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**Reconstructing Gender Roles  
as a Repercussion of Migratory  
Journeys in Mohsin Hamid's Exit  
West and Patricia Engel's The Veins  
of the Ocean**

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# Reconstructing Gender Roles as a Repercussion of Migratory Journeys in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Patricia Engel's *The Veins of the Ocean*

Rachid Lamghari

## Abstract

This article reflects on reconstructing gender roles as a repercussion of migration in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Patricia Engel's *The Veins of the Ocean*. Gender shapes people's practices at every level of social reality as there is no separate sphere in which gender exists isolated from other kinds of social relations. Gender imperatives of cultural performativity are used to normalize the allegedly natural division of assignments, tasks, spaces, etc. and migration is no exception as it was male dominated and women's crossing of borders was supposedly conditioned by having a male accompanier. Women's experiences of migration were thus excluded from the main narrative due to biased historicizing. With the feminization of migration, however, women's migratory journeys are narrated differently as they migrate individually and independently contrary to the homogenizing prototypical experience of dispersal. As a result of crossing geographical borders, cultural and religious frontiers are trespassed as well. Nadia's and Reina's representation in the targeted novels dismantles the prototypical images drawn for female migrants and simultaneously subvert their alleged passiveness and docility.

**Key Words:** Migration, Diaspora, Gender, Diasporic Subjects, Borders, Deconstruction, Reconstruction.

## Introduction

This article examines the changes that have occurred with regard to gender roles in relation to migration in the past and in the present. The choice of the novels is thematically conditioned. The authors, however, are chosen in the hope of comparing and contrasting the representation of female migration from the perspective of a female and a male author. Diasporic literature has been oblivious to women for a long time, in that, female experiences of migration were not recorded as women's migration was viewed merely as an extension of their male relatives. Women could not migrate individually nor independently owing to multitudinous ideologically driven rationales that work in favor of androgynous mindsets like in other contexts and fields, i.e. women's subordination and invisibility serve the perpetual domination of men in the field of migration

in this context.

Women's migration has been a pivotal concern with the gendering of diaspora as many researches and studies have shifted their lenses to female migration and its significance. The rising of feminism and its seminal influence in different aspects and fields has launched a new critical perspective from which diasporic women's experiences and concerns are historicized and documented. The female migrant is cherished and given a voice to express her concerns and to tell her own story from her own stance to elude any stereotypical attributions historically associated with female diasporic subjects, that of being dependent on men to cross borders.

The indispensable penetrability of the conventional gender roles in migration incentivizes diasporic writers to offer an alternative literature with a new scope and horizon transcending the traditional. Gender per se, being a social, cultural, religious construct, is prone to change and malleability as it is not fixed, but rather pliable. Diasporic writers, thereby, call for the need to approach migration cynically especially in its relation to gender as the latter plays a tacit role in obliterating one group in favor of another.

The novels the present article studies have offered new lenses through which to see migration and gender: the conventional gender roles are trespassed and reconstructed as a repercussion of women's migratory journeys. Women are migrating individually and independently from men unlike the first waves of migration which were assumed to be exclusively male dominated as evidenced from the existing literature.<sup>1</sup> The agency attributed to the protagonists in the novels proves the cynical spirit of the authors whose aim, *inter alia*, is to revolutionize the realm of migration and its male gatekeepers. As feminism has revolutionized academia, so has in relation to migration.

## Early Waves of Migration and Gender

Gender is an element of utmost importance that feminists try to reconsider and represent because it

<sup>1</sup> Women's migration is as old as men's, except the existing literature on migration has not explicitly dealt with male and female migratory experiences. This is largely because migration data by gender has not been collected until recently as women are migrating on their own in significant numbers.

is contentious and controversial. Gender roles are not fixed nor sanctified, but rather subject to change and shift, for the simple reason that they are acquired and learned not inherently ingrained in men and women. Gender is a spacial-temporal, cultural, ideological, social and political construction; as such, feminists believe that it is reductionist and biased. Even more telling, gender is not natural. To that, Eckert, Penelope and McConnell Ginet, Sally argue "gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do (West and Zimmerman 1987) – something we perform (Butler 1990)" (2005, p.1). Woodward (2011) editorializes that

Gender denotes an unequal and largely hierarchical division between women and men, which is embedded in social practices and institutions. (...) Gender is embodied and lived through everyday interactions and, although it is characterised by the endurance of inequalities such as patriarchy, it is also subject to change and is a fluid concept, which can be negotiated and transformed as well as reinstated. (p. 4)

In a gender-based society, women are thought of as subordinate to men as gender roles are made to perpetuate male-hegemony and women are perceived as dependent on men and subjugated to them as well. That results in what Foucault names 'docile bodies' which are destitute from their human agency and autonomy. This excessive discrimination and objectification, among a host of other reasons, have given birth to feminism, with which history takes a different trajectory (re-historicizing, rewriting), and for women to take a defensive position.

