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### Lesson Plan For Teaching Mohsin Hamid's "Exit West"

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English 52C, US Contemporary Fiction / Swarthmore College

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### Lesson Plan for Teaching *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid

Grade(s): 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup>

\*Class days/times: MWF for 75 minutes

Themes: Migration and Identity

\*I planned this lesson for 3 weeks and 3 times a week, but I highly recommend that teachers revise these plans as needed in order for the lesson to fit their class schedules.

#### Learning Goals:

- Students will be able to identify stereotypes of migrants and refuse to accept these as proper understandings of people.
- Students will be able to reclaim their identities using the novel as a basis for this outcome.
- Students will learn to identify the different types of narration, how the narrator functions, and what is accomplished when the narrative voice switches in a novel.
- Students will learn how we should read dialogue, and how it contributes to characterization. Students will be able to deduce information from unspoken dialogue.

#### Week 1: Reading the novel and class/group discussions

##### 1. Monday: Pages 3 – 98

- a. Students will have read and annotated pages 3 – 98 for Monday's class. Students were asked to make special notes on things that they found interesting, had questions on, liked/disliked, etc. in order to make Monday's discussion more fluid. At the beginning of class, students will have a few minutes to do a free write on these notes in order to prepare them for their discussions, and so that they all have something to contribute. For half of the remaining class period, students will share their notes, each

contributing at least once. At the end of this time, we will have a whole class discussion in which each small group shares a summary about their discussion and poses a remaining question for the class to discuss. After each group shares, we will work together to answer the questions from each group.

2. Wednesday: Pages 101 – 166

- a. Students will have read and annotated pages 101 – 166 for Wednesday’s class. Students were asked to make special notes on things that they found interesting, had questions on, liked/disliked, etc. in order to make Wednesday’s discussion more fluid. At the beginning of class, students will have a few minutes to do a free write on these notes in order to prepare them for their discussions, and so that they all have something to contribute. Before getting into small groups, have volunteers remind us about what we discussed during Monday’s class in order for the pending discussions to build off prior ones. For half of the remaining class period, students will share their notes, each contributing at least once. At the end of this time, we will have a whole class discussion in which each small group shares a summary about their discussion and poses a remaining question for the class to discuss. After each group shares, we will work together to answer the questions from each group.

3. Friday: Pages 169 – 231

- a. Students will have read and annotated pages 169 – 231 for Friday’s class. Students were asked to make special notes on things that they found interesting, had questions on, liked/disliked, etc. in order to make Friday’s discussion more fluid. At the beginning of class, students will have a few minutes to do a free write on these notes in order to prepare them for their discussions, and so that they all have something to contribute. Before getting into small groups, have volunteers remind us about what we discussed on Monday and Wednesday in order for the pending discussions to build off prior ones. For half of the remaining class period, students will share their notes, each contributing at least once. At the end of this time, we will have a whole class discussion in which each small group shares a summary about their discussion and poses a remaining question for the class to discuss. After each group shares, we will work together to answer the questions from each group.

## Week 2: Narration and Dialogue

### 1. Monday: Narration

- a. What are the different types of narration? Give students these definitions.
  - i. *First-person narration*: Uses “I” or “we”; shows us one point of view at a time; not always reliable, so we must question their views and understandings.
  - ii. *Second-person narration*: Uses “you” to address the reader; common in the choose-your-own-adventure type of novels.
  - iii. *Third-person close narration*: Uses “he” or “she”; gives us a person’s thoughts and feelings but not in their voice; similar to *first-person narration* but with different pronouns being used.
  - iv. *Omniscient narration/ third-person distant*: presents an all-knowing narrator to provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of the characters; the characters may not understand happenings as they occur, unlike the narrator who gives a broader knowledge to the reader.
  - v. *Indirect narration*: quotes a character without using quotation marks.
  - vi. *Free indirect narration*: allows for the narration to switch between people, and it does not necessarily need to be linked to an individual – this type of narration can be either moving among several different characters’ points of view or giving a group’s opinions (despite the group not necessarily being named); it can also do both these things, switching back and forth between the type of narration —it is “free indirect” narration because it is rather unpredictable in its choices.
  - vii. Ask the students these questions for analysis and discussion: What kind of narrator(s) does the story use, and how does the narrator function? At many points it shifts back and forth among all of the above narrative styles – track *where* and *when* this happens, and then ask *why* (what is accomplished when the narrative voice switches?)

