



LINGUISTIC FOREGROUNDING AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF POST-COLONIAL IDENTITY IN *EXIT WEST*: A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study examines the function of linguistic foregrounding in the reconstruction of postcolonial identity in Mohsin Hamid's novel Exit West. It integrates the stylistic concepts of Leech and Short (2007) pertaining to stylistic theory with those of Homi K. Bhabha pertaining to postcolonial concepts of hybridity, liminality, and the Third Space. The research claims that the linguistic foregrounded features are not aesthetic, but rather ideological tools that produce migrant consciousness and unstable migrants' identities, including syntactic fluidity, repetition, metaphorical imagery, and fragmentation of the narrative. The study, which analyses texts qualitatively and reads their selected passages, illustrates how Hamid's stylistic positions convey the psychological and cultural misplacedness of migrants in transnational spaces. The results indicate that linguistic foregrounding is a major factor in constructing identity as fluid, hybrid, and constantly reworked in postcolonial fiction.

Keywords

Stylistics, Foregrounding, Postcolonial Identity, Hybridity, Liminality, Exit West, Migration, Narrative Style

Introduction

Today's world has seen migration, displacement, and transnational movement on a scale like never before, triggered by war, political unrest, economic disparities, and globalisation. These circumstances have had a significant impact on literary production in the present and later on in post-colonial fiction that has begun to examine the disintegration of identities, cultural negotiation, and psychological effects of displacement. The contemporary migration story is characterized by the concept of identity is not fixed, stable, or territorial but, on the contrary, fluid, unstable, and continually produced in the process of crossing geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Thus, the field of contemporary postcolonial literature has emerged as a significant area to explore how people negotiate issues of belonging, memory, and selfhood in the context of social and cultural changes that occur at a fast pace (Hall, 1996).

Mohsin Hamid is a prominent figure in the postcolonial literary scene for his work on migration, transnationalism, and the nature of identity. In his novel *Exit West* (2017), he tells the tale of Nadia and Saeed, two young people who flee their unnamed war-torn country through a magical door that instantly carries migrants across country and international boundaries. The novel deals with themes of migration and refugee crises, nationalism, and global mobility, but its focus is not just on physical displacement, but also on the creation of a new postcolonial identity in the context of transnational mobility. While Nadia and Saeed travel through different places, their identities slowly shift as a result of the new cultural terrain, new social relations, and new ideologies that they encounter. Hamid thus considers migration as a process of psychological and cultural renegotiation rather than just a matter of geographical movement.

The themes of hybridity, liminality, and the instability of belonging are interconnected and can be seen in the representation of identity in *Exit West* as a postcolonial concern. For postcolonial people, identity can be formed by past experiences of colonialism, displacement, and cultural



contact, and it can therefore be “between” cultures instead of an identity within a definite national border (Bhabha, 1994).

Homi K. Bhabha suggests that identity is produced in the “Third Space” as it is negotiated and reconstructed in the process of interaction and difference. In this interstitial zone, identities take on multiple and hybrid forms, fluid and constantly reconfiguring ones, being neither singular nor essentialist (Bhabha, 1994). The migrant characters in *Exit West* also live in precarious social and cultural environments, and they are juxtaposed with ideas of home, nation, and belonging. Their experiences exemplify postcolonial states of “unhomeliness”—feelings of psychological disorientation in the familiar” (Bhabha, 1994). The themes of “migration” and “postcolonialism” in *Exit West* have garnered much critical interest, but there has been less research that has focused on how these themes are formed through linguistic and stylistic structures.

The majority of the criticism that has been published in the context of this novel concerns sociopolitical issues related to globalisation, refugee mobility, cosmopolitanism, and border politics, and hardly considers the influence of language on the novel's representations. But for literary meaning to be created, the thematic content is not the only element involved; it is also created by the carefully foregrounded linguistic structures which guide readers' interpretation and emotional response. In this sense, stylistics can be a valuable method to analyse the role of language in literary works in the generation of ideological and aesthetic effects.

