



RESEARCH PAPER

Contextualizing Self (Re)Invention in Modern World: An Urban Sociological Perspective of *Exit West*

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PAPER INFO ABSTRACT

Received:
September 11, 2019

Accepted:
December 25, 2019

Online:
December 31, 2019

Keywords:

Tradition,
Social Locales,
Urban
Sociology,
Self
(re)invention,
Modernity

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The current study questions the impacts of differentiating characteristics of incongruous social locales of modern urban cities and traditional chaotic city in transforming the lives and characters of two individuals in the selected novel. It chooses *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid as the text under discussion. It also underscores how salient features of the dichotomous social locales help them to (re)invent themselves in the phenomenon of self-exploration in the differently located geographical terrains. The paper seeks guidance from the critical insights of (Bhaba, 1994; Ashcroft, 2000; Berman, 1988) to analyze and highlight the challenges that modernity and tradition pose to them to intervene in their journey of self-realization. It goes on to underline the causal adumbration that engages them to oscillate between the two opposite poles by bringing them in a fix of ambivalently divided affinities. Subsequently, it aims to highlight how the gravitational pull of the ephemeral modernity and the solidified tradition intrigue to be the determinants of their destiny under different circumstances, clandestinely

Introduction

The *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid showcases myriads of differentiating characteristics of modern European/American cities and a traditional war-ridden city. In comparison with the modern western cities, the troubled eastern city surfaces to be a symbol of tradition and conservativeness. The comparison between these opposite social locales enables this study to find out their explicit and implicit effects in the lives of Saeed and Nadia—the major characters in *Exit West*. The study advances to draws its conclusion to highlight the role of modernity/tradition in different locales to influence the embattled

phenomenon of the self (re)invention surreptitiously. Also, it necessitates emphasizing the presence/absence of modernity in the aforementioned social locales.

Tradition relates to the past and the modernity pertains to the present. It implies that tradition is in a fixed state but modernity exhibits fluid characteristics. Bauman thought the preceding stage of modernity to be “solid” and its current stage as “liquid” (Bauman, 2000). Being modern is to be in a world where, as Marx said, “All that is solid melts into air” (Marx, Engels, 2008, p. 38-39) Experiencing modernity is like traveling from definite towards indefinite. Whatever is modern, proves to be under a consistent change. Thus, one can explain tradition comprehensively because it has a certain form but to define and explain modernity altogether is a complex phenomenon since it proves to be transitional and ever-changing in nature.

Marshall Berman (1988) thinks that modernity is “a body of experiences” shared by all across the world in terms of “space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils”. Thus, it is universal because it is a binding force for all humanity. Nevertheless, the unifying attribute can be brought into question because it may be hard to discern whether it is unity in real or “unity of disunity”. Modernity is a journey from the known to the unknown. Although it promises different enterprises to all men and women in all walks of life, yet none can diminish the threats accompanied by it to everything in the possession of its exponents (Berman, 1988).

The earlier traces of modernity which culminated in today’s modern era can be found at the beginning of the sixteenth century. After two hundred years a new wave of modernity began with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s hero, Saint Preux, who talked about “a continual flux and reflux of prejudices and conflicting opinions...” (Berman, 1988, p. 18). He is followed by the voice of Nietzsche in “*The Birth of Tragedy*” showing his faith in “man of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow” (Nietzsche, 2000). In nineteenth-century, Marx was another person who realized the impact of modernity in society and declared that “all fixed relations” had ceased to exist, and “all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify” (As quoted in Berman, 1988, p. 21).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a modern landscape played a vital role in the transformation of the lifestyles of the people of that era. This

landscape was “developed, differentiated and dynamic”. It promised everything to the people “except solidity and stability” (Berman, 1988).

“This is a landscape of steam engines, automatic factories, railroads, vast new industrial zones; of teeming cities that have grown overnight, often with dreadful human consequences; of daily newspapers, telegraphs, telephones and other mass media, communicating on an ever wider scale...” (Berman, 1988, pp.18-19)

Although the nineteenth-century passed through certain stages of modernity yet it was not the end of the journey because the journey of modernity is unending. Therefore, the modernity of every age seems to be something “that has lost touch with the roots of its own modernity” (Berman, 1988). Ironically, every era to become modern is at daggers drawn with its modernity because the most modern lifestyle which the people of today are following is bound to be replaced by a coming modern lifestyle in the name of modernity. So, a consistent rivalry between the prevalent modernity and the modernity in anticipation is observed and it provides the basis for a tug of war between these two in which the latter would always be the winner.

Literature Review

Etymologically, the first usage of the word modern can be traced back in the fifth century A.D as ‘modernus’ used to differentiate the present official Christian from the past pagan. The term modernity is reminiscent of the social organization of the European world which started in the sixteenth century. That was the period when Europe underwent the experiences of Renaissance and Reformation which changed the outlook of that society to a great extent. From there onward, each coming generation started cherishing its present in comparison with the past days (Habermas & Ben-Habib, 1981).