1. Some examples of different narrative styles:

- a. Page 31 – “In times of violence, there is always that first acquaintance or intimate of ours, who, when they are touched,

makes what seemed like a bad dream suddenly, evisceratingly real.”

- i. Questions to also discuss: What does the use of “our” in the narration cause for the reader? Does it make it more personal? Does it make it “suddenly, evisceratingly real”?
  - ii. An advanced question/topic: discuss the irony involved in using the word “touched” or “an intimate” to describe violence’s effects.
- b. Page 97 & 98 – “Saeed’s father then summoned Nadia into his room and spoke to her without Saeed and said that 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 to safety, and ... but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind.”
- i. Questions to also discuss: What is the importance of this entire passage consisting of a single sentence? How does the narration of dialogue impact the message communicated? What does the use of “we” in narration cause for the reader?
  - ii. Perhaps the most startling moment in this passage, which makes the voice of Saeed’s father very present to us, is the use of the word “murder.” It comes as a shock, and at the end of a very long sentence. Why does the father use it? Could he be urging his son and Nadia to forget about him left behind? Also have students consider a counter-argument: Is Saeed’s father, despite his best intentions, also saying it to make them feel guilty? (He knows he will be miserable and alone,

with neither wife nor them....) Compare with the lesson on dialogue below.

## 2. Wednesday: Dialogue

a. Use discussion questions to dive deeper into the ideas of narration and dialogue in *Exit West*.

i. Let's look at the scene where Nadia leaves Saeed on pages 213 to 215 – “All over the world people were slipping away from where they had been ... It was Nadia who first brought up the topic of her mobbing out of the shanty, said in passing ... Saeed did not say anything in response ... So it was not his words that felt to him like an act, but rather his stroking of Nadia's hair ... so their discussion of her departure was not, as it pretended to be, a discussion of her departure, but a navigation, through words that said otherwise, of their fear of what would come next, and when Saeed insisted he would carry her bags for her, she insisted he not do so, and they did not embrace or kiss then ...”

1. Questions to also analyze and discuss: How should we read this paraphrased dialogue? How does it contribute to characterization? Should we just see this as a simple break-up? What's left unspoken, and how can we “guess” that there's more going on than is said aloud? How can form impact the interpretation of a passage? How should we analyze their conversation? Are they saying all that they mean? How do we interpret body language to be dialogue? How can narration be dialogue? How can we think of narration and dialogue as “navigation” through conversation and meaning?

## 3. Friday: Spoken word poetry

a. Use spoken word poetry to solidify the idea of dialogue and narration. Show examples of spoken word poetry like these that use narration and dialogue (even if it is only one voice):

- i. [Denice Frohman – "Borders"](#)
- ii. [Khamal Iwuanyanwu, Sarina Morales, and Vanessa Tahay - "Standing In Between"](#)

- iii. [Joshua Abah - "Uncle Sam"](#)
- b. Introduce the spoken word poetry project:
  - i. Students will create their own spoken word poems to present next Friday. Try to give some time each class day for practicing, planning, reviewing, and questions. The poems should use what we learned about narration and dialogue to tell us their migrant stories – to use Hamid’s words, “we are all migrants through time” (p. 209) – and do not have to be memorized but must be *performed*. Give time for brainstorming and planning during this class. You could also offer students the opportunity to share these performances through YouTube or as a video/performance to the larger school community (this is only with the student’s permission and *should not be required* as part of the project).