Leech and Short (2007) define stylistics as the study of how linguistic form relates to literary function in terms of lexical selection, grammatical structures, narrative techniques, figurative language, and deviation patterns. Foregrounding is one of the most important ideas in stylistics and is the artistic emphasis of linguistic features, either by deviating from ordinary language or by using deviating repetition (Leech & Short, 2007). Foregrounded language draws the reader's eyes and adds to the interpretation by making particular features of the text more salient in the text. In literary texts, foregrounding is sometimes used to highlight psychological tension, thematic conflict, and ideological meaning (Simpson, 2004).

Hamid uses the stylistic elements of extended sentence structure, repetition, symbolic imagery, metaphorical spaces, and fragmented narration in a foregrounded manner throughout *Exit West*. These linguistic features are not just the stylistic devices of the writers concerned, but they also speak of the instability, mobility, and uncertainty of postcolonial migrant life.

The stylistic choices that are made by Hamid are especially important if considered in the context of Bhabha's theory of hybridity and liminality. The novel's rhythmic syntax, the travel of the narrative, and the repetition of images are all a reflection of the fractured consciousness of displaced individuals who live in between cultures and identities. The magical doors are themselves symbolic of transitional spaces which disrupt the fixed idea of a country and a sense of belonging. In a similar way, the smooth transitions in space in the narrative mirror the intertwining of postcolonial identity in the global space of migration. These foregrounded linguistic strategies enable Hamid to create a literary representation of a postcolonial subjectivity that is uncertain, changing, and negotiated.

The stylistic and postcolonial theories are thus combined and offer a more comprehensive examination of the role of language in the reconstruction of postcolonial identity in contemporary fiction. While previous studies have considered *Exit West* from a thematic and/or an ideological angle, there has been little focus on the connection between linguistic foregrounding and postcolonial identity-building. Previous studies often tend to focus on thematic interpretation rather than stylistic analysis, and the linguistic construction of hybridity and liminality is under-researched. The present study attempts to fill this gap by merging two theories, the stylistic theory of Leech and Short and the Third Space theory of Bhabha and the



concepts of hybridity and liminality, to see how foregrounded linguistic features are used to recreate a postcolonial identity in *Exit West*.

The merit of this study is that it is interdisciplinary in nature, bringing together stylistics and postcolonial literary criticism. The study explores the stylistic form of foregrounded language constructions, which convey meanings associated with migration, displacement, and hybridity, thereby showing that stylistic form plays an important role in the representation of postcolonial consciousness. In addition, the research helps to advance the development of stylistic scholarship in the present by discussing foregrounding theory and its use in postcolonial migration literature. It also contributes to postcolonial studies by emphasizing the linguistic aspects of dealing with the process of identity negotiation in transnational settings.

The present study thus seeks to find out and discuss the foregrounded linguistic features in *Exit West* and to explore how the narrative reconnects with the postcolonial identity in the foregrounded linguistic features. The study explores the connection between language, migration, hybridity, and the process of identity change through Leech and Short's stylistic model and Bhabha's postcolonial ideas in Hamid's novel. The research aims to show that stylistic foregrounding is not only an aesthetic tool, but also a very effective tool for the representation of the complexities of postcolonial identity in contemporary fiction.

Literature Review

Hall (1996) claims that identity is not fixed or essentialist, but is continually created as a result of historical, cultural, and ideological processes. Hall argues that a modern identity can be shaped in a process of representation and discourse, especially in situations of migration, displacement, and globalisation. This is important for postcolonial literary studies as his view creates a conceptualization of an identity rather than a stable and unified one. In stories of migration like *Exit West*, identity is an ever-changing phenomenon influenced by travel between cultures and nations.

The concept of postcolonial hybridity comes from the work of Bhabha (1994), who argues that identities are negotiated in liminal or “in-between” cultural spaces. He brings in the term “Third Space” to refer to the location where cultural meanings are negotiated, re-negotiated, and reconstructed on and off the axis of “coloniser” and “colonised” or “self” and “other.” Bhabha also claims that postcolonial subjects are subject to “unhomeliness”, a psychological state of abetted by displacement and cultural dislocation. The concept of the unstable, hybrid migrant identity that is constantly re-made in the process of transnational movement is especially important for the novel *Exit West*, as this idea is central to his theory.

