Existential Anxiety and Spatial Reconstruction in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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ABSTRACT

Existentialists, while seeking meaning within the depths of human existence, examine human freedom, responsibilities, and choices. As individuals are responsible for every choice they make, a state of anxiety emerges as an intrinsic part of their existence during these choices. Meanwhile, space serves as the stage upon which human beings exist and navigate their existential journey, marked by these very responsibilities and decisions. In his novel *Exit West* (2017), British Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid addresses the issue of migration, which has become a global problem today, rendering the existential journeys of the protagonists Nadia and Saeed to produce a literary solution to this global issue. He invites his readers to witness not only a story of migration but also an existential journey through the magic doors he opens by using magical realism in the novel. He problematizes borders as the greatest locus of the age and facticity in the existential sense. Consequently, he attempts to demonstrate how this anxiety can be transcended in various spaces constructed using the magical realism technique. Each space reconstructed by the author promises new opportunities for the characters to make sense of their existence on the path to authenticity. Thus, the anxiety-inducing boundaries of geographical borders become an existential issue in the novel, while the imaginary line between ontological space and physical place disappears.
Keywords: Existentialism, Ontology, Anxiety, Mohsin Hamid, Space

Introduction

> "The anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time." (Foucault, 1986, 23).

Can doors serve as portals not for simply entering physical buildings but for transcending existential anxieties? In Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017), generally approached through the lenses of migration and postcolonial studies, an extraordinary existential journey unfolds, offering different perspectives on the concept of space, an enduring source of anxiety since Foucault's exploration of it. Amidst this narrative, the author constructs four main spaces in the existential journey of Nadia and Saeed, the protagonists. Through the magical doors that interlink these spaces, Hamid illustrates that spatial transitions extend beyond mere physical relocation. These constructed spaces intricately shape the characters' inner worlds and their relationships with others as they struggle with existential anxieties. Serving as both catalysts for existential anxieties and ontological realms, these spaces are reimagined by the author through the enchantment of magic doors, providing the characters with avenues to transcend these anxieties.

While proponents of existentialism offer several ontological approaches to exploring the nature of being, the existence of a human being, unlike that of inanimate objects, is uniquely shaped by a series of moments comprising individualized and concrete experiences. Thus, rather than adhering to a comprehensive ontological philosophy, certain existential concepts, such as "facticity," "thrownness," "abandonment," "authenticity," and "bad faith," find resonance in literary works through the lived experiences of fictional characters. Likewise, human beings mold their identities through interactions with others and engagement with the physical environment. In this sense, the novel illustrates how the deconstruction of physical boundaries via magic doors blurs the distinction between ontological space and physical place.

As a comprehensive philosophical approach encompassing experiential, ethical, theological and temporal dimensions, existentialism is examined in this study within the framework of anxiety along with the relevant existential concepts based on individual experiences. To ensure coherence, the inclusion of existentialist philosophers is restricted to those whose philosophical heritage significantly influences the discourse. Specifically, this study explores existential thoughts originating from Soren Kierkegaard's

phenomenology, subsequently evolving in the arguments of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, albeit with minor spatial variations, and analyzes how these concepts intersect with Nadia and Saeed's existential journeys toward authenticity in the novel. Simultaneously, this study attempts to reveal how the existentialist ideas manifested in the novel serve Hamid's intention to address a universal issue, facilitated by his utilization of the magical realism technique.

On Existentialism and Existential Anxiety

Existentialism stands as a philosophical movement that elaborates on fundamental issues such as responsibilities, choices, and individual freedom regarding human life. It endeavors to comprehend the inner anxieties inherent in an individual's existence. Proponents of this movement grapple extensively with human concerns regarding existence, free will, and freedom. Within existential philosophy, anxiety emerges as a fundamental aspect of human existence, leading to specific insights on how to understand and navigate the existential worries that individuals face as they contemplate the significance of their lives. Sarah Bakewell (2016) endeavors to delineate the common tenets of existential philosophy through the story of existentialism in her book:

> Existentialists concern themselves with individual, concrete human existence.
> — They consider human existence different from the kind of being other things have. Other entities are what they are, but as a human I am whatever I choose to make of myself at every moment. I am free —
> — and therefore I'm responsible for everything I do, a dizzying fact which causes
> —an anxiety inseparable from human existence itself. (p. 34)

Bakewell (2016) concludes her all-encompassing definition by emphasizing that human existence, despite its constraints, is transcendent and exhilarating. She asserts that existentialists aim to awaken individuals to live more authentically (p. 34). According to Bakewell, the absence of a systematic existentialist approach suggests the presence of a collection of existential thoughts rather than a specific existential philosophy. However, there are similarities in various aspects, such as the rejection of traditional philosophical notions characterized by rationalism and positivism, a shared perspective on methodological approaches, and the centrality of human existence. Hence, when

examining this philosophical approach within the context of emotions such as anxiety, fear, and insecurity, it becomes pertinent to examine the conceptual approaches of existentialists such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre.

