



AI AND THE SYMBOLIC PORTRAYAL OF MAGICAL DOORS: AN EXPLORATION OF TECHNOLOGY AND TRANSITION IN MOHSIN HAMID'S NOVEL 'EXIT WEST'

Naheed Hassan

Research Scholar

Department of English Linguistics and Literature

Riphah International University

Islamabad - Pakistan

hnaheed01@gmail.com

Abstract

The use of technology and symbolism in the era of contemporary literature has given rise to unique possibilities for narrative writing. 'Exit West' by Mohsin Hamid is one of the captivating examples of this technique i.e. portraying the use of magical doors in the novel as a symbol of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This amalgamation into the storyline transcends the mundane and lets the readers enter into the world of today's digital era. The purpose of this research paper is to delve deep into the thematic landscape of 'Exit West' revealing the fundamental relevance of AI and the symbolism embedded in the magical doors by Mohsin Hamid. Symbolically, the use of magical doors offers an enriched narrative not only as physical gateways that lead to different locations around the globe and symbols for transition but also the role of AI associated with these magical doors. These doors also represent the essence of migration as a symbol of optimism, uncertainty and personal development. This paper goes beyond the cultural and literary framework of Mohsin Hamid's novel 'Exit West' by analysing the symbolism used and the AI aspects to current world challenges.

Key words: AI, Magical Doors, Symbolism, Migration, Displacement

Introduction

In the world of literature, the fusion of technology and symbolism has gained much attention. Mohsin Hamid's 'Exit West' is a masterpiece of literature in which the author has skillfully incorporated the use of magical doors which can be symbolically interpreted as Artificial Intelligence (AI). These magical doors become significantly important symbols, which are linked to the AI revolution of transcending physical spaces in just a click with a distinctive perspective of the difficulties of modern man. The concept of magical doors has been transformed into a meaningful symbol of longing, personal growth and new ways. 'Exit West' depicts a narrative technique that is normally associated with folklore and fantasy due to the use of magical doors that lead to different locations across the globe



in seconds but there is another layer to it according to today's digital era of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Previously conducted researches have explored the use of technology and literature by mainly focusing on the effect of digital age that has been incorporated in the storytelling. Some scholars have examined the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on literature specifically in Sci-Fi. Furthermore, the themes like migration, issues of displacement, identity and belongings have been explored time to time. Researches have also been conducted on the geographical themes.

This paper adds to the current literature by providing the amalgamation of AI and symbolism in "Exit West". It also investigates the role of AI in changing the world, connecting individuals across the globe, plays a role in decision making by impacting mind both consciously and sub-consciously like the Hamid's characters in novel. It also focuses on the profound significance of magical doors as they symbolise AI, offering a new perspective of modern world which is on the verge of technological revolution with AI at the forefront of revolutionary change. The magical doors in the novel 'Exit West' is not only for the purpose of plot building but metaphorically they reflect the fast changing technological reality of modern world.

The paper not only investigates, how these magical doors serve as physical escape to other lands but also delves symbolically that how the magical doors swing wide to disclose the new world that is totally different from the previous world of the protagonists and also dissects the ever expanding horizon of AI.

Literature Review:

The world is evolving more rapidly in technology that its impact on human cannot be neglected. Literature, being the mirror of society, plays an important role in shaping the mind-set of humans. The relation of technology and literature has also gained the attention of authors over the period of time that authors now incorporate the digital world in the world of imagination to convey their message to the world. The amalgamation of technology into literature reflects the changing dynamics of human's connection and communication (Jenkins, 2015). In 'Exit West', Hamid skilfully incorporated the technology in the form of AI with symbolism by the use of magical doors that truly represents the ever-changing world of modern man both physically and emotionally.

Philip K. Dick (1968) and Isaac Asmov (1950) both authors have investigated the impact of AI on humans in their artworks of literature. In his novel, *Do Androids Dreams of Electric Sheep*, Philip K. Dick, presented two major questions: If an AI is as smart as human, how do humans control it? And secondly If an AI can think like humans, should it be neglected as fellow living being or not? (Dick, 1968). *Klara and the Sun* by renowned author Kazuo Ishiguro, explore the existential and the emotional hazards of engaging with AI that increasingly act very sentimental. The novel also direct readers to think about what makes us human and whether we humans can be programmed or not (Ishiguro).