Ashcroft commented that those were the days when Europe started to portray itself as “modern” and called the rest of the world “traditional”, “static” and “pre-historical”. This construction of the binary opposition fulfilled the purpose of the colonizer and encouraged him to subjugate the others by declaring them uncivilized because to him modernity was a synonym of civilization. It was the time of change and replacement. Old social order was being replaced by a new modern social institution. Rationality was the call of the day. Rationalization stayed as the key factor of the modernity. Undoubtedly, rationalization brought order and reliability but at times it was at the cost of meaningfulness (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000).

Europe became the heart of modernity and considered itself the “Center” of civilization. The rest of the world which did not have a firsthand experience of modernity was treated as the “Periphery” for that center (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000). This was the start of an era of colonization and subjugation. The people of periphery looked towards the center because of its phantasmagoric and modernistic character and followed the center, at times, blindly or they were allured or forced to do so. Nevertheless, this movement towards center did not come out to be linear but circular because the Others, sooner or later, had to revert to their starting point albeit modernity still was the order of the day.

Talking about the translation of the word modernity in the postcolonial narrative, Homi K. Bhaba (1994) debates on Mladen Dolar’s description of modernity in which he regarded “the constant reconstruction and reinvention of the self” as an “attitude of typical modernity. Dolar added, “The subject and the present it belongs to have no objective status, they have to be perpetually (re)constructed” (Dolar, 1991). Here, Bhaba questions whether this iterative split of the subject is a condition for his freedom in any way. He talked about a complex phenomenon of how “historical temporality intervenes the “enunciative present” and resultantly gives birth to “self inventions of modernity” (Bhabha, 1994).

Bhaba (1994) asserts that the significance and force of modernity in the postcolonial perspective is present in its “performative and deformative” structure that is incommensurable to the straight forward reassessment of the “contents of cultural tradition, or transpose values”. He augments his argument by giving an example that “The cultural inheritance of slavery” was introduced to modernity “not to resolve the historic differences” and not to correct its traditional mistakes rather it was an introduction to “another locus of inscription and intervention” (Bhabha, 1994).

Anthony Giddens (2016), talks about the multi-dimensional aspects of the modernity. He opines that modernity cannot be associated with a single term explanation but one has to dig deep to understand the multiple perspectives of modernity. He tries to develop a connection of modernity with “capitalism”, “industrialization”, “administrative powers” and “military power”. It means that to Anthony Giddens modernity is not a monolithic term that has a single hue and does not convey something else, rather, to him it proves to be a multi-dimensional construct that needs so many things to come into collaboration for giving a comprehensible meaning (Giddens, 2016).

Ben Singer (2006), in his article titled *"Introduction: Modernism, Modernity and the Senses"* delineated the three models of modernity, briefly. At first, he talks about the concept of the "hegemony of the psychological regimen of rationality", an idea propagated by Weber and others in detail. This group believed in the need of "a calculative mindset" aspiring for "efficient systems of production, management, and social engineering." His second model is relevant to the "reflexivity" in the modern age. The exponents of this model put stress upon "disenchantment" and "demagification" of the world. This concept of modernity also stems out of the first one but it is devoid of the rational stability of the former one (Singer, 2006).

Nietzsche (2000), because of this aforementioned reason, finds it to be "madly thoughtless shattering and dismantling of all foundations," furthermore he adds that "their dissolution into a continual evolving that flows ceaselessly away, the tireless unspinning and historicizing of all there has ever been" (Nietzsche, 2000). Singer has also talked about the conception put forward by Simmel and others and he categorizes it as "sensory-perceptual counterpart" of "ceaseless social-ideological flux." Commenting on this model comprehensively, he asserts, "This perspective stressed the sensory dynamics of the new urban experience, surveying the metropolis as a phenomenological environment of unprecedented sensory-perceptual instability, complexity, and intensity" (Singer, 2006).

Ulrich Beck (1992) in his book *"Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity"* explicates many other effects of modernity on the lives of modern people. He also gives a division of modernity into three stages i.e. "pre-modernity, simple modernity, and reflexive modernity". He keeps on talking about the risks which modernization itself has caused to its existence as he says, "Just as modernization dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century and produced the industrial society, modernization today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being" (Beck, 1992).

He talks about the risks impending to society through the extensive usage of science and technology. In this regard, he gives the example of the food being produced through genetic modification of the food. He gives a comparison of the past classical modernity with that of the second contemporaneous modernity. He takes his debate a step ahead as he talks about "Second Modernity". He asserts that the modernity was a product of the enlightenment in terms of social justice, and ability to reason and mass production but now it has become something

related to past because the world is progressing towards a stage which is beyond modernity and it is second modernity (Beck, 1992).