Emerging as a beacon of inspiration for subsequent existentialists, Kierkegaard's philosophy is shaped by concepts such as free will, self-determination, and individual experience. Although these concepts do not inherently offer a transparent system, when intertwined with ontological notions such as freedom, anxiety, despair, existence, and subjectivity, they lay the foundations of an existential approach in the modern sense. Kierkegaard posits that existence, as he defines it, is inherently tied to the human condition, urging individuals to strive toward their authentic selves. In this sense, the self emerges as a synthesis of limiting finite and expansive infinite polarities (Kierkegaard, 1989, p. 60). The concept of the infinite is characterized by the process of reconstruction or recreation, self-transformation, and the act of choosing among potential options. Conversely, the finite represents necessity and the facticity that arises from it. If viewed as a voyage, the journey toward selfhood necessitates balancing these opposing tensions in a manner that is personal and individualistic. Moreover, individuals are called upon to demonstrate qualities such as awareness, consciousness, effort, and courage throughout this process. Ontological anxiety emerges as an essential component of the path toward selfhood, constituting a crisis that is anticipated as individuals transition from mere existence to becoming.

In his unique philosophical approach, which bears traces of phenomenology and influences postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives, Heidegger ascribes distinct meanings to existential concepts. Central to Heidegger's philosophy is the notion of Dasein, which he defines as "being there." David West (1997) interprets Dasein as follows: "Dasein is from the beginning both 'Being-in-the-world' and 'Being-with-others' […] Dasein thus bears no resemblance to the detached and contemplative consciousness or '*theoria*' of the western philosophical tradition" (p. 101). Dasein, therefore, embodies a being-in-the-world that exists concerning others, presenting a relational model of existing. Heidegger further links the ontological structure of Dasein to the concept of thrownness, which signifies being thrown into a particular lifeworld and being born into a specific geography or family that Dasein did not choose. Dasein is inherently intertwined with its environment and exists perpetually in relation to the world. Anxiety, according to Heidegger, arises as a fundamental response to this environment. It is confronted with a sense of not feeling at home or feeling unhomely in the world with

which one is connected, a state he refers to as "unheimlichkeit" meaning uncanniness or "not-being-at-home" (2001, p. 233). Additionally, anxiety emerges from the condition of facticity by Dasein. Facticity encompasses the existential definiteness of Dasein and the concreteness of life shaped by preceding historical conditions that restrict human capability for self-awareness and self-realization. Thus, facticity is associated with the state in which the thrown Dasein finds itself unable to exercise free will.

Sartrean existentialism introduces the concept of transcendence to overcome the limitations associated with facticity. Despite being limited by the situational facts of facticity, humans possess the faculty of decision-making, which operates based on personal preferences and enables them to chart new alternatives to attain freedom. This idea is described in the maxim of Sartre's existential philosophy: "Existence precedes essence" (2007, p. 22). According to Sartre, this principle is foundational to existentialism, as it posits that individuals first exist and then create their essence. The essence or nature of a human being is not predetermined; hence, "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards" (2007, p. 22). This sequencing suggests that essence emerges after existence, fostering a process in which individuals become the architects of their identities to build an essential sense of self. Throughout this process, individuals encounter various stages that trigger and alleviate existential anxiety depending on their actions or inaction. Initially, individuals must face their responsibility resulting from being thrown into the world, a concept Sartre terms abandonment. Since humans find themselves abandoned, they must recognize that there are no predetermined sets of values, social institutions, norms, or signs to guide them. According to Sartre, "such abandonment entails anguish" (2007, p. 34). Humans must navigate life by making decisions and defining themselves through these decisions. The weight of this responsibility following abandonment burdens their existence, accompanied by despair, grief, and dread, a state Sartre describes as anguish. Once the mood of anguish triggers individuals to consciously realize their freedom, they begin to question the possibility of other options. Refusing to acknowledge that other options exist and could be considered for changing and improving one's life amounts to blocking those options. This not only denies the truth but also freedom, sharply contrasting with the notion that essence follows existence. Simply put, reducing existence to a single possibility, for Sartre, indicates bad faith. In his preface to *Being and Nothingness*, Richard Eyre (2003) contends that "we evade responsibility by not exploiting the possibilities of choice; in short, by not being fully human" (p. ix). Eyre implies that avoiding the truth or engaging in self-deception impedes authenticity

and stimulates inauthenticity, hindering individuals from fully realizing their humanity. Therefore, authenticity, as Sartre asserts in a footnote, entails avoiding bad faith and represents a form of "self-recovery of being" (2003, p. 94, note 9). In this context, authenticity can be attained through transcendence, which liberates individuals from the constraints of facticity.