### Week 3: Identity and migration

1. Monday: Introduction to migration and introduction to identity
  - a. *Migration* is the movement of a person or people from one country or place to settle in another. This includes both emigration and immigration.
  - b. *Emigration* is people moving out of a country.
  - c. *Immigration* is people moving into a country.
  - d. *Refugees* are people who have been forced to leave their country.
  - e. *Push factors*: forces that drive people to move away from a place
  - f. *Pull factors*: forces that drive people to move to a place
  - g. Cross the line activity:
    - i. With a piece of tape, mark a line that has enough space on both sides of it to fit your class. The teacher will say the question/prompt and ask that whomever it applies to, cross the line and momentarily face those who did not cross, then return to their spot. Give an example: “If you are wearing a red shirt please cross the line.” If this describes them, and if they feel comfortable doing so, they would cross the line. Ask them to think about both sides of the line and then return to their spot. After a few moments, say the next question. Remind everyone that this is a *silent* activity! Emphasize that they do not need

to cross the line if they are not comfortable doing so. Make sure they understand the directions before you begin, and feel free to have a trial run.

ii. Ask these questions for the activity, and *add more*:

1. Cross the line if you play or have played sports
2. Cross the line if you have braces
3. Cross the line if you feel lonely
4. Cross the line if you are the oldest child
5. Cross the line if you are the youngest child
6. Cross the line if you are the middle child
7. Cross the line if you have ever visited another country
8. Cross the line if you have a step-parent
9. Cross the line if you are a leader
10. Cross the line if you were raised by a single parent
11. Cross the line if people usually mispronounce your name
12. Cross the line if you have ever caught yourself judging someone even though you don't know them
13. Cross the line if you like to read
14. Cross the line if you have been bullied
15. Cross the line if you bullied someone
16. Cross the line if you speak more than one language
17. Cross the line if you like to dance
18. Cross the line if you have been targeted by racial slurs
19. Cross the line if you feel safe in school
20. Cross the line if you had someone close to you die
21. Cross the line if you have privileges that others don't
22. Cross the line if you have broken someone's heart
23. Cross the line if you have had your heart broken
24. Cross the line if you are an only child
25. Cross the line if you have not crossed the line

iii. Ask these questions after the activity for discussion:



1. How did it make you feel to share those sides of you? What are some parts of your identity that many other people can identify with?
  2. How can you appreciate someone else's identity without identifying with it?
    - a. Religion scene in *Exit West* on pages 4 to 5. Discuss this scene and how Saeed and Nadia had a positive relationship despite having opposite beliefs, or pieces of their identities.
  3. How does relating to someone, or simply knowing more about someone, change your perception of them?
    - a. All the migrant scenes in *Exit West*: how does Hamid represent these characters? Let's look at the first instance where a migrant's story is shown on pages 7 to 9. What would change if we were to have a better description of the man emerging rather than the woman sleeping? What does this tell us about who is criminalized?
2. Wednesday: Introduction to migration and introduction to identity continued
- a. [The danger of a single story | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#):
    - i. Adichie's TED Talk enforces the idea of challenging the "single stories" that are mostly constructed in western literature that "show a people as only one thing, and that is what they become." In *Exit West*, Hamid uses the "incomplete" stories of migrants to emphasize and refute the stereotypes of migrants.
  - b. [Myers-Briggs test](#):
    - i. Allow time for students to get their results. Afterwards, use this experience to discuss the way that students might think of themselves, and if they agree with their result. What would they feel if they were reduced to only being those four letters? Think about the way migrants are reduced by western media.
3. Friday: Identity and migration
- a. Spoken word poetry presentations!
    - i. Have students introduce their poems, and then perform them to the class. If students have agreed to do so, record the performance. Use the end of this

class to talk about how their stories of migration might impact or challenge conventional understandings of migrants. Have students share their final thoughts on *Exit West*. Reinforce the learning goals from the lesson and emphasize what the most important things the class activities taught the students were.

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### **Reflections**

I based my lesson plan off of the novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid. My learning goals were essential to the planning of the lesson. I wanted to bring the themes of migration and identity that are presented in the novel to the forefront of the lesson. Hamid does an exceptional job at using the intentional obscurity of migrants to criticize this suppression. Within this intentional obscurity are the stereotypes constantly directed towards migrants. In using activities such as cross the line, the Myers-Briggs test, and Adichie's TED Talk, the teacher is able to connect personal emotions to passages in the novel, such as the man who emerges from the closet on page seven. He is reduced to be in the dark and seemingly violent. This is all deduced through the detailed description of the woman sleeping, and lack of detail in the description of this emerging figure. Because we do not know him, we are scared, we are clueless, and we are ignorant. The easiest thing to do is push him into a box in our minds and begin to judge him before we truly know him. It is essential to have students wonder and discuss what it might feel like to be reduced to stereotypical understandings of their cultures and peoples. These are understandings that I hope students will internalize and will use to learn that proper understandings of people do not come from stereotypes. When reading the multiple snippets of migrant's stories, it is important to note that they are just that: snippets. We do not go on the rest of their journeys, and we have no real understanding of who they are. We must question this. We

must reflect on the missing descriptions and ask why these characters are left out of the complete narrative.