Stylistics is a systematic approach to the analysis of the language-literary effect relation, as defined by Leech and Short (2007). Their stylistic approach explores lexical items, grammatical constructions, figures of speech, and context to understand how these choices contribute to the meaning of literary texts. They see foregrounding as one of the core assumptions of stylistics and believe that it is deviation and parallelism that bring out stylistic salience and semantic significance of the features of linguistic structure. Their method offers an adequate method for discussing how Mohsin Hamid foregrounds language in *Exit West* as a metaphor for displacement, fragmentation, and the process of postcolonial identity formation. According to Simpson (2004), stylistic analysis is a means of determining how readers' interpretations are influenced by the use of literary language in terms of the point of view used in the story, syntax, word choice, and the author's positioning on the ideological spectrum. He believes foregrounding is an interpretive intensifier, because it disrupts the ordinary language expectations and makes salient text patterns salient. In *Exit West*, Hamid's style of narration, episodic and disjointed, along with his symbolic imagery and his ideas of how he represents his world, as discussed by Simpson, are helpful for analysing his writing. His work contributes



to the argument that the stylistic structures directly serve to represent migrant consciousness and hybrid identity.

Verdonk (2021) highlights foregrounding as a cognitive and aesthetic process that draws readers' attention to the literary text and makes an interpretation meaningful. He says that features foregrounded in the text generally have emotional and ideological effects because they invite the reader to interpret the meaning of the text more critically. This discussion by Verdonk can be applied to the current study as Hamid's stylistic devices, such as the use of repetition and syntactic fluidity, highlight the instability and uncertainty of being a migrant and a post-colonial.

According to Miall and Kuiken (1994), foregrounded literary language enhances the emotional and cognitive involvement of the reader by slowing down the flow and encouraging the reader to make a deeper interpretation of the literary work. According to their cognitive stylistic approach, deviation in style creates a psychological defamiliarization, which allows the reader to be affected by the themes in the literary work to a greater extent. This point of view is crucial to understand the stylistic foregrounding that enables readers to understand the emotional dislocations and uncertainties of migrant identities in *Exit West*.

According to Nørgaard et al. (2010), the recent development of stylistics has moved beyond a strictly formal description of language to the consideration of the ideology and culture of texts. They believe that style is strongly related to the broader sociocultural messages and dynamics that are embedded in literary texts. Their view agrees with the interdisciplinary method that has been adopted in the present study, which combines stylistics with postcolonial theory so as to explore the linguistic construction of postcolonial identity.

Azzam (2019) looks at *Exit West* as a postcolonial migration story of crossing borders and transnational mobility, using magical realism. The author contends that Hamid challenges the notions of nationality and belonging by making migration seems to be universal and global to all humans. The analysis, however, does not investigate in great detail the stylistic devices that create the meaning of migration and cosmopolitanism, but rather concerns itself with thematic issues.

Through an examination of hybridity and cultural displacement, Nair and Kaur (2020) discuss how the novel has been written from the lens of a non-binary identity that is ever-questioned and negotiated in transnational spaces. Their analysis shows the importance of Bhabha's theory for the comprehension of migrants' experience in the novel. However, the study is basically thematic and does not delve into the role of foregrounded linguistic patterns play in the representation of hybrid postcolonial identity.

In *Exit West*, Sajjad and Ashfaq (2021) discuss how the novel constructs the refugee identity and addresses border politics by which Hamid questions exclusionary nationalism and rigid territorial boundaries. Their findings indicate that they have presented migration as a socio-political and psychological phenomenon through the novel. The study, however, leaves the study of stylistic analysis and the systematic study of the role of linguistic foregrounding in the construction of postcolonial meanings to the last.