Symbolism, a method used in literature when something is needed to be interpreted in many different ways. Symbolism gives wings to author in order to create their imaginative world and essence in their literary work. Bai mentioned in his diary that the symbolism has two different meanings; an obvious literal meaning and a symbolic meaning that is deeper than literal meaning (Bai, 2017). Thus symbolism plays an effective role in making the themes of literature universal and more impactful. As literature has the power to change the society so the use of symbolism helps in understanding the depths. In his article, Akter says that symbols appear in the form of words, sounds, gestures or visual images. In addition, all of these are used to convey thoughts and beliefs (Akter, 3). Symbolism, gives beauty to any literary work with the freedom of interpretation. It opens up closed doors for new and innovative ideas that can play a significant role in transforming the landscape of literature. The use of magical doors in 'Exit West' serve as a powerful symbol that not only reflect physical passageway but they represent the fast AI transition and transformation that the world is facing today. They not only fulfil the purpose of geographical settings, but they serve as an innovative emblems of transformation as discussed by Edward Said in 'Orientalism' which emphasis the need when it comes to interpreting literary symbols that cultural context should also be given recognition. According to Said, symbols can have different interpretation and different meanings I different cultural settings and 'Exit West' by Mohsin Hamid gives this liberty to readers from different cultural backgrounds to relate to the journeys of characters in the novel (Said, 1978).

A prominent postcolonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha, investigates the concept of "Other" in his essay, "The Location of Culture" which is characterized by exploration of the complexities of identity, hybridity, mimicry and culture in a globalized world (Bhabha, 1994). The usage of magical doors in 'Exit West' can be interpreted as new challenges and experiences of "Other". The doors represent the migration and transformation of one's identity which also reveals the relationship of displacement and culture.

The symbolic usage of magical doors has both cultural and universal significance. While cultural and geographical memories are associated additionally the symbolism of freedom, hope, change and transition can also be figure out. This duality of interpretation in literature with the help of symbols have multiple meaning each, which resonate with readers across the globe depending on their cultural backgrounds, this concept in 'Exit West' is aligned with the David Damrosch's concept of "What is World Literature?" Damrosch argues in his book that World Literature transcends all the geographical and cultural boundaries offering readers to engage with literary artefacts across the world (Damrosch, 2003). 'Exit West' beautifully embraces this idea by giving freedom to readers for interpretation and to relate the experiences of migration.

In Mohsin Hamid's literary work the convergence of technology and symbolism bridges the gap between the literature and the ever fast evolving landscape of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The symbolism of AI in the form of magical doors in stories like 'Exit West' reflect the powerful impact of AI on human connections and experiences. In this digital words, readers can relate to the AI symbolism as magical doors because it provide a new perspective of looking at the complex yet



challenging relationship between AI and humanity in the twenty-first century. This symbolic interpretation of AI in 'Exit West' reflects the worries, trauma, hope and freedom with challenges individuals are facing in a technologically advanced world.

Research Objectives

- To investigate and examine the representation and the use of magical doors in 'Exit West'
- To find out how Artificial Intelligence (AI) can change personal connections due to migration
- To examine the symbolism associated with magical doors as AI and its impact on modern man.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research method has been used for data analysis. It consists of utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include data taken from the book "Exit West" (2017) by mainly focusing on symbolism of AI used through magical doors in the novel. Secondary sources are comprised of reviews of critics taken from books, articles and journals.

Analysis

The novel "Exit West" by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid draws attention of readers to the real magical world by using magical realism in which one door can change the whole life of characters in the novel. A story of unknown teetering land, on the brink of civil war, became a land of love for two young lovers Nadia and Saeed. Their love got stronger and stronger but the situation in that land became fiercer and terror was prevailing in their love street. Nadia and Saeed had no other choice except leaving their homeland and they found one of the magical door which they had been listening about for a while. Everyone was talking about these magical doors- doors that take people to far away land. Saeed and Nadia found a door and step through it without knowing that the challenges they would they were about to face will turn up their destiny's pages upside down.