Gender has affected academia as the latter used to be male dominated as well and when gender begun to appear in scholarly work it was done in linguistics, and it focused on the analysis of languages. Katharine Donato et.al postulate that

Still, even a quick survey of studies published in the twentieth century reveals that, by the mid-1970s, the term "gender" was already widely used in the social sciences. At that time, social scientists from a wide variety of fields were exploring gender differences and relationships through use of conventional methodologies, such as surveys, ethnography, archival research, and participant observation, and some clearly exhibited awareness that gender was a social construction, different from biological sex. (2006, p.6).

Migration literature and theory have been biased for a long time as they exclude the female actors in the process of migration. Migrants are often portrayed as male, single and unburdened by a host of gendered responsibilities that have been traditionally and stereotypically assigned to women (Monica Boyd and Elizabeth Grieco, 2003). Even when a migrant has a family, he is repeatedly represented as a migrant in his own right, a pioneer (Hania Zlotnik 2003), whilst his female partner is frequently depicted as a dependent migrant. However,

Rather than viewing gender as fixed or biological, more scholars now emphasize its dynamic nature: gendered ideologies and practices change as human beings (gendered as male or female, and sexualized as homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual) cooperate or struggle with each other, with their pasts, and with the structures of changing economic, political, and social worlds linked through their migrations. (Katharine Donato et.al, 2006, p.6).

Female migrants began to appear in the literature from the mid-1970s. Whereas previously they were portrayed as "followers, dependants, unproductive persons, isolated, illiterate and ignorant" (Morokvasic, 1983, p. 16). Although women play a crucial role in contemporary migrations, previously they have been "sociologically invisible, although numerically and socially present" (Morokvasic, 1983, p. 13). It can be asserted that in the late 1980s social scientists "turned toward gender analysis largely as an intellectual strategy for ending the marginalisation of the women-centred work" (Donato et al. 2006, p14). The paid work, arguably, in the developed world offered to migrant women from developing countries is one way for them to escape the oppressive patriarchal and other traditions in their homeland (Morokvasic, 1983). For many migrant women therefore the change from unpaid work in the private sphere to paid work in the labor market came about through migration as it is the case with the female protagonists in the studied novels. Therefore, migration may prove to be emancipatory for women as financial and social remittances may have a positive impact on women's gender roles or the perception of them.

Engle (2004) indicates that the contrast between women's migrations in the 19th and 21st centuries lies in the reasons for their travels and the way they are recorded. She writes, "in fact, gender (i.e. perceived roles, responsibilities and obligations – or the lack thereof) may be the single most important factor influencing the decision to migrate" (p.6). Engle acknowledges that women's motivations for migration

may have changed from family reunification to moving as pioneer migrants, but emphasizes that women have always migrated "Women have always migrated; but, whereas in the past their movement was often more directly related to family reunification or depended on a male migrant, today they are moving as primary migrants in their own right" (2004, p. 17). In the same line of thought, Moha Ennaji contends that

A growing number of women migrate alone, on the one hand because of the demand in wealthy countries for traditionally feminine jobs (for instance, services presented to elderly people and children, housework, etc.); on the other hand because they aspire to live in societies offering them more opportunities, equality and emancipation, and a better future for their children (2014, p.2).

The early waves of migration, therefore, were exclusionary as they were recorded from a males' perspectives and women's migration was regarded as an extension of men's. The revolutionizing of academia by feminism has brought women's issues, including women's migration, to the front and many studies have been conducted to approach women's migration from different angles. The absence of women in the diaspora literature is ideologically driven and it does not mean that women were not migrants on their own, but rather the biased historicizing of the migratory narratives. In the studied novels in this article, women are represented as independent migrants crossing borders with no aide from men as the early waves claim. Nadia in *Exit West* and Reina in *The Veins of the Ocean* debunk and dismantle the passivity which is ideologically associated with migrant women as they migrate as agents. The novels are, to use Barbara Harlow terminology, resistant literature as they provide alternative images to eastern migrant women in total oblivious to the discursive ascribed roles and assignments linked with them. Hamid and Engel as postcolonial diasporic authors seek through these works to invalidate the unitary and monolithic lenses through which eastern migrant women are seen i.e. they present dissimilar portrayals of migrants in general, and migrant women in particular to stress on the heterogeneity of female subjects in transit and their migratory journey. By placing constructions of gender in contact with other forms of identity, diasporic postcolonial writers undermine the discourse that began during the colonial period and continues in contemporary America and Europe, which categorizes the Eastern women in homogeneous and static terms.

### **Negotiating Gender and the Feminization of**

## **Migration**

For a long time, diaspora studies have been or have limited their vision when it comes to gender issues. A female diaspora is not that accessible in the prototypical experience of dispersal; the latter is characterized by homogeneity and unitary processes. According to Pande (2018) "the initial theoretical and empirical models either omitted or undermined their (women's) experiences under homogenised perceptions" (p. v). In that, women cannot migrate independently as they supposedly need a male partner to cross borders. The initial theoretical and empirical models of migration have denied any sort of diversity or difference as migration has, for a long time, been androcentric, with women essentially being invisible (Morokvasic, 2004; Phizacklea, 1983; Oakley, 1981). It is until the third phase of social construction in the 1980s and 1990s that we start noticing the reverberation of the word gender in diaspora. The second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 70s contributes hugely to this shift; it stands against denying women's experiences and the fixed, naturalized gender ideologies. The main notions that come to stage within this context have to do with migration and mobility, labor force, home, transmission of traditions, political mobilization and gender relations that are embedded within the idea of ethnicity, class and sexuality (Knott & Loughlin, 2010, pp.119-121).