George Ritzer (1993), in his seminal work, *"The McDonaldization of Society"* gives a deeper insight into the concept of modernity. To Ritzer, McDonald's is a symbol of modernity. Through the symbol of McDonald's restaurant, he gives a new coloration to the old concept of modernity given by Weber. Weber talked about the three forms of rationality named "formal rationality", "substantive rationality" and "theoretical or intellectual rationality" whereas Ritzergave a concept of hyper-rationality in which all three forms of rationality given by Weber collaborate to give birth to hyper-rationality (Ritzer, 1993).

His theory of hyper-rationality can be identified as an extension rather than a refined form of Weber's rationality. Where Weber talks of the formal rationality in terms of bureaucracy there Ritzer used the restaurant of McDonald's as a paradigm of formal rationality. He also examines the impact of credit cards in terms of rationalization and implies that when the restaurant is dealing with receipts of the credit then, actually, the bank seems to be dealing with fast money in the backdrop of fast food (Ritzer, 1993).

Zygmunt Bauman (1992), in his book, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, writes, "...considered as a complex purposeful operation, the holocaust may serve as a paradigm of modern bureaucratic rationality" (p. 150) The effect of modernity on the phenomenon of modernization is similar to the effect of Nazis on the Jews. The persons behind the scene of the holocaust used the bureaucracy as a tool to achieve their objectives. Bauman (1992) opines that the holocaust is not abominable as it is perceived by the majority of the people. He thinks that within a due course of time the holocaust would appear to be normal with time (Bauman, 1992).

Bauman (1992) asserts that "every 'ingredient' of the holocaust -all of those many things that rendered it possible - was normal". He thinks that his condition of being normal is not in the known sense of normality but in the other sense of being fully in compliance "with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world." He also believes that under suitable circumstances this modern world may bring more abominable incidents than that of the holocaust (Bauman, 1992).

Describing the inter-connection of modernity and the holocaust Bauman (1992) writes, *Modernity*, as embodied in these rational systems, was not a "sufficient condition" for the holocaust, but it was clearly a necessary condition.

Without modernity and rationality, “the holocaust would be unthinkable” (p. 14). Bauman (1992) considers the act of holocaust as an act of modern bureaucratic rationality and cannot find any kind of pre-modern irrationality involved in the process anywhere (Bauman, 1992).

In addition to that, Bauman has also worked on the concept of post-modernity and coined the term “Liquid Modernity” (Bauman, 2000). In an interview with Keith Tester (Bauman and Tester, 2004) he seems to be suggesting that liquid modernity is a better term than the umbrella term of post-modernity. He suggests that liquid modernity proves to be a more appropriate terminology for denoting the changes and the continuities of the modernity. His concept of liquid modernity indicates towards quickly ever-changing forms of life of today where there is not any room left for the longevity.

Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (1987) by Jurgen Habermas elaborates on the views of this scholar of modernity. He is among those philosophers who think that talking about postmodernity is not the right attitude because still, the accomplishment of modernity has not taken place. He suggests that modernity is guided by rationality and it is still under process. The project of modernity has not been completed yet (Habermas, 1987).

Habermas (1987) says, “A rational society would be one in which both system and life-world were permitted to rationalize in their own way, following their own logics.” He continues that such a “rationalization” would result in a society that possesses “material abundance and control over its environment” as a consequence “of rational systems and one of truth, goodness, and stemming from a rational world.” He seems to be hopeful regarding the establishment of a rational society and emphasizes the need to do more in the modern world rather than thinking about postmodernity (Habermas, 1987).

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Discussion

Nadia and Saeed are the two main characters of *Exit West* (2017). Their first interaction takes place in an unnamed city that is “swollen with refugees” (Hamid, 2017, p.1). The citizen can anticipate the war in offing and the city lacks the fundamental prerequisites of a modern urban city too. The city has to pay a heavy price for its orthodoxy in the form of an impending civil war catastrophe. Its economy “was sluggish form mounting unrest” (Hamid, 2017, p.4). The sky of the city has also “become too much polluted” (Hamid, 2017, p. 14). The “war” in their “city revealed itself to be an intimate experience” (Hamid, 2017, p. 65). Nadia and Saeed both are undergoing the phenomenon of self (re)invention in this social locale through this intimate experience as the novel suggests that “Geography is destiny” (Hamid, 2017, p. 9).

Nadia is experiencing a continuous oscillation in her self-discovery. Outwardly, she is wearing a “hijab”; however, inwardly she is more modern than Saeed. She loves to go out riding her “hundred-ish cc trail bike” (Hamid, 2017, p. 3). Conversely, Saeed is less religious explicitly as he had a beard that was “not a full beard” (Hamid, 2017, p. 1); nevertheless, his innate conservativeness exacts the initiation and execution of the phenomenon of self (re)invention in the contrasting social locales ultimately.