On Existential Spatialization

In contemplating existential spatialization, it is crucial to examine various theosophical perspectives that have shaped our understanding of space over time. Alongside an Aristotelian preoccupation with the unity of place, which Edward Casey (1997) interprets as a finite and independent topos (p. 52), Cartesian thought introduces a new dimension to spatiality by conceptualizing it as a geometrical and volumetric extension (Casey, 1997, p. 161). It is essential to understand Descartes's thesis, which aims to separate the *res extensa* from the *res cogitans*, thereby establishing human beings as independent subjects distinct from the physical space surrounding them.

Contrary to Cartesian belief that has governed modern conceptualizations of space, Heidegger, with his deconstructionist perspective, posits that space is an integral aspect of human existential experience. He describes Dasein's existential spatiality through the concept of being-in-the-world, signifying Dasein's existence as an indivisible whole concerning its interaction with space (2001, p. 78). Consequently, the process of spatialization entails a totality of ontological contents that are not mutually exclusive but rather all-encompassing. This formulation suggests that humans exist within the world, along with their comprehension of the world and their experiences, that they significantly contribute to the reconstruction of the world as a distinctive space: "In every understanding of the world, existence is understood with it, and *vice versa*" (2001, p. 194). Heidegger (2001) also defines "environment" as "a suggestion of spatiality" emphasizing the connection with being-in-the-world (p. 94). Departing from the traditional context, Heidegger emphasizes that the environment, as a field imbued with both physical and existential significance, shapes the existential experience concerning the relationship between humans and space. Moreover, Heidegger (2006) distinguishes between building and dwelling in the environment. He contends that "to dwell is to be set at peace, to remain within the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature" and the essence of dwelling lies in the act of "this sparing and preserving" (p. 69). By considering Dasein's reciprocal with the world, wherein, as Richard

Polt (1999) argues, "Dasein happens to be" through "dwelling in it" (p. 64), Heideggerian existentialism challenges the conventional understanding of space not necessarily through the ontological structure of Dasein but also through the emotions that arise in its connection to the outside world.

Sartre's perspective also considers space as an arena where human reality intersects with other beings and shapes itself, positing that individuals freely navigate the possibilities of coexisting within this space. The model Sartre presents through the relationship of humans with other existences highlights that individuals and their sentimentality, which directly impact their authenticity, are embedded in a space where they occupy positions as both subjects and objects. Sartre's elaboration on the distinction between the subject and object in spatial terms warrants further discussion. He argues that the socio-cultural environment, with its diverse realities, including "hodological space," interactively shapes human existence. Over time, human becomes "a product of his product, fashioned by his work" and "at the same time exists in the milieu of his products" (1963, p. 79). Edward Soja (1989) clarifies this Sartrean spatiality, asserting that the most significant existentialists focus on this undeniable connection in their primary studies. According to Soja, Sartre's and Heidegger's philosophies are underpinned by "situated" or "regional ontology," wherein the fusion of existence and spatiality is explicable through the inherent actions of being-in-the-world and its relations with other entities. This combination grants individuals a space in life, termed "emplacement," which denotes a comprehensive linkage between "subject and object, Human Being and Nature, the individual and the environment, human geography and human history" (pp. 133–134). Consequently, phenomena such as time, space, geography, history, nature, and the environment emerge as factors that both influence and are influenced by human existence.

Echoes of Being in a City with No Name

In "Echoes of Being in a City with No Name," the author introduces the first fictional space in the novel as an unnamed city, initially portrayed as predominantly peaceful. However, this city, to which Nadia and Saeed are involuntarily thrown, foreshadows the impending impact of the place on them very soon. Hamid (2017) characterizes the city as "mostly at peace," suggesting that it is "at least not openly at war … teetering at the edge of the abyss" (p. 3). This introductory depiction of the unnamed city underscores the start of spatial displacement. In a similar vein, the author prompts readers to confront

an ontological reality, touching on the inevitable trial of human existence: "That is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying" (Hamid, 2017, p. 4). In alignment with the ontological relationship among being, space, and death, Hamid indicates that upon their existence, Nadia and Saeed are immediately confronted with a high likelihood of death. In this unnamed city, where the characters often grapple with the fear of death, the author does not perceive death as a static end that awaits experience. As Jacques Choron (1963) articulates, death, in the Heideggerian sense, is a dynamic phenomenon that is inseparable from life (pp. 234–235). Hamid (2017) echoes this perspective in the novel, stating that in cities on the brink of collapse, "our eternally impending ending does not stop our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does" (p. 4). By implying that death, as a dynamic force, permeates the unnamed city, the author also provides an initial portrayal of space through the lens of the fear of death, which emerges as a central component of existential anxiety. This existential anxiety intensifies as the characters are reminded of their mortality, particularly when Nadia's cousin, an immigrant doctor, is "blown by a truck bomb to bits" (2017, p. 31), and Saeed's mother is killed by "a stray heavy-caliber round passing through the windshield of her family's car and taking with it a quarter of [her] head" (2017, pp. 74–75). The recurrence of such reminders, when coupled with their anxiety about facing death, reinforces their awareness of their existence as mortal beings, thus contributing to their being-in-the-world.