Feminist scholars look forward to shaking the homogeneous and essentialist ideologies that have reigned diaspora for a long time through highlighting differences because the experience of a woman in diaspora is not similar to that of a man. Women are subject to double gender ideologies (the ideologies of the country of origin and the ones of the host country). Women are considered the backbone of a certain ethnic group or nation since they are the biological reproducers of ethnic collectivities; they are the "border guards" of ethnic groups and, as a consequence, the transmitters of its culture. "Notwithstanding a subservient position in a culture riddled with patriarchy, women have been the bearers of tradition and the transmitters of culture to the next generation" (Pande, 2018, p.7). More than that, they have to be the 'proper women' abiding by many codes. All this implies how women are imprisoned within the confines of these reproductive duties even if they are outside the country of origin "it is also sometimes evident that gender hierarchy gets reinforced and becomes more rigid and traditional than in the homeland" (Pande, 2018, p. v).

Sometimes, however, the experience of diaspora can be empowering to women. Quayson and Daswani (2013) argue "women are involved in productive and reproductive labor within the household but also link the household to wider forms of socialization and

transnational modes of belonging" (p.43). This means that even if women find themselves again within a household in the host country, they go beyond it by socializing themselves with the public sphere. Migration may be empowering to women as it helps to reconstruct the traditional gender roles. Pande postulates that "Feminist inquiries suggest that migration and diasporic conditions, on the one hand, can be liberating, bringing more egalitarianism in the family and opening avenues for women to strengthen their agency and create new opportunities for themselves" (2018, p. v). In the same line of thought, Ryan et al. (2007) argue, "gender roles and dynamics within families may be reconfigured in complex and diverse ways through the migration process, but these dynamics are also influenced by the family life stage" (p.74).

The exposure to a new social and cultural setting that is facilitated through migration may influence women's gender role expectations in various ways. Thus, as "... mobility opens up the possibility to escape from the world of limited opportunities" (Isański & Luczys, 2011, p. xiii) many women may have migrated for those reasons. Depending on women's life stage and other socio-economic characteristics, the length of time spent in the host country and level of integration, gender roles may be redefined and renegotiated leading to change. That is to say, the process of migration gives women the opportunity to question and potentially reconsider their gender roles as they are exposed to different social settings with often different gender regimes and gendered responsibilities. They can then compare and contrast how gender roles have played out in the host country in comparison to the home country.

When women become mobile and change their place of residence, they may choose to present themselves from a different angle and abandon or reevaluate their attitudes towards gender roles. Some migrants may forgo certain traditional gender role expectations which are deemed unsatisfactory while others may embrace them even more strongly. Mostly, however, the process of migrating is found to be a valuable opportunity to reevaluate existing attitudes and values. When crossing international borders women gain confidence and respect, particularly when they become involved in the paid labor market abroad. While abroad, women observe more or less subtle differences between their home and host countries which could influence their views and attitudes.

The present authors have expressed female subjectivity and a strong agency through negotiating the relationship between movement and the construction of a highly personalized individual identity. Unlike the conventional diasporic writings which were male dominated by all counts, the current writings give voice to female protagonists to demonstrate their own concerns and

speaking for themselves. Third world feminists reject the bases of the "first world feminism" that pretends to speak for the subaltern and oppressed women. Western feminism sees that third world women are suffering and it is their duty to rescue them, ignoring the distinct and particular needs of those women. The same rhetoric is championed with regard to eastern female migrants as they are homogenized and rendered isomorphic with similar experiences. As postcolonial feminists argue, however, women's experiences are heterogeneous and different as it is suggested in the targeted novels.

### **Disenfranchised Subjects in Transit: Rationales Behind Female Migration in the Novels**

The novel *Exit West* starts with the description of an unnamed Middle Eastern country swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, "or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom but did not speak to her." (Hamid, 2017, p.3). The name of the male character is Saeed who is a grown man, unmarried, with a decent position and a good education. The female character is Nadia and she is less straightforward-seeming: she doesn't pray but wears a "conservative and virtually all-concealing black robe", works in an insurance company but rides a "scuffed-up hundred-ish cc trail bike", has veered off from her parents and lives alone. One may question why Nadia does not pray but she wears the black veil?