The traditional backwardness of their city is quite obvious as the for “many decades after independence a telephone line in their city had remained a rare thing” (Hamid, 2017, p. 35). The modern phone strips Nadia of her privacy by intruding her “separate existence” (Hamid, 2017, p. 36). It reveals the role of modernity in shaping and reshaping the lives of the main characters of the novel explicitly or implicitly. Particularly, in the case of Nadia, she feels “no need to limit” it as she explored multiple avenues of modernity to identify her with them (Hamid, 2017, p. 37).

Nadia started her journey of self-invention in the pursuit of modernity in her traditional city. For this sake, she decided and announced to move “out on her own” as “an unmarried woman” (Hamid, 2017, p. 18). Also, both of them have a common desire to “travel” the exotic destination like “Cuba” and Chile (Hamid, 2017 pp. 20-21). Her pursuit of modernity is also reflected through the choice of the music she listens to. She likes to an “American” female singer popular with her country folks as “soul” (Hamid, 2017, p. 25). To materialize their desire to enter the premises of the modern world and (re)invent themselves through modernity they

use the “doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away” (Hamid, 2017, p. 69).

During the days of the war, they looked for those doors “every morning”. This informs of their strong desire to move to modern social locales to modify themselves. Upon being able to walk through these doors, they even jeopardized their lives as well for they knew that the “passage was both like dying and like being born” (Hamid, 2017, p. 98). Having taken the risk, they succeed in landing on the “Greek island of Mykonos” (Hamid, 2017, p. 100).

The modern social locale of Mykonos does not help them to (re)invent themselves as Saeed trims his beard to the stubble that he had at the time of meeting Nadia in their homeland. Similarly, Nadia the social locale of Mykonos does not help Nadia grow herself too as she too does not give up wearing her robe. Their struggle to find the doors to “Germany” or any other modern destination bespeaks their quest for more modernity. Although they have been swindled, they are determined to further their journey (Hamid, 2017, p. 107).

The sight of “glossy magazines, with pale woods and cream rugs and white walls” triggers them to think themselves to be in a filmy hotel room. With a little bit of pain, they can identify the place as one of the modern western metropolises – London. Both of them undergo certain changes in the city and the warmth of their relationship begins to cool down.

Here, they stand to be the metaphors of two different weltanschauungs. Nadia advocates modernity and Saeed takes sides with the tradition. He does not forget to place the “photo of his parents” safely whereas Nadia never misses her family and forbids Saeed to control him as she says, “Don’t tell me what I can do” (Hamid, 2017, p. 123). Perhaps, the outer roughness has fractured their relationship as well as in London “there were rough people everywhere, and in life, roughness had to be managed” (Hamid, 2017, 129).

In the modern social locale of London, they experience self (re)invention of modernity; nevertheless, this does not come out to be promising social locale conducive to their journey of self-realization and they intend to move ahead once again. The bruising of Nadia’s eye and the splitting of Saeed’s lips in London symbolize their respective incapacities of thinking and presenting his point of view effectively. They keep on changing without changing anything. Saeed notices that “Nadia looked much the same as she did when they met first” and “continued to wear her black robes” (Hamid, 2017, p. 187).

The thirst for self (re)invention inspires them to pass through another door to enter another modern western country America, i.e. the oceanic hills of Marin, California. During their stay, there they tried different ways to explore themselves while embattling with modernity. Even they developed the tendency to smoke weed but they suffered a lot at the hands of modernity. They both notice the change occurred in them as she thinks “he had changed” and continues “and perhaps she had changed too” (Hamid, 2017, p. 193). Saeed tries to reinvent himself by reverting towards religiosity as it is seen, “in Marin, Saeed prayed even more” (Hamid, 2017, p. 201).

The consensual separation of both them is the last step which they take to find a final self (re)invention in modern social locales that they could not achieve together. Still, she wears her robe and recalls her “apartment in the city of her birth” (Hamid, 2017, 215). Their journey proves to be circular when they both meet in the country of their birth after half a century. They ask each other to “imagine how different” life would have been if they had opted differently under different circumstances. This pinpoints their unaccomplished journey of self (re)invention. (Hamid, 2017, p. 228). They part their ways with a wish to go to “the deserts of Chile” to see if it looked the same way they had imagined. (Hamid, 2017, p. 229).

Conclusion

The open-ended closure of the novel disallows the reader to be judgmental in determining the social disposition of both characters; however, one cannot deny the surreptitious role of modern and traditional locales as driving forces behind their actions and the repercussions they face in the novel. They cannot help themselves out of the continuous oscillation between two contrastive social locales and continues to face the ramifications of his indecisiveness on the way to the journey of self (re)invention.

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