As Hamid introduces the first fictional space, he also presents the relationships between the main characters, Saeed and Nadia, within a framework that aligns with the concept of being-with-others. The initial encounter between Nadia and Saeed holds particular significance because it illustrates how the space shapes individual identity formation and interpersonal relationships. In the novel, the unnamed city is depicted as a place where radical religious groups enforce their ideologies, leading to anxiety regarding the acceptance of individuals' identities and values by others. Nadia's first reaction to Saeed carries weight within this context. The first question she poses to Saeed, who seeks to meet her, revolves around whether he will partake in the evening prayer (2017, p. 4). This question highlights the centrality of religious choice in the unnamed city, especially in terms of how it may impact individuals' acceptance within the community. In their first interaction, Saeed experiences this anxiety more than Nadia. As he attempts to express his thoughts, he touches on the issue of freedom in accordance with an existentialist explanation: "I think it's personal: "Each of us has his own way. Or… her own way. Nobody's perfect. And, in any case—" (2017, p. 5). Saeed's concerns stem from the possibility that

Nadia's beliefs may align with the prevailing conservative view in the city, posing a potential obstacle to his responsibility in choosing his religious practices.

Nadia and Saeed's residing in the unnamed city, alongside their families, serves as a significant determinant influencing their authentic individuality. The author portrays Saeed as a character who adheres to patriarchal traditions and finds contentment within familial norms. In contrast, Nadia is depicted as rebellious, forging an identity that defies societal norms and traditions. These norms and traditions within the family, as argued by Selçuk Şentürk (2020), create a "gendered space" where "men and women are expected to follow rigid gender specific roles that are prescribed as ideal" (p. 164). Consequently, the rules and traditions governing her family environment, similar to those of the city where she resides, limit her journey toward personal freedom. The challenges Nadia faces in reconciling her differences with her family's expectations alienate her from this space, prompting her quest for a new home. Essentially, the expectations of her family and the societal norms containing her existence provoke Nadia's existential anxieties, necessitating the reconstruction of both her space and identity to assert her authentic individuality. Despite the significance of her decision to move out and live alone, thereby demanding spatial change and revealing her ontological free will, her anxieties persist. Her experiences in the unnamed city as a single woman present additional obstacles to maintaining her authentic individuality. She faces loathsome and perilous events as well as encounters with aggressive men, necessitating her constant vigilance (2017, pp. 22-23). In a poignant passage where Nadia rides a motorcycle at night, the author highlights the heightened sense of insecurity experienced by women within the unnamed city, even in times of peace: "A burly man […] turned to Nadia and […] began to swear at her, saying only a whore would drive a motorcycle, didn't she know it was obscene for a woman to straddle a bike in that way" (2017, pp. 42–43). These biological facts, social norms, and gender issues prevalent in the unnamed city are depicted as facticity, encapsulating realities that can limit freedom. Nadia must grapple with whether she transcends these sources of existential anxiety after confronting them. The various spaces she inhabits, from her workplace to her home and the unnamed city itself, can also be considered manifestations of Simone de Beauvoir's ontological concept of facticity:

> Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into "in-itself," of freedom into facticity […] if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression […] But

what singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence. (2011, p. 16)

Beauvoir highlights the confinement of women in predominantly masculine spaces, wherein facticity remains beyond Nadia's ability to change or control as a woman. However, she consistently takes decisive actions, transcending bad faith instead of succumbing to it. Despite her protective stands, Nadia encounters existential anxieties throughout decision-making. The heightened anxiety experienced by Nadia in navigating choices within the unnamed city, particularly influenced by gender norms, underscores her entrapment with facticity. Unlike Saeed, Nadia grapples with anxieties stemming from societal expectations, elucidating the impact of societal structure on autonomy. Her resilience amidst these challenges underscores her ongoing quest for authenticity.