Alongside the political unrest that Nadia and Saeed's city was experiencing, there were other social ills that might have been the reason behind the protagonists' decision to migrate, especially for Nadia. The latter is an independent woman with agency and human autonomy; however, in such a conservative and traditional context of the unnamed Middle Eastern City, women are not supposed to be independent nor agent, they are rather expected to be conformist and conventionalist. Differently put, women cannot claim their freedom over themselves, and once they trespass the socially and culturally constructed boundaries, they subject themselves to social exclusion, and sometimes violence. In the novel, Nadia was violated verbally and physically in her own country

Online there was sex and security and plenty and glamour. On the street, the day before Nadia's shrooms arrived, there was a burly man at the red light of a deserted late-night intersection who turned to Nadia and greeted her, and when she ignored him, he began to swear at her, saying only a whore would drive a motorcycle (Hamid, 2017, p.43)

This passage illustrates clearly the discriminatory treatment to which women are vulnerable in their

homelands owing to gender roles which are enforced and strengthened by the customary law. This verbal violence would incentivize anyone to leave even if they have to risk their lives. This passage questions the patriarchal culture which deprives women of their rights by referring to cultural norms and values. Nadia as a female and in reference to conventional gender imperatives is not supposed to straddle a bike as that is only a man's thing to do. The discursive division of roles, duties, assignments, and the like serve the patriarchal system with its biased and suffocating norms. As tradition has it, women are supposed to stay at home and confine themselves in the domestic private space and any trespassing can lead to exclusion, violence, harassment, and the like as it is case with Nadia.

Owing to the patriarchal culture that dominates in the third world countries, and in other parts of the world, women are vulnerable to physical violence. They are required to be submissive and obedient to their male relatives as part of confirming the cultural belonging to the community. As a result, women are deprived of their agency and they never dare to trespass the boundaries. The case of Nadia in the novel epitomizes the discriminatory treatment women suffer from in their countries of origin due to the patriarchal mindsets, cultural teachings, and the conventional gender roles. When Nadia was waiting for the bank to open "there in the unruly crowd she was groped from behind, someone pushing his hand down her buttocks and between her legs, and trying to penetrate her with his finger."(Hamid, 2017, p.63)

Nadia is harassed publicly in her unnamed Middle Eastern country because of her presence in the public space. She finds it tremendously difficult to survive in such violent environment in which she cannot practice her freedom owing to being a female. Her eventual decision to migrate was incentivized first by the chaos her country was going through and second because of the patriarchal system that denies women's right in the public space and simultaneously the suffocating gender imperatives of the unnamed Middle Eastern country.

Nadia and Saeed become close to each other after their city turns into a war zone. Both characters share a dream of leaving their city one day. When Nadia invites Saeed to her apartment, though she lives alone and people would suspect her, they talked about their willingness to leave their country if they had a chance. The constructed gender roles, which differentiate between the sexes, oppresses one's freedom with regard to personal relationships i.e. a male and a female cannot express their love in public spaces because it is culturally and religiously forbidden. Talking about Nadia and Saeed's case, Mohsin Hamid tells us

They next faced the problem that confronted

all young people in the city who wanted to continue in one another's company past a certain hour. During the day there were parks, and campuses, and restaurants, cafés. But at night, after dinner, unless one had access to a home where such things were safe and permitted, or had a car, there were few places to be alone." (Hamid, 2017, p.25).

Nadia and Saeed thereby are vulnerable to social oppression and customary law that reinforce gender roles which divide the space into a public and private one. Such division leads to the oppression of both males and females but with different degrees and at various levels. As oppressed individuals in a chaotic religious and conservative city, Nadia and Saeed search for a secular state where they can express themselves in fear of nothing.

What is striking in Saeed and Nadia's decision to leave is the fact that Nadia was insisting they should leave and never think of coming back. Nadia was more feverishly keen to depart and her nature was such that prospect of something new, of change, was at its most basic level exciting to her. As Hamid argues, "But she was haunted by worries too, revolving around dependence, worries that in going abroad and leaving their country she and Saeed and Saeed's father might be at the mercy of strangers, subsistent on handouts, caged in pens like vermin" (Hamid, 2017, p.94). Probing this cynically, one understands that Nadia was anticipating and suspecting discriminatory and racist treatment to which they would be vulnerable in their country of destination. This is also indicative of the uncertainty arising from the unknown. She still wants to cross borders in search of a different space to try her chances.

In *The Veins of the Ocean* Reina Castillo is the protagonist of the novel and she is the sister of Carlito who was saved by an angler after his father threw him. Reina is a young woman whose beloved brother, Carlito, is serving a death sentence for a crime that shocked the community, throwing a baby off a bridge just like what his father did to him long time before that. The reason is the same as Carlito figured out that his girlfriend was cheating on him and -it was not his baby- that is why he decided to take the child's life.

Reina and her brother lived in Cartagena in Colombia before their parents migrated to the States. Hector's, Rein's father, decision to migrate did not come out of nowhere, but it was rather the accumulation of the negative experiences that he had been through in his homeland, the same social ills that galvanize people to depart from their soils which are supposed to be their Eldorado. After securing a job for himself in America,

Hector managed to make the necessary documents for his wife and children to follow him to Miami. Hector had always been looking for a way out of Cartagena, as "If you weren't rich or light-skinned, there wasn't much for you there" (Engel, 2016, p.58). Thus, people can suffer from racism in their own homelands, which instigates them to start thinking about leaving.