Therefore, the existing scholarship on *Exit West* shows much interest in the themes of migration, hybridity, displacement, and postcolonial identity. Stylistic studies too have investigated in great detail the significance of foregrounding as a feature that creates meaning and interpretative significance in literature. Few studies, however, have combined the methodological approaches of stylistic foregrounding and postcolonial identity theory to look at how linguistic elements help to reconstruct postcolonial identity in *Exit West*. Thematic interpretation is the focus of most previous studies, and few of them address the relationship between foregrounded stylistic features and postcolonial identity formation. To fill this gap, the



present study aims to integrate the stylistic framework of Leech and Short with the concepts of hybridity, liminality, and the Third Space of Bhabha to explore the reconstruction of postcolonial identity through foregrounded language in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, stylistic and postcolonial theories are combined to explore the role of foregrounded linguistic structures in the reconstruction of the postcolonial identity of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. The theoretical basis is mostly derived from the stylistic model of Geoffrey Leech & Mick Short and the ideas of hybridity, liminality, unhomeliness, and the Third Space of Homi K. Bhabha. These frameworks are integrated in the study, which explores how the novel constructs meaning and how it represents postcolonial identity.

Stylistics is defined by Leech and Short (2007) as a “stylistic analysis of the choices made by the writer of a literary text and their role in the creation of meaning and aesthetic effect”. Their stylistic system explores literary language and its features in terms of lexical, grammatical, figurative, cohesive, and contextual language features. Literary language is significant in both stylistic aspects when it deviates from the regularity of language and when it is used in obvious forms (Leech and Short, 2007). This is sometimes referred to as the foregrounding effect.

The concept of foregrounding is one of the main concepts in stylistics, and it is an artistry in language that is created through deviation and parallelism (Leech & Short, 2007). Deviation is when the linguistic structures are not in line with conventional language, and parallelism is when the language is repetitive or patterned, which can draw the reader's attention. In foregrounded language, the intensity of interpretation is created by the disruption of the normal reading processes and by highlighting the theme or the psychological implications (Simpson, 2004). In literary texts, foregrounding can be used as a stylistic device that makes the author 'foreground' emotionally complex situations, ideological opposition, and divided consciousness.

In *Exit West*, Hamid employs various foregrounded stylistic features such as syntactic fluidity, repetition, metaphorical imagery, symbolic spatial descriptions, and fragmented narration. These stylistic patterns showcase the precarity and uncertainty of migration and displacement. These foregrounded linguistic features will be analysed in the context of these stylistic categories as formulated by Leech and Short, to investigate the role of language in the representation of postcolonial identity.

In addition to stylistics, the study is based on Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory for the interpretation of the ideologies embedded in the identified stylistic patterns. Essentialist notions of identity are disputed in Bhabha's (1994) hybrid, fluid, and constantly reconstructed postcolonial identity, which is shaped by cultural encounters. He presents the idea of hybridity, which suggests that identities are not grounded in any fixed cultural identity, but rather constructed in the negotiation of various cultural influences. Hybridity challenges strict binarism, namely that of self and other, native and foreign, coloniser and colonised.

The relevance of the concept of the Third Space in the present study is because it sheds light on how identity is negotiated in liminal cultural spaces. As Bhabha (1994) has described, the Third Space is an in-between space where cultural meanings are being continually translated, negotiated, and reconstructed. People living in this space live in liminality, or a space of no fixed or definite character. Likewise, the migrant characters in *Exit West* inhabit spaces that are liminal, moving beyond national and belonging.

Bhabha (1994) also describes the feeling of 'unhomeliness', a psychological phenomenon that is felt by the displaced who find themselves alternately alienated from their own countries and the countries where they are settled. The idea is important in the study of the emotional and



psychological division of people in *Exit West*. The novel describes migration as a state that forces people to renegotiate their identities with uncertainty and displacement.