The spatial transformation of the unnamed city, depicted in a negative sense, unveils another outstanding point that promotes existential anxiety among the characters. This transformation unfolds in two ways. First, as the city shifts from its familiar and authentic appearance to embrace a more capitalist structure, it triggers emotional states, particularly among the older inhabitants. The author draws a contrast between Saeed's family's past lifestyle in the city and its current state to underscore the anxieties created by the transforming environment. Once vibrant places like the cinema where Saeed's parents first met, their favorite bookshops, restaurants, and cafes have disappeared, replaced by modern edifices such as neon-lit shopping arcades selling computers and electronic equipment (Hamid, 2017, pp. 12-13). This city, once the cherished home of Saeed's parents, now feels unfamiliar and unhomely, a place they no longer recognize as their own, evoking feelings of not belonging. Hamid adds that "when walking by the arcade, and seeing that old name on its new neon sign," Saeed's parents would smile or pause, upon remembering how they used to live in that same place (2017, p. 13). Each time they see this building, they are reminded of the comfort, security, and significance it once held in their lives. Now, they find themselves appreciating the sense of comfort and security that they experienced earlier. The second, which is the most significant transformation, occurs with the devastation wrong upon the unnamed city due to war, exposing the characters to scenes previously unimaginable. The author portrays the nameless city not only merely as a physical space with defined boundaries but also as a space where Nadia and Saeed are required to initiate their existential journey. The scenes of the bloody and devastating

war within the city lead them to be lost between the destruction of their past and the uncertainty of their future. As the author reveals the spatial metamorphosis of the city, it becomes evident that now, "only death await[s] Nadia and Saeed in this city" (Hamid, 2017, p. 97). Stemming from the effects of alienation and insecurity on their emotional well-being, an existential form of anxiety is now intensely felt in their little cubicles walled by the refugees lying on the streets, the sounds of helicopters and gunfire, destroyed houses, bombs falling from the sky, and dead human bodies hanging like ornaments.

Nadia and Saeed's reliance on their mobile phones, coupled with their experimentation with psychedelic mushrooms, leads them to experience social disconnection and isolation from the unnamed city, where they struggle with existential anxieties posed by its spatial transformation. Before the author constructs a new city for them through magical realism, this mode of escape evokes "the feeling of awe" (Hamid, 2017, p. 46). However, within an ontological context, it lacks the elements of individual choice and responsibility essential for authenticity. Furthermore, it fails to serve as a means of transcending the existential anxieties rooted in spatial dimensions; instead, it merely offers temporary respite, delaying the inevitable confrontation with these anxieties. Thus, Hamid employs an unconventional fictional technique, reshaping spaces to provide her characters with an alternative means of dealing with their existential anxieties. By revealing Nadia and Saeed's desire to assert their authenticity as individuals, the author highlights their intention to leave the city at the earliest opportunity (Hamid, 2017, p. 95). However, they find themselves embroiled in an ontological process, navigating through a sense of nothingness and anxiety. Saeed, for instance, constantly entertains leaving the city, yet this contemplation fills him with profound sorrow due to his allegiance to his home. Conversely, Nadia appears more excited about the prospect of her departure, yet she is also "haunted by worries" stemming from the possible threats they might encounter (Hamid, 2017, p. 95). Caught in the tension between the facticity of their past, from which they remain trapped, and the uncertainties of the future, the characters are reminded of their agency as free beings, compelled to make decisions regarding the spatial upheaval unfolding around them. This predicament engenders existential anxiety, which is characterized by the revelation of nothingness when Dasein confronts its being.

The-Rebirth-of-Being: Mykonos and London

Mykonos emerges as an intermediate space meticulously constructed by the author, serving as the inaugural step in the characters' existential journeys, thereby

preventing them from being captivated in a state of bad faith. Within Mykonos, the perception of space undergoes a profound transformation, fascinating Nadia and Saeed in both shedding their past and embracing a new existential journey. The jarring images of tanks, bombs, and firearms are replaced by the tranquil expanse of the sea and the inviting allure of the beach, which make these characters aware of the beauty of the space and the reasons why people prefer to visit here (Hamid, 2017, p. 113). Mykonos is also a reconstructed space in the novel where they can recognize the outcomes of their choice in giving different meanings to their existence. Thus, the author places the significance of choice, or the condemnation of bad faith resulting from its absence, through the character of Saeed's father, who accepts his fate by staying in the unnamed city. Despite the existence of a two-dimensional option, one that promises freedom, his inability to depart, driven by his lingering attachment to his deceased wife, encapsulates self-deception or bad faith as a type of determinism. As noted by Thomas Anderson (1993), "the individual in bad faith denies one of these dimensions of his or her reality and identifies his or her self with the other […] what makes such denial bad faith […] is that the individual is lying to him" (p. 15). Saeed's father does not take responsibility for embracing his authentic selfhood and maintains daily practices in the unnamed city, engaging in what existentialists call "everydayness." He still visits his surviving relatives, with whom he drinks tea and coffee, and discusses the past (Hamid, 2017, pp. 86-87). The biggest issue challenging authenticity is everydayness. As Joanna Handerek contends, "It is in everydayness that the whole world of man, with his culture, activities, phenomena, material and intentional events is enclosed" (1988, p. 191). Thus, while death serves as a supplementary principle of life for existentialists, the death of Saeed's father due to pneumonia in the unnamed city is related to the situation of a man who abandons himself to death in a state of bad faith.