Using Hamid's intentional masking of characters, I believe there is much to be understood about students' selves. In *Exit West*, migrants' identities are decided by the people who have the power to do so. As readers, we have the power to decide what we think of certain characters. This said, I hope that the activities and discussions allow students to reflect on their identities – and are able to grapple with the idea of who they wish to be – without letting anyone decide for them. In addition, narration and dialogue are a key to understanding the novel, especially the different way narration and dialogue interact with each other both in the novel but also in students' lives e.g. spoken word poetry.

The narrative techniques on which this lesson plan focuses ALSO allow readers to become the characters, see what they see, feel what they feel. That's the opposite of having their identities “decided” or interpreted by others who feel they're mostly threatening unknown invaders.

I felt that the structure of the lesson was an important and difficult piece to consider as I planned it out. I positioned the novel at the start of the lesson in order to get through the whole classroom's thoughts, questions, and reflections before diving into specific topics and passages. The second week was focused on specific instances of narration and dialogue through discussion of passages in *Exit West*. At the end of the second week, I introduce the spoken word poetry project. This activity would allow students to piece together the concepts learned from *Exit West* but also our learning on narration and dialogue. The example videos of spoken word poems were to help inspire the students and to give them an idea of what can be done with narration and dialogue through a project like this one. The last week was to help define a few terms

surrounding migration, but also to help enforce the idea of identity within the novel and their personal lives. The cross the line activity is an explicit activity to show the way we are all different, yet similar in many ways. The questions are loaded with emotions that tap into areas of the student that are not usually emphasized or respected in classroom environments. It is important to let students know that they are to be cared for and respected in all areas of life – especially in classrooms where learning is usually considered separate from the person learning.

As I planned this lesson, I realized that even the structure of the lesson matters. Often students are left feeling as if a particular lesson or book had no real importance or connection to their lives. I wanted to challenge this thinking by building each week of the last, always bringing thinking back to the novel, and basing discussion and analytical questions off of their personal lives as well. A prime example of this structuring is the spoken word poetry project. The spoken word poetry project came with many difficulties. I wanted to effectively portray the learning goals into a final project, but also be creative enough for students to each add their own personality and identity to the project. This project has narration, dialogue, migration, and identity all at its core. These ideas emerged in *Exit West* yet took their own form as I worked to combine both literature and reality for high school students. I feel that the project successfully encapsulates all the ideas from the lesson plan's learning goals and does so through both vocal and written communication. Including the opportunity to share these spoken word projects with the school community, and even on YouTube, is a special way for your students to realize that the work that is done in class is important outside of class as well. Showing your students that you value their effort and creativity so much that you wish to share it with a broader audience can positively influence your relationship with students.

I learned that planning a lesson around controversial topics is difficult to do so. It is important, however, to do careful planning and research in order for you, as an educator, to provide impactful and helpful lessons for your students. These conversations are not far removed from the realities of students, and to ignore them in literature can negatively impact the credibility and influence of learning in a classroom. I also learned that it is incredibly difficult to construct a lesson plan without knowing who your audience is. It is especially important to adjust this lesson and the activities to accommodate for your students. Differentiating activities for your students is crucial and will make a greater impact if you plan *for* your students and their individual and communal learning, not despite it. I encourage teachers to make adjustments to this lesson, keeping similar learning goals as a product, but not sacrificing the communities' needs for the sake of teaching it the way I wrote it. As I planned the lesson, I realized that the importance of literature, literature like *Exit West*, can bring to light many important issues regarding current events, identity, and work to help uplift voices that are often silenced. Using literature to emphasize the importance of these issues is an essential component of the lesson.

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