Alongside Castillo's family there are many other migrant families in the novel which departed from their countries for similar reasons. After Reina's father killed himself, her mother left her for her boyfriend Jerry in Orlando and her brother Carlito took his life before the State did, she was alone before she met Nesto. The latter is a Cuban migrant who came of age in the eighties at the height of what he calls the Soviet colonial era in Cuba. Nesto is "fluent in Russian, practicing military exercises in his school at Ciudad Liberated in case of U.S. bombings and educated like every other Cuban child to serve the state." (Engel, 2016, p.122). Nesto is another example of a migrant who was forced to leave his country, and to search for an alternative soil where he can survive. Nesto left Cuba three years ago but he told Reina: "He'd been trying to get off the island long before that. Like so many, he says, he was just waiting to find a way." (Engel, 2016, p.113)

Reina's case is to a great extent similar to Nesto's. In his search of the reason behind Reina's leaving, Nesto asked her

"Reina. Can I ask you why you came down here? I mean, why did you leave where you're from?"

"I had no reason to stay" (Engel, 2016, p.100)

In Reina's case, it is the strong disassociation she felt toward Colombia that made her leave. It is the same issue in *Exit West* with Nadia and Saeed. As we have seen earlier, Nadia and Saeed were coerced to leave their country because of the civil war that was taking over their unnamed Middle eastern country; in Reina and Nesto's families, it is unemployment, bureaucracy, corruption, and the like. Though different contexts and reasons for leaving their countries of origin, the characters in both novels had to escape from their Eldorado.

Leaving one's homeland is tremendously difficult as Nesto puts it "No matter how much you hate where you are, no matter how much you curse your government or desire something better, leaving your home, your country, is like tearing off your own flesh." (Engel, 2016, p.328) Migration has psychological repercussions as well, regardless of the technical side of the process. Either in the case of Saeed and Nadia in *Exit West* or

Nesto and Reina in *The Veins of The Ocean*, it is the same hardships and psychological pain. Many other postcolonial authors reflect on this issue of social ills that oblige people to leave. By way of example, Laila Lalami in her novel *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* tackles this in the Moroccan context.

Migration then is the last resort for the characters in both novels. The social ills in conjunction with the suffocating gender imperatives of cultural performativity of the old countries render it difficult for both males and females to survive there. In both novels females seem to suffer more from the oppressive regimes of their postcolonial states and simultaneously from the conventional gender imperatives that relegate them to the periphery and confine them in the domestic private space. In other words, females in the postcolonial states suffer from double colonization and the latter refers to "the term coined by Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford and refers to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy." (Bill Ashcroft et.al. 2003, 249). Being the case then "the dismantling of colonial rule did not automatically bring about changes for the better in the status of women, the working class or the peasantry in most colonised countries." (Ania Loomba, 2005: 16).

### **Reconstructing Gender Roles: Nadia and Reina**

In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid represents his female character as a postcolonial agent. From the very beginning of the novel, and before leaving her country, we come to know that Nadia is an independent woman who rejects the socially and culturally constructed gender roles. When Saeed first meets Nadia, he expects her to be a typical woman who abides by the social norms. A conventional woman who wears traditional clothes and covers her head with a black cloth. To his surprise, after they came out of a class "instead of covering her head with a black cloth, as he expected, she donned a black motorcycle helmet that had been locked to a scuffed-up hundred-ish cc trail bike" (Hamid, 2017, p.5). Saeed then is an example of a traditional man who expects all women to be the same and to wear the same clothes.

After making each other's acquaintance, Saeed asked Nadia about her conservative and virtually all-concealing black robe

"If you don't pray," he said, lowering his voice, "why do you wear it?"

"So men don't fuck with me," she said. (Hamid, 2017, pp.16-17)

The reason why Nadia wears traditional clothes is to oblige men to respect her; she is not free to wear

what she wants due to gender roles that dictate the appropriate and decent way for women to dress. Nonetheless, the fact that she does not pray is an evidence of her independence in that though she grew up in a religious and conservative context, in which being religious is mandatory, she is intellectually strong to decide for her spirituality. "The art in Nadia's childhood home consisted of religious verses and photos of holy sites, framed and mounted on walls." (Hamid, 2017, p.21). Nadia differs from her mother and sister because she is educated, agent, and economically independent while they were quiet women and did not rebel against the suffocating gender imperatives owing to their dependency on Nadia's father.

Nadia was constantly questioning and growing irreverence in matters of faith and that upset and frightened her father for not being religious or at least pretending to be subjects one to automatic exclusion from the social system in a country like the unnamed Middle Eastern one. After finishing university "Nadia announced, to her family's utter horror, and to her own surprise for she had not planned to say it, that she was moving out on her own, an unmarried woman, the break involved hard words on all sides." (Hamid, 2017, p.22). This is another evidence of Nadia's independence, as she first questions her beliefs and at the same time she decides to move out on her own to live independently. It is not common though in the Middle East to find women living on their own as it is considered a virtue to live in an extended family as it provides protection, especially for women. In reference to gender roles, men can manage to live away from their families, while women need someone to accompany and protect them. Nadia's agency helps her to decide and to choose for herself. She then challenges the patriarchal culture which claims that women are dependent on men and simultaneously she deconstructs the orientalist discourse on eastern women. Nadia contradicts the way the orientalist have depicted the eastern women: passive, obedient, dependent, and the like.