Unlike Saeed's father, who denies his responsibility and freedom and is trapped in bad faith, the departure of Nadia and Saeed from the unnamed city indicates the rebirth of an ontological being with a sense of self-consciousness and a capacity to project into the future. As elucidated by Johannes Fritsche (1999), authentic Dasein perceives "the present" considering "today," and understands that it faces "a dangerous situation, "which tends to produce "the separation between the Daseine that have fate and those that do not" (p. 67). In the novel, Hamid aligns the transformation of Nadia and Saeed with a rebirth, symbolized by their passage through the magical doorway leading to Mykonos:

> It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it, and she felt cold and bruised and damp as she lay on the floor of the room at the other side, trembling and too spent at first to stand, and she thought, while she strained to fill her lungs, that this dampness must be her own sweat. Saeed was emerging and Nadia crawled forward to give him space. (2017, p. 104)

The author describes both the rebirth of existence and the reconstruction of space, where the concepts of being-in-the-world and being-with-others take on new dimensions within Mykonos. This process of reconstruction introduces new existential anxieties, accompanied by security concerns in this intermediate space: "Decent people vastly outnumbered dangerous ones, but it was probably best to be in the camp, near other people, after nightfall" (Hamid, 2017, p. 107). However, despite the presence of others, Saeed finds himself grappling with a sense of hopelessness as their being-in-the-world fails to establish a relational symbiosis with other beings. Furthermore, the limited access to opportunities in Mykonos leaves them with a sense of transience, lacking belonging or permanence in this new environment.

Upon traversing through the magical doors once more, Nadia and Saeed find themselves in the bustling metropolis of London, embarking on yet another iteration of the thrownness process. These magic doors essentially offer them the opportunity to re-engage with their existential journey, with London serving as a space that the author reconstructs for the protagonists so that they can make sense of these experiences in their existential journey. Compared to their arrival in Mykonos, the characters, although holding the responsibility for making decisions about the replacement in the thrownness stage, continue to have anxieties about what they will encounter as they do not know where they are being thrown. Nadia and Saeed, on the other hand, strive to lead a new life in London and integrate into the new society formed due to demographic changes in the city. In fact, their search for space is an existential battle for them, and these spaces are a battleground where they struggle to leave with victory. In other words, the comfort and peace they long for is "about being human, living as a human being, reminding oneself of what one was" and it is "worth a fight" (Hamid, 2017, p. 126). Consequently, the characters are forced to confront phenomena such as violence, hunger, the problem of coexistence, and the fear of death on these battlefields. In this sense, while the author

opens a space of freedom for the characters in London, he also underlines the limits that a new space brings to them. One of the reasons that prompt Nadia and Saeed's existential anxieties here is that they have to live not in "light London," but in "dark London," where these boundaries and barriers are intensely felt among refugees. Food shortage (Hamid, 2017, p. 133), attacks from nativist extremists (Hamid, 2017, p. 135), and attempts of operation by British regiments (Hamid, 2017, p. 162) have become new threats.

The narrative takes a sudden turn as the author explicitly articulates the idea that the true essence of coexistence can flourish within reconstructed spaces devoid of boundaries. As government officials come to recognize this existential reality, they acknowledge that "the denial of coexistence" would ultimately lead to the obliteration of one party (Hamid, 2017, p. 166). Consequently, they sanctioned the construction of housing developments to accommodate immigrants in the newly christened cities of London Halo (Hamid, 2017, p. 169). This shift in the narrative, symbolized by the construction of houses and the newfound tolerance toward immigrants, suggests the potential for a secure and peaceful environment conducive to the characters' existential journeys. However, Hamid seems to highlight the ideational difference between building and genuine dwelling, which is in line with Heidegger's ideas. According to Heidegger (2006), not all building equates to true dwelling, as "building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling" (p. 67). Building houses may provide "shelter," but it does not "guarantee" dwelling for an existential being (Heidegger, 2006, p. 66). Thus, while Hamid portrays the availability of housing opportunities in London for the characters, he also underlines the lack of emotional and psychological conditions essential for true dwelling. The London Halo project gives Saeed the feeling that they are "remodeling" the world (Hamid, 2017, p. 178). However, the author remarks that the existence of the characters here undergoes a dramatic transformation: "the shades we reflect depend much on what is around us. So it was with Nadia and Saeed, who found themselves changed in each other's eyes in this new place" (Hamid, 2017, p. 186). The existential perceptions of the characters, whose presences have contributed much to each other from the outset of the novel, begin to evolve into different dimensions. Rather than drawing an elaborative description of this new space, the author, throughout the chapter, mostly emphasizes that the existential crisis aroused in them due to the spatial change gives them pain and sorrow. As Gaston Bachelard remarks in *The Poetics of Space*, this approach could be argued as evidence illustrating the author's affinity with a phenomenologist perspective. According to Bachelard (1994), a geographer or an ethnographer describes the forms of dwellings. However, a phenomenologist surpasses