Throughout this fictional narrative, the magical doors serve as a symbol of hope and also of uncertainty for the characters not knowing what will happen after crossing those magical doors. But all they knew was that these doors are the source of escape from the danger and the conflicts the characters were going to encounter. So in order to have desire for peace and a better life like everybody had, the young lovers Saeed and Nadia chose to go through these magical doors. The door has been described in following words; "The black door was a rectangle of complete darkness that held a lure so fierce it pulled Saeed and Nadia towards it" (Hamid, 2017). It was not only the character's desire to use the doors for escape, but the aura of door was so strong that it pulled both the young lovers towards it.

In this fast changing technological world the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is same as, magical doors. Even if the person does not want to use, some way or the other one has to encounter him/herself to AI because without using AI people will struggle in their career or not using AI can also be a hurdle



towards their success. Same is the case with the characters in the novel “Exit West”, Nadia and Saeed. If they hadn’t used those magical doors they would have had to bear the consequences as the land was on the verge of civil war.

Peirce Semiotic Theory also known as the Peirce Sign Theory is one of the major theories by an American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, dealing with symbolism. Semiotics provide tools required to analyse the form of text and to read it as a part of a general social system of signs. The theory of signs had been of great importance for Peirce as he himself said, “it has never been in my power to study anything, – mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitation, thermodynamics, optics, chemistry, comparative anatomy, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economics, the history of science, whist, men and women, wine, metrology, except as a study of semiotic” (SS 1977, 85–6). Peirce’s focus was on the sign theory to figure out the realism that is hidden behind every sign. For Peirce, “a sign/symbol is anything from pictures, words, signals, microscopes, legislative representatives, musical concertos, and their performance etc. which stands for something else” (San Juan Jr., 2010).

Peirce’s Theory of Semiotics is also known as a three-cornered or Triadic model of sign because he gives three elements that make up a sign. The first one is ‘Representamen’, it is a physical form that represents something else. It can be a word, an object, an image, a gesture that gives complete sense. The second is Object; it refers to the idea that the sign represents and the third one is ‘Interpretant’; it is the mental capacity of mind through which an interpreter generates meaning out of it. We live in a world which is full of signs and symbols. Literature is the embodiment of society so writers use symbols in their writing to create a visual impact that generates vast meanings for different people. It makes the work more vivid and creative because there is no limit to human imagination and to extract meaning out of it. Symbolism is used to generate meanings other than literal meaning in order to create a space for creative thinkers. That’s the technique Mohsin Hamid has used in his novel ‘Exit West’ to give meaning beyond words. The magical doors can be seen with the lens of Peirce’s Theory of Semiotics as the magical doors are more than just a symbol of the physical passageway that relocates the characters in different places time to time rather they also reflect a sign of ever-fast-growing digital world which has given rise to many challenges to human experiences. As signs generate signs there are multiple layers to magical doors one as they symbolize the ever-changing AI in this digital era.

Modern Perspective to “Exit West”, Magical Doors as Artificial Intelligence (AI)

“Exit West” if viewed under the modern perspective where the magical doors are the symbol for Artificial Intelligence (AI) opens up a new interpretation which is relevant to today’s modern digital world. As technology plays a great role in transformation. In today’s world the transformative role that AI is playing is on a different level i.e. social, political and on an individual level. As the magical doors are the representative of profound change, they symbolically represent that how AI and its use is changing societal norms and individual on a drastic capacity. The first encounter of Saeed and Nadia with the magical doors was a ray of hope even if it seemed an ordinary black door in the shape of a rectangle. But that ordinary magical door transformed their whole existence, just like AI, often it appears as a saviour of mankind but AI has an immense power to change the human existence



completely.

Another modern perspective to magical doors is the globalization. The world has become a global village, a saying every human is aware of and the reason behind this saying is that in real time and space now people are able to connect to people around the world. And it is not because of any magic but because of Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven communication technologies. Mohsin Hamid, has undoubtedly written a very insightful novel which opens up new layers behind these magical doors. Hamid has beautifully hidden the global connectivity in the form of AI using these magical doors. As stated in the novel, "through the door there was a hallway and then blackness, then the sudden burst of city lights" (Hamid, 2017). Furthermore, through globalization the connections are facilitated around the globe with different people from diverse culture, ethnicity, norms traditions and customs. Through magical doors connections are reflected in the idea that AI has made it easier to connect and to tolerate the diversity of cultures, religions and traditions. As quoted by Hamid in "Exit West", "these people were from all over the world, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, but here in this new land they were all human together" (Hamid, 2017).