With regard to Nadia's case, her experiences during her first months as a single woman living on her own "did, in some moments, equal or surpass the loathsomeness and dangerousness that her family had warned her about. But she had a job at an insurance company, and she was determined to survive, and she did." (Hamid, 2017, p.22). Hamid's use of the verb survive instead of live is deliberate, as he knows that diasporic subjects survive and do not live. In addition, Nadia secured a room of her own atop the house of a window, and she learned how to dress for "self-protection, how best to deal with aggressive men and with the police, and with aggressive men who were the police, and always to trust her instincts about situations to avoid or to exit immediately." (Hamid, 2017, p.22). Given all the

hardships that Nadia had to deal with, even with the police who are supposed to protect people, left her no choice but to migrate as mentioned earlier. Still, being a single woman who manages to survive in a country, which looks like a jungle, and the fact that she migrates independently is a proof of her determined desire to question the traditional assumptions associated with women.

Nadia is more daring than Saeed in that that she sometimes did things that men should do according to gender roles. For example, on the third week of making each other's acquaintance, Saeed went to Nadia and she met him in a nearby café since it was too risky for her to go outside by herself, or for him to go to the place where she lives because they are not married and thus cannot, in relation to the traditional law, be together in a private place like a house. Saeed tells Nadia

"I don't think we should have sex until we're married." And she laughed and pressed close. And he shook his head. And she stopped and stared at him and said, "Are you fucking joking? (Hamid, 2017, p.55)

The novel therefore questions the conventional gender roles that attribute certain features to women and others to men. By way of example, a woman is not supposed to take the initiative of having sex with a man because it is believed to be the man's prerogative to ask first. A woman, in other words, is supposed to be submissive and obedient to the man and as object of his desires or to his voyeuristic gaze, to use Laura Mulvey's language in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). In reference to the conventional gender roles, women exist to show that men are powerful and superior in that women's bodies have been essentialized to the male-gaze: an object of lust. Differently put, women's existence is conditioned by the male voyeuristic gaze.

After someone tried to rape her in the bank, Nadia tried to make Saeed have sex with her again. Still, it was not because

"she felt particularly sexy but because she wanted to cauterize the incident from outside the bank in her memory, and Saeed succeeded again in holding back, even as they pleased each other, and he told her again that they should not have sex before they were married, that doing otherwise was against his beliefs" (Hamid, 2017, p.65)

In the Middle Eastern countries, and in other parts of the Islamic world, men and women cannot have an

intimate relationship privately, and Saeed seems to be a perfect example of a conformist of such cultural values that partially get inspiration from gender roles. On the other side, Nadia is dissident and censorious with regard to such practices that constrain people to exercise their personal freedom. Social and cultural norms are thereby trespassed by Nadia. Nadia is represented in a way that contradicts the orientalist representation of the eastern women on the one hand, and the ideologically driven assumptions of the patriarchal system on the other.

Nadia is not only represented in a way that challenges the traditional constructed gender attributes, but also as saviors of men. Gender roles, while socially constructed, are shaped by societal perceptions along with certain attributes assigned to women. Gender roles are derivative of those perceptions and attributes. As the couple was ready to leave their home country, Saeed's father then summoned Nadia into his room and spoke to her without Saeed

He was entrusting her with his son's life, and she, whom he called daughter, must, like a daughter, not fail him, whom she called father, and she must see Saeed through safety, and he hoped she would one day marry his son... and all he asked was that she remain by Saeed's side until Saeed was out of danger (Hamid, 2017, p.97)

Traditionally, it is men who take care of women in the context of diaspora. As it is discussed above, women's migration was conditioned by having a male relative migrant to accompany them. Such conventions and practices are however reconsidered as migrant women are given the floor to voice their concerns. Nadia in this passage is represented in an anomalous way to the traditional image drawn for Eastern women; she was asked by Saeed's father to take care of his son and not to leave him until she was sure he was safe. The patriarchal attributes to women are questioned through representing Nadia as an independent agent first, and the savior of Saeed second.

With regard to *The Veins of The Ocean*, women are encouraged to express themselves and to answer back their ideologically driven representation. Reina being the protagonist of the novel makes it easier to fathom the incline of the writer towards recuperating female migrants' voices. In the novel, Reina is presented as an independent woman who takes care of herself and of her brother Carlito. Traditionally, it is men who take care of women, especially when they are migrants, but Patricia Engel aims at reconsidering the culturally constructed gender roles which subordinate women. Commenting on Reina's independence, Lucy Scholes tells us: "... this is the coming-of-age story of a young Colombian-

American woman negotiating independence, romance and the ties of kith and kin." (Lucy Scholes, 2020). Patricia Engel thereby gives voice to female migrants to narrate their diasporic experiences which are basically different from male-narrated stories of women.

Back in Cartagena, Reina depended on Carlito, partially because he was older than she was, but mainly because he was a male. As Reina tells us, her brother was into bicycles and forming boy gangs with the neighborhood kids, and

I was happy to be their mascot, until we got to the age when our bodies started to divide us-girls over here, boys over there- and then the rough waters of puberty when I figured out boys didn't mind keeping me around as long as I agreed to be their toy. (Engel, 2016, p.40).