the limitations of superficial descriptions to understand "the germ of the essential, sure, immediate well-being it encloses," in an attempt to attain the "original shell" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 4). Consequently, Bachelard prioritizes emotional nuances and the picture of a "psychological phenomenon" rather than superficial additions (1994, p. 4). Hamid's attempts to transmit existential anxiety are re-triggered by highlighting Nadia and Saeed's alienation from each other as a psychological phenomenon, which indicates that the characters have not completed their existential journey. Thus, he compelled the characters to take responsibility and choose again between bad faith and authenticity, entering into the process of constructing a new space where Nadia and Saeed, who are "filled with hope," expect that "they would be able to rekindle their relationship, to reconnect with their relationship, as it had been not long ago, and to elude, through a distance spanning a third of the globe, what it seemed in danger of becoming" (Hamid, 2017, p. 189). The desire for reconnection on the brink of physical separation fosters a tendency to seek new spaces.

The Beginning of the End: Marin

In his depiction of Marin, the author portrays it as a city imbued with a "less violent" temperament and scenic beauty, possessing "a spirit of at least intermittent optimism" (Hamid, 2017, p. 194). Within this setting, the characters are involved in the socioeconomic structure. The author gives the impression that, in Marin, the characters are very close to resolving the conflicts between existence and essence that they have experienced thus far. Nadia and Saeed, in particular, exhibit notable progress in making sense of their existence in each place that the author has reconstructed. This latest spatial creation assumes an important role in shaping the fate of the characters' existence. The situation can be expressed more clearly with the concept of ontological temporality, which points to a rhizomatic structure of the dynamic process of being in their becoming and changing (Röck, 2017, p. 42), since, in the novel, temporarily, along with space, is one of the most important factors that directly determines the independence of the authentic self after confronting its existential anxieties. Correspondingly, Professor Joseph Fell (1979), in his *An Essay on Being and Place*, sees Sartre's concept of temporality as a "synthetic totality" and emphasizes that the past, present, and future are not separate dimensions in terms of shaping the consciousness of humans as being-for-itself (pp. 86–87). At this point, the experiences of the characters in the unnamed city, Mykonos, and London affect their responsibilities and choices in Marin and become a factor that determines their future states of freedom.

Saeed's growing interest in religion and Nadia's disclosure of homosexual tendencies in Marin lead to the characters' distancing from each other and eventually their separation. Although it may seem like a separation, it shows that they have taken the most important step in terms of existential freedom. The most important point that the author attempts to reveal in Marin is that Nadia and Saaed's love is now an emotional state that prevents them from being their authentic selves. According to Sartre (2003), the relationship between love and the freedom of the individual is conflictual because practical love limits freedom. For an individual, a relationship based on love carries the risk of transitioning from being a subject to being an object. Thus, he/she conforms to the expectations and desires of the lover, which undermines their autonomous choices (Sartre, 2003, pp. 388–394). The love that provides emotional support for Nadia and Saeed in prior spaces now appears to turn into existential anxiety in revealing their identities and claiming their freedom in Marin. In other words, the characters evolve into lovers who objectify each other in Marin. The author, for example, draws attention to the uneasiness between them just before they separate and become the individuals they desire to be:

> Jealousy did rear itself in their shanty from time to time, and the couple that was uncoupling did argue, but mostly they granted each other more space, a process that had been ongoing for quite a while, and if there was sorrow and alarm in this, there was relief too, and the relief was stronger. (Hamid, 2017, p. 204)

As Sartre manifests in his views on love, the characters experience a conflict between freedom and a sense of ownership. When the act of restriction disappears by creating a field of freedom, the mood of anxiety is replaced by tranquillity.

On the one hand, the author opens magical doors to the spaces he reconstructs using magical realism, which provides the characters with the possibility of overcoming their existential anxieties. However, he interrupts the story at regular intervals by applying another postmodern method, a fragmented narrative, and reinforces the existential messages he attempts to convey through the lives of other people. In this last part of the novel, the author invites his readers to engage in an ontological question through the choices and responsibilities of two different people. Unlike Nadia and Saeed, the characters in these stories display the traits of an inauthentic self that cannot escape bad faith. With the story of a woman who lives "in the same house her entire life" in Palo Alto (Hamid, 2017, p. 207), the author underlines that resisting spatial change