Such a stylistic framework is conceptualized by Leech and Short, with a postcolonial theory offered by Bhabha, which allows the present study to consider linguistic patterns foregrounded as linguistic mechanisms in the construction of a hybrid postcolonial identity in a text. The stylistic analysis pinpoints the linguistic features that are emphasised in the text, and the postcolonial approach interprets how these features are related to migration, liminality, and identity reconstruction. Overall, the integrated framework is helpful in examining the connection between language and postcolonial consciousness in *Exit West*.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research methodology to explore how linguistic foregrounding helps to reconstruct postcolonial identity in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. The study is conducted based on qualitative textual analysis, which is deemed appropriate because the study aims to analyse the phenomenon of ways of language patterns, the structure of stylistics, and the meaning of ideology in a literary text. The research is interpretative and descriptive in nature, so as to analyse the role of foregrounded language in the narrative in representing migration, hybridity, and identity change.

Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017) is the main source of data for the study. Secondary sources consist of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, stylistic studies, and postcolonial theoretical texts on foregrounding, hybridity, migration, and identity reconstruction. These secondary materials help to analyse the textual data and give theoretical support to the study.

The study employs purposive textual sampling to be able to get passages from the novel that clearly represent migration, displacement, identity negotiation, cultural transformation, and transnational movement. Passages with foregrounded lexical repetitions, syntactic deviations, metaphorical imagery, narrative fragmentation, parallel structures, and symbolic descriptions are particularly treated. These linguistic features are chosen because they help to establish the postcolonial identity in the story.

There are several stages in the analytical method used in the study. In the first stage, extracts from the text are closely read and linguistic features that are foregrounded in the narrative are identified. The identified stylistic patterns are grouped by the stylistic taxonomy of Leech and Short (2007) in the second stage, which comprises lexical, grammatical, semantic, and narrative patterns. In the third stage, the stylistic characteristics of these linguistic choices are discussed in order to understand how the text gains thematic and psychological value.

In the final stage, the foregrounded features are analysed using the postcolonial concepts of hybridity, liminality, unhomeliness, and the Third Space as Bhabha (1994) calls it. This stage analyses the linguistic foregrounding as an expression of a sense of 'belonging in fragments', of 'migrant consciousness', and of reconstruction of postcolonial identity. The analysis, therefore, needs to be a close stylistic reading of the text which is also contextualised through postcolonial interpretation, so as to establish a relationship between language and identity formation in *Exit West*.

In the present study, only some of the passages in *Exit West* are analysed, and foregrounded linguistic structures are examined in the context of postcolonial identity reconstruction. Other literary elements like character, feminism, narratology, or political themes are not explored in detail, unless they are directly related to the stylistic construction of postcolonial identity.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis shows that Hamid uses several foregrounded linguistic strategies to build up the image of migrant identity.



Syntactic Fluidity

Hamid is often employing extended sentences, which convey the sense of movement and displacement. The syntactic fluidity captures the dynamism of the migrant experience and the lack of rigid demarcations.

Repetition and Parallelism

The repetition of important phrases and narrative elements gives rhythm to the collection, highlighting the repetitive and uncertain aspects of migration. This foregrounding magnifies the instability's emotional impact.

Metaphorical Spatiality

In the book, the magical doors serve as a metaphor for switching identities and locations. They represent the fading of the boundaries and the opening of liminal spaces.

Narrative Fragmentation

The novel has an episodic structure, which is related to the fragmented identity formation. The drastic change of settings reflects psychological disorientation of migrants who move across a range of cultural environments.

Postcolonial Interpretation

Linguistic features from a Bhabhaian point of view build identity in the Third Space. The characters are in a state of hybridity and unhomeliness, of a belonging negotiated, not fixed. Linguistic foregrounding is therefore a way of representing, and even a way of creating, a postcolonial identity.

Conclusion

Linguistic foregrounding in *Exit West* is found to be very important in the making of postcolonial identity in the study. The syntactic fluidity, repetition, metaphor, and narrative fragmentation, all of which Mohsin Hamid employs, are metaphors for migration as a psychological and linguistic process of identity reconstruction.

Combining stylistics and postcolonial theory has revealed that language can not only be a medium of storytelling but also a means that can mould the ideological meaning. The study is based on the premise that in *Exit West* the postcolonial identity is flexible, liminal, and constantly being re-made by foregrounded linguistic structures.

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