In their childhood, Reina and Carlito did not have to think of their sexes because there was nothing that differentiated between the two, but once their bodies started to grow up, gender roles were imposed on them and they had to be in different spaces. Reina depended on Carlito to protect her because that was the norm back in their country, in that, men are supposed to be the protectors of women in reference to conventions and traditions. Obviously, gender roles are not biological or natural, but rather social and cultural constructs. It is the society which dictates how men and women should be: different clothes, roles, occupations, and most importantly spaces.

Reina had to prove herself to her brother, meaning that she was required to invest a lot on whatever she did so that her brother would accept her. In their childhood, they used to play together and once the ball went missing, Reina tells us

"I wanted to find the ball before he did, to avoid hearing him call me a useless slug, to prove I was a worthy teammate, that I was good as any boy at keeping up and a kick-around with him so he'd finally stop threatening to take me to the pulguero to trade me for a television." (Engel, 2016, p.36).

Owing to the patriarchal indoctrination, children are destined to live different experiences. As Reina claims, it was in her adolescence in which she was introduced to the gender divisions that assign men the duty of constructing women, to that, she says: "I had this idea that it was on older boys to teach us young girls what to do with our bodies, the same way they taught us how to dance salsa and merengue at block parties and

asados." (Engel, 2016, p.55) Hence, back in Cartagena Reina was subordinate to Carlito due to the established societal roles -gender based. This changed when they moved to the United States of America.

The socially and culturally constructed gender roles played a pivotal role in Reina's life, not only with her brother but also with her father. Because she was a baby girl, her father never liked her and her mother waited until she was angry at her about something to unleash her with memories, like "How my father never held me when I was a baby, either the cause or the consequence of my relentless crying-there was no way to know. When he was drunk, he'd deny he was my father, or worse, say I was a bad-luck baby..." (Engel, 2016, p.43). Reina, though her name literally means a queen, was vulnerable to subordination back in Cartagena because of her sex. Still, thanks to migration, alongside other factors, gender roles are negotiated and transformed: she becomes independent, to the extent that her brother becomes dependent on her.

Unlike Reina, her mother is an epitome of a passive woman who internalizes her inferiority and dependency. After Carlito's death, Reina's mother moved to Orlando to join her boyfriend, Jerry. One reason why she was with him is, as Reina puts it, "He makes enough at his dental practice for her to stop working. This is the kept-woman gig she's been praying for all her life." (Engel, 2016, p.41). This shows that Reina's mother is a dependent woman who did not make use of her migratory journey as she perpetuated her dependency on men. Reina's mother asked her daughter to join her in Orlando

She was inviting me to live with her since Jerry's town house is big enough and there's a room specifically for guests they never actually have. But she explained I could rent an apartment nearby and find a roommate or, even better, may be may be with a little effort, I'd get lucky like her and find a man to take care of me. (Engel, 2016, p.41)

This confirms the internalized dependency of Reina's mother on men as she needs someone to take care of her. Reina's mother contradicts herself as she asked her daughter to rent an apartment meaning that she asked her to be independent, and simultaneously she wanted her to find a man to look after her. In other words, in reference to Reina's mother, women cannot afford to live by themselves and they need a man to guarantee their survival in the diaspora. Reina's mother says: "It's not normal for a girl to be living on her own in the middle of nowhere, Reinita." She thinks I should move to a city, somewhere where there are cultured people, people going places, and I know she means people

with money." (Engel, 2016, p.97). On the other side, Reina is represented as an independent agent who can afford to survive by herself. Reina resembles, to a great extent, Nadia in *Exit West* as they both manage to survive independently from men in their diasporic spaces.

Universo Cassiani, who is Reina's childhood friend, was a migrant in the States as well. He met Reina after a long time in Miami and they both commemorated their childhood memories. Before he migrated, Universo's mother hesitated to let him go, and the rationale was that he, as she tells us, would not be able to contain and control his wife "It's better down here," his mami warned him. "Here, women know their place. Up there, they become wild and their men go crazy trying to contain them." (Engel, 2016, p.61). Universo's mother resembles Reina's mother for they both champion the passivity and docility as they subordinate themselves to their male relatives. She told her son that women 'here know their place' meaning that women in Colombia, as in many other parts of the developing world, are obedient and passive; they do not dare to trespass the social and cultural norms which result in their subordination. 'Up there' referring to the United States of America, women become wild animals: they go beyond the traditional gender roles and they subvert their inferior position. The migratory journeys therefore aide in reconstructing gender roles that were in favor of Colombian men back in Cartagena.

Alongside being independent agents, Reina has another point in common with Nadia. Both characters are not religious though they were brought up in religious contexts and that is another evidence of their intellectual and emotional independence. On the other hand, Saeed and Nesto are portrayed as traditional religious individuals who could not go beyond their spiritual comfort zone. Patricia Engel points out when Nesto asked Reina

"What about you, Reina? Isn't there anything you want to ask for?"

"Ask who?"

"God. The supreme one. Owner of the day and night."