in the novel is incongruent with the dynamics of existence now: "when she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it" (Hamid, 2017, p. 209). Particularly, Hamid's story of a maid in Marrakesh bears considerable resemblance to Sartre's example of a café waiter. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (2003) makes an analogy concerning a café waiter whose actions and behaviors reflect an excessive embodiment of the stereotypical waiter persona. By displaying a quick and exaggerated manner, the waiter dedicates himself to satisfying the needs of the customers. Sartre claims that he impersonates the role of a waiter, a person he does not inherently want to be. Thus, he portrays himself as an object within that place and consciously engages in self-deception (Sartre, 2003, pp. 82-83). Just like Sartre's waiter, Hamid's maid in the novel plays a rigidly defined role, acting like a maid, which renders her passively detached and oblivious to all the possibilities that free will may present to her. The occupation of the maid, who does not even know her age, seems to be akin to merely aging and exchanging "the magic of months for bank notes and food (Hamid, 2017, p. 225). Even though the maid's daughter offers her to change her fate through the magic doors, the maid always says "no" because she has "a sense of the fragility of things" and feels like "a small plant in a small patch of soil held between the rocks of a dry and windy place" and thinks she is "not wanted by the world" (Hamid, 2017, p. 224). Using these stories that exemplify the concepts of bad faith and being-in-itself to vindicate Nadia and Saeed's situations, the author reveals that Nadia and Saeed's being in Marin, the final space constructed to present the alterations in an ontological dimension, saves them from being inanimate objects. Referring to the modes of being, e.g., being-for-itself as inanimate objects and being-for-itself as conscious human beings, Sartre (2003) claims that "the waiter in the café can not be immediately a café waiter in the sense that this inkwell is an inkwell, or the glass is a glass" (p. 83). In this sense, Nadia and Saeed function as "being-for-itself," while the women in the stories reduce themselves to "being-in-itself" and are, consequently, in bad faith.

During their reunion at the end of the novel, when they revisit their place of birth, the emphasis on an intended visit to "the deserts of Chile" (Hamid, 2017, p. 230), which was mentioned as a dream earlier in the novel, shows that they continue their existential journey and that Marin is constructed as a new beginning for the characters. Marin is portrayed as the final setting in the novel; however, it serves as the pivotal space where Nadia and Saeed appear to reconcile the conflict between essence and existence and come closer than ever before to achieving the authentic self. Thus, the final remarks of

the novel gather the past, present, and future dimensions, which are interconnected and essential for each other's existence. In this sense, the author emphasizes that being-for-itself, characterized by facticity, anxieties, relationships, choices, and so on, is always tied to its past. However, at the same time, being-for-itself remains separate from its past until it falls into an ongoing moment in which being derives from its past and orients itself toward its future. This is an escape from the being he is now. In other words, it represents an escape from the being it is now to the being it will be. Being-for-itself is its past, and from now on, it will be its future. The future is a direction toward which being-for-itself must be oriented (Bozkurt, 1984, p. 146). Therefore, revisiting the unnamed city after Marin and implying that Nadia and Saeed will continue their existential journey, the author considers the existential dimensions of the spaces when reconstructing them through magical realism.

Conclusion

In his novel *Exit West*, Hamid emphasizes the emergence of borders as today's paramount facticity, stimulating the existential crisis that causes unprecedented loneliness and despair among individuals. Consequently, navigation through this crisis and the pursuit of authenticity are contemporary concerns. From an ontological perspective, individuals find strength and independence in their struggle to preserve their existence against all odds, an inherent trait within them. In illustrating the activation of this drive, the author employs magic doors to reconstruct spaces whenever Nadia and Saeed encounter seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Thus, the existential anxieties portrayed transcend beyond borders, becoming emblematic of a universal human experience. Within each reconstructed space, the characters undergo transformative existential shifts. Notably, the novel distinguishes itself by portraying the act of reconstructing spaces as a means of enabling transformation rather than resigning to despair.

The deliberate omission of naming the first space symbolizes thrownness, depicting it as "any city" in which characters find themselves involuntarily placed. The protagonists construct their own phenomenal spaces based on their anxieties and subsequent choices, with the reconstructed spaces in the narrative offering opportunities for transcendence and the realization of authentic selves in their existential journeys. As existential anxieties individuate the characters, the author remains subjective regarding Nadia and Saeed's ultimate choices, embracing postmodern pluralism.

In *Exit West,* the characters' migration signifies more than a mere change in geography; it embodies a universal suggestion of creating an authentic self by delving into the depths of existence through a postmodern fictional technique. This suggestion echoes existentialist themes spanning from Kierkegaard to Heidegger and Sartre, emphasizing the ontologically basic in their thoughts, which is the notion that man is condemned to an inescapable freedom. The relocation of the characters constitutes the foundational dynamics of the novel, both in attaining this freedom and in confronting unprecedented anxieties as inherent necessities of existence. Hamid's novel serves as an attraction to delimitation and self-emancipation, thereby acting as an antidote to essentialist notions that rigidly categorize and confine human existence to immutable properties.

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