone dies in a raid or a shooting or when someone’s throat is slit, their last drop of blood transforms into a tiny red bird and flies away.” (Hanif 2018, 84) Thanks to Mutt’s acute sense of smell we discover that Major Ellie, who also saw a bird a few days after crashing in the desert (Hanif 2018, 34), is a ghost because he is “the man with no smell” (Hanif 2018, 117). Eventually, the Hangar, “which looks like an abandoned shopping mall” (Hanif 2018, 231), turns out to be a place where ghosts gather: “they are dead but they don’t know it” (Hanif 2018, 231-232). The mimetic reality of the novel seems to dissolve into a supernatural story as it appears that Ellie has been a ghost since he saw the first “red blur” (Hanif 2018, 34) fluttering in the distance through his binoculars. The last pages of *Red Birds* transform the novel into a funeral elegy as Major Ellie, Bro Ali, and apparently the other characters, step into the territory of the spectral. The eruption of ghosts towards the end of the novel points to the ethical nature of loss and mourning. The realization of Major Ellie’s spectral nature is not about the novel shifting into Gothic mode, it is rather more of a conceit which changes a metaphor into a literal image: the pilot and the refugees he was supposed to bomb become the “grievable” figures of a vulnerable, precarious world. Reality itself is precarious and porous as it dissolves into spectrality.

Exit West and *Red Birds* explore the possibility of representing the contemporary figures of the precariat and the experience of precariousness. Mohsin Hamid and Mohammed Hanif chose to approach the issue of asylum seekers and refugees using the mode of allegorical and speculative fiction, rather than a more testimonial, realistic description of migration and life in U.N. camps. An allegory, by nature, does not designate fixed points of interpretation but, on the contrary, contains its own precariousness and hermeneutic vulnerability: “As every critic who has attempted a definition is forced to acknowledge, the nature of allegorical writing is elusive, its surface by turns mimetic and anti-mimetic, its procedures intricate and at times seemingly inconsistent, and its meaning or “other” sense – how it is encoded, or what it refers to extrinsically – often indeterminate.” (Copeland and Struck, 2, 2010). The paradox of these novels is the tension between the ethical response elicited by the subject matter and the aesthetically distanced rendition of the precarious figures of the migrant. The ambiguity of its allegories remains open: the metaphors of the red birds in Hanif’s novel and the black doors in Hamid’s book are both manifest and equivocal: precarious.

Significantly, the last pages of *Red Birds* are saturated with religious references: the litany of the ninety-names of Allah is mentioned, but so is the Christ-like apparition of a crucified Brother Ali: “His arms spread out [...]

strung up in mid-air” (Hanif 2018, 275). Furthermore, the Hangar could be interpreted as Purgatory, taking the text’s mainly Sufi frame of reference in an unexpected direction. The whole novel, with its topographical vagueness, could also be read as Purgatory, or some form of afterlife. Similarly, *Exit West* oscillates between a realistic world picture and a form of distanced magic realism. Hamid captures the technological zeitgeist of the twenty-first century as he describes the smartphones and social networks which supplement human connections. He also describes futuristic, animal-like machinery and machines of surveillance. Thus, a digging machine is compared to “a wolf spider or praying mantis” (Hamid 2018, 180) and a drone, “part of a swarm, no longer than a hummingbird” (Hamid 2018, 210) crashes at Saeed’s feet and he decides to give it a proper burial. The precarious border between animate beings and machines narrows and Hamid’s novel could be read as a post-human “meta-allegory” (White 2019). Its textuality not only points at its indeterminacy but also stages the condition of its interpretation “in the face of an increasingly uncertain global space” (White 2019, 14). What Hamid and Hanif probably wish to achieve by placing their novels in a culturally distanced, unlabelled space is to open up their work to a global audience. By avoiding a specific topographic and onomastic Pakistani or Middle Eastern context, which would hinder a transparent reading of the world, Hamid and Hanif write their novels as “relational spheres” (Bourriaud 2002 43) which can accommodate a global readership.

Mohsin Hamid is aware of his ambivalent position as a global best-selling author “marketing” (Huggan 2001) a form of exoticism for Western audiences, both creating “dissensus” (Brauer 2019) and also conforming to the demands of the transnational market economy. *Exit West* is now a household name: it appeared on Barack Obama’s Summer 2018 reading list. The novel is also set to be adapted as a television series for Netflix by the Russo brothers and produced by the Obamas⁶. Although, in a way, as a postcolonial writer Mohsin Hamid is “marketing” the precariat, his aesthetic choices point toward a form of hermeneutical resistance which challenges the readers, thus achieving a form of ethical gesture. Mohammed Hanif, as a multilingual journalist – Hanif writes regular columns and op-eds in English, Urdu, and Punjabi – and anglophone novelist also stands as a cultural translator between the precariat of refugees and a Western audience. Both novelists occupy ethical positions, making the experience of silenced and invisible populations “narratable”. The two novels relate to a global reading, primarily those familiar with satire and who might not be put off by the presence of distanced magical realist elements. The ultimate aim is to ethically draw this reading public into a diegetic universe marked by differences: the precarious world of migrants and refugees, but also one marked by aesthetic differences. The combination of the two dimensions, political and aesthetic, closes the gap between the two worlds so that the precariat and global readers can share the common ground of postcolonial ethical fiction.

NOTES:

1. UNCHR definitions are available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-view-point-refugee-migrant-right.html>

2. Claire Chambers points at an incoherence in Hamid's description of the Sydney neighbourhood as white and privileged whereas, in fact, it's a rundown neighbourhood next to Sydney's Railway Station frequented by drug addicts. (Chambers 2019 n.19)

3. Significantly, one of Mohammed Hanif's work is an inquest and collection of testimonies on political violence and state repression in Balochistan: *The Baloch Who Is Not Missing & Others Who Are*. Lahore: Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2013.

4. Saad Shafqat, "Profile: Sabeen Mahmud": Striving for Better." *Dawn*. 18 September 2008. See also: "Director T2F Sabeen Mahmud shot dead in Karachi", *Dawn*, 24 April 2015; "Sabeen Mahmud", *Dawn*, April 5, 2018.

5. I use the operatic image deliberately since Mohammed is the author with Mohammad Fairouz, of an opera on Benazir Bhutto. Sources: "Opera on Benazir Bhutto's life set to premiere in US", *Global Village Space*. 28 November 2018. <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/opera-on-benazir-bhuttos-life-set-to-premiere-in-us/>; "Opera show based on late Benazir Bhutto's life to open

in USA next”. *Something Haute*. November 28, 2018. <https://www.somethinghaute.com/opera-show-bhutto-based-on-late-benazir-bhuttos-life-to-open-in-usa-next-year/>. He is also the author of two radio plays, *What Now, Now That We Are Dead?* (2007) and *The Dictator's Wife* (2008).

6. Barack Obama’s reading list is widely published every year. One reference among many: Tyler Coates, “Barack Obama Reminded Us What It’s Like To Have a President Who Reads”. *Esquire*. 18 August 2018. <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/g22776537/barack-obama-summer-reading-list-2018/>. For the Netflix project information is already available on the IMDB platform: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7255366/>

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