Twenty first century can be considered as a marathon and if any individual want to be a part of this marathon than he/she must learn the art of adapting to the change of this fast moving digital world. The characters in the novel are forced to adapt to all the uncertainties and obstacles they faced throughout their journey toward peace and tranquillity by the use of magical doors. Just like the AI which forces the person to adapt to it in order to make his/her life easier. We as humans want shortcut and easiness in our lives and that is why we adapt to it and whosoever does not adapt to it, he/she is left behind in all walks of life some way or the other. Hamid has skilfully describe this adaption in the novel "Exit West", "Saeed understood that the city could be blotted out, that his past could be blotted out, and that this could be a beginning" (Hamid, 2017).

This adaption can certainly makes a person anxious and disoriented because once a person is introduced to a new world which he/she is unaware of makes things difficult to adjust. Once in the novel when Saeed and Nadia using one of the magical doors entered into a new country where everything was different, their language, their customs and their clothing. But eventually both the lovers tried to adapt themselves in that environment by learning their language, by understanding their cultural norms and traditions. In this way they were able to connect to the people of that country. As Saeed said, "we've been pushed out of our comfort zones, forced to adapt, and in doing so we've discovered ourselves" (Hamid, 2017). Adaption grants opportunities for change and for personal growth. As this dialogue of Saeed proved that through the interaction of magical doors they were able to transform themselves and got a chance to personally groom themselves. Similarly, AI serves the same role as that of magical doors in the novel, as AI too provides new and innovative ways to mankind to learn, adapt and groomed themselves personally, emotionally in order to compete in the world of digitalization.



Conclusion

Symbolism in literature is writer's language to convey their message beyond literal meaning creating pictures in the reader's mind. The amalgamation of Artificial Intelligence through symbolism is a captivating example that Mohsin Hamid has used his novel throughout. This research paper has find out the hidden symbolism of Artificial Intelligence (AI) through the use of magical doors. This symbolism reveals the impact of AI on the modern era as that of the magical doors in the novel. Saeed and Nadia the young lovers of Hamid's novel "Exit West" passed through magical doors in order to save themselves from the civil war as those magical doors, which takes people to faraway lands. Socially, culturally and politically changed countries forced Saeed and Nadia to adapt to those environment in order to continue their life which symbolically portrays the AI revolutionary potential that make people adapted to its use so that they could be successful in their everyday life. The use of Mohsin's symbolism through the magical doors align with the Peirce Semiotic Theory, which describes that the door regardless of conveying the physical passageway for transition of characters life also portrays something beyond that when looked under the lens of symbolism. As magical doors are used as a 'symbol' it can be interpreted in many different ways as literature opens up new ways of imagination and also according to social system of symbols one that is 'magical doors as Artificial Intelligence (AI).'



References;

- Akter, Sumi (2013) "Symbolism; Theory, Function and Characteristic." Departement of Sociology.
- Asimov, I. (1950). *I, Robot*. Gnome Press.
- Bai, R. (2017). Symbolism in Ted Hughes' Poetry. *ELK Asia Pacific Journals, Special Issue*. ISBN: 978-81-930411-1-6.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Damrosch, D. (2003). *What is world literature?* Princeton University Press.
- Dick, P. K. (1968). *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Doubleday.
- Hamid, M. (2017). *Exit West*. Riverhead Books.
- Ishiguro, K. (2021). *Klara and the Sun*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Jenkins, H. (2015). The depiction of technology in literature reflects the changing dynamics of human connection and communication. In *A Companion to Media Authorship* (pp. 231-244). John Wiley & Sons.
- Peirce, C. S. (1883). *Studies in Logic, by Members of The Johns Hopkins University*. Boston: Little Brown.
- Peirce, C. S. (1931-1935). *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1867-1913)
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage.
- San Juan Jr., E. (2001). Charles Sanders Peirce's Theory of Signs, Meaning, and Literary Interpretation. *St. John's University Review*, 2(2). Retrieved from <https://facpub.stjohns.edu/~ganterg/sjureview/vol2-2/06Juan-Knowledge.htm>