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Bound for Life

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* is no stranger to the subversion of expectations. Even the novel's two protagonists -- Nadia, a robe-wearing individual who practices no formal religion, and Saeed, a devoutly religious man who nonetheless enjoys smoking marijuana -- evade presumptions. As readers turn the pages of *Exit West*, they slowly learn to expect the unexpected. Even so, there was one element of this novel that caught me particularly off guard, not for its sudden or shocking nature, but rather its anticlimactic one: the ending of Saeed and Nadia's relationship.

In a world so rife with conflict, where mothers, fathers, siblings, sons, daughters, and friends are untimely ripped from each other's arms, one wouldn't expect to see something so commonplace as two lovers slowly drifting apart from each other. It is certainly sad to read that, "Nadia was slipping away from Saeed, and Saeed from Nadia" (Hamid 213) but in the context of the book as a whole this struck me as particularly surprising. Towards the middle of the book I caught myself fully anticipating a tragic ending where one of the two lovers succumbs to the war or the secondary horrors created because of it. But, as Hamid writes, this was far from their fate: "...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" (204). Their ending is brutally real, in a way that a more dramatic depiction simply could not have achieved.

I believe that Hamid portrays the ending of the relationship in this way for a very profound reason, and it has to do with the formation of relationships in the face of conflict. To me, it seems as if struggle has taken on an almost romantic quality in our society when it comes

to forming relationships. While true that conflict may strengthen bonds in general -- as seen in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Boston Marathon Bombing -- our media has pushed this concept past its reality. Instead of serving as events that strengthen bonds generally, conflict has become a force that intertwines destinies. Friends and lovers who struggle together become “bound for life”. The protagonists of countless movies and books form very meaningful but perhaps unrealistically strong relationships as a result of their struggles. Culturally ubiquitous works like the Harry Potter series portray friends that, partially as a result of their conflict, are bound seemingly by destiny. In *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, a perhaps less popular novel that I fondly remember reading when I was younger, the narrator even states outright just how close the main characters had become in the span of a few days because of the tense situation they found themselves in. In real life, however, relationships formed in conflict are not nearly as clear cut.

Exit West thus helps to fill an important gap in our cultural understanding by showing that shared suffering does not mean two individuals have shared destinies, nor that they must remain together after the suffering has ended, or even while the suffering continues. Real human beings are not “bound for life”. As much as we might wish to believe in the romantically appealing idea of permanent connection, Hamid’s portrayal of Saeed and Nadia’s relationship subverts the expectations established by countless relationships before it and helps bring us back, if a bit disappointingly, to reality.

Even more interesting is that Hamid’s portrayal is not just a guess at what a counterbalance to the traditional romanticized narrative of relationships might look like. It has a basis in psychological fact. I love my connections to social psychology, and here’s another opportunity to comment on one. According to our modern understanding, there are two major

kinds of love: passionate love and companionate love. Passionate love is the most forceful: it is the insatiable desire to be around a partner, the intense love and lust one feels when first falling into a relationship. Companionate love, on the other hand, is much more of a slow burn: it is like the love between friends, a deep care and concern for the other individual that, while not as “passionate” as passionate love, is much longer lasting. Typical relationships begin with passionate love that tends to last for less than two years. If the relationship is unsuccessful, this period of bliss may well end in the termination of the love entirely. If the relationship is successful, however, a couple slowly transitions into companionate love that lasts for much longer. A flame that flared brightly at first may dim, but as a result it will persist.

This is the pattern that Nadia and Saeed follow, albeit outside the context of a continued romantic relationship. It is the pattern of reality, regardless of whether two individuals fall in love amidst a difficult struggle. Exceptions exist, no doubt, but our common portrayal of relationships -- especially those formed in the face of struggle -- differs majorly from most people’s lived experience. It is because of this failure to holistically showcase love that Hamid’s portrayal comes across as so surprising. In a society where “conflict-love” -- as we may call it -- is viewed as impossibly strong, it can only end in two ways: with a happily ever after or a tragedy. *Exit West* charts an untravelled middle ground, one where two lovers simply decide to move on. It presents this ending without cynicism. It refuses to use it as a tool to criticize our society. It forces us to adjust our expectations of love in a way that is straightforward, powerful, and poetic. And finally, it leads us to realize that while struggle may be a strong social adhesive, it is not a permanent one. If we expect and demand it to be so, we will find ourselves not only surprised but thoroughly disappointed.