"I know you believe in that stuff, Nesto. But I don't." (Engel, 2016, p.169)

Considering the above dialogue can tell us much about the critical spirit of Reina. Patricia Engel, through her female protagonist, has successfully recuperated female migrants' voices. Reina's un-religiosity, like Nadia's, contradicts the traditional assumptions that link women with emotionality and spirituality. The

above passage is only one out of many examples that Patricia Engel exemplifies within her novel. Similar gender issues are tackled in her other novels, namely *Vida*.

Reina and Nadia in both novels are represented as agents, but slightly different. In the case of Nadia, Mohsin Hamid represents her as an agent and independent in both locations either when she was in her unnamed Middle Eastern country though she faced a number of issues, mainly galvanized by conventional gender roles, or when she and Saeed migrated to Greece, England, and ended up in the United States of America. She is the one who looks after Saeed, protects him, and most importantly, taking the initiative of having sex. Thus, in her case, the experience of displacement reinforces her independence and it helps her to counter the patriarchal and orientalist discourses. Whereas, Reina, like many Colombian migrant women, was vulnerable to discriminatory treatment back in Colombia due to her sex: being a female. Still, her migratory journey to the United States of America helps her to subvert her peripheral position and simultaneously to reverse gender roles. In the cases of both heroines, migration is in their favor.

## Conclusion

The postcolonial feminist theory has come as an answer back to the orientalist and patriarchal discourses which deplete the other women from their agency. For a long time, the so-called other women have been portrayed as a passive group who are at the disposal of men i.e. eastern women are supposed to obey the socially and culturally constructed gender roles if they are to be accepted by the society. The latter imposes on women the way they should behave, think, dress, etc. so as to be socially accepted as 'good' women. The double colonization to which eastern women are subjected is challenged by postcolonial agents as postcolonial diasporic writers have sought to recuperate the other women's voices via representing them as being independent, transcendent, reliable, intellectuals, and resourceful.

The difference and diversity of women's experiences of diaspora as discussed suggests their heterogeneity and thus dismantles the monolithic orientalist discourse which labels eastern women as a homogeneous and isomorphic group with little agency. The feminization of migration repudiates the old forms of historicizing migration, especially female migration, as women's narratives and experiences are documented unlike the traditional diasporic literature which was male dominated. The gendering of migration therefore gives women a voice to narrate their experiences from their own angles. The female migratory journeys in the targeted novels provide them with an alternative

space to exercise their freedom and agency and simultaneously to debunk the discursive portrayals that deplete them from autonomy. The alleged peripheral position of women with regard to migration is thus reversed and subverted as they are portrayed as independent and the males in their lives are dependent on them either in the process of crossing borders or once they are settled in their new country.

In *Exit West*, Hamid has proven the cynical stance from which he views the eastern women. That is, he has given the floor to a female agent to narrate her diasporic experience from her own point of view. Nadia is an epitome of postcolonial females who are independent from men. Diasporic women were merely an extension of their relative migrants in that they were dependent on their male relatives to guarantee their survival in the space of the diaspora. In *Exit West* Mohsin Hamid has challenged those traditional roles and characteristics that the patriarchal and the orientalist discourses associate with the 'other' (women). Nadia is the savior of Saeed, and this is not usual in the traditional writings of the diaspora, as men were always the rescuers of women. As we have seen, migratory journeys provide an alternative to women as they deconstruct gender roles that have traditionally been in favor of men. When women are displaced, they leave behind the culture of their country of origin, and as a result, patriarchy is challenged. The host country becomes an alternative space in which migrant women can exercise their agency.

In *The Veins of The Ocean*, Engel has done the same thing as Hamid. Engel has surpassed the traditional roles that the patriarchal discourse attributes to women. Traditionally, the Colombian migrant women, as it was the case for other women in other parts of the world, were represented as being dependent on their male counterparts in diaspora as they could not displace individually first and second they needed a male migrant relative. The cynical spirit of Engel, however, has pushed her to give the floor to her female characters, namely Reina, to counter the ideologically driven assumptions about eastern women. Reina was the savior of her brother Carlito and of her boyfriend Nesto as they both depended on her to survive in the diaspora. Reina was their home, and the latter is the commonly shared problem that diasporic subjects face. Reina and her family, inter alios other Colombian and Cuban migrants, were forced to leave their own countries and that had a psychological effect on them, a sense of loss, and they had to establish a new home which is not easy.

Given the examples and contexts discussed above, we can see the vicissitudes of the diasporic experiences, starting from the reasons behind their departure in the first place to their success or failure to perceive

the host country as a home where one can survive and probably belong. What is striking in these novels, including others, is the critical spirit of the postcolonial diasporic writers as they have recuperated the female voice and simultaneously portrayed migrant women as being independent agents who can survive elsewhere without having any particular attachment to their respective countries of origin. Reina and Nadia are epitomes of that: they take care of their male relatives and that was not common in the traditional writings of diaspora, as men were always at the center and women at the periphery. Thus, migration outside one's repressive gendered socio-cultural milieu opens up the possibility for women and also for men to revisit their gendered roles in a different environment or place and thus challenge the roles and norms of societies in their home countries. This, however, does not mean diaspora always provides a better alternative to women, and by all means, the experiences of the female migrants in the targeted novels cannot be generalized and applied to other migrant women. Women are heterogeneous, so are their migratory journeys and diasporic experiences.

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