

Currency and Border Crossings: The Role of Social Class in *Exit West* and *Girl at War*

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Girl at War by Sara Nović and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid both tell the stories of characters in war-torn countries that are trying to survive day by day. In these novels, there are many physical and intangible borders that impact the main characters' lives in significant ways. Ana Jurić from *Girl at War* is a Croatian girl from the former Yugoslavia who lives in poverty in the midst of a civil war at just 10 years old. *Exit West* follows young, working-class couple Saeed and Nadia from an unspecified country who are experiencing a violent war within the streets of their city while also trying to navigate their forming romantic relationship. Although *Exit West* differs significantly from *Girl at War* due to its elements of magical realism, the two novels are very similar in that they both show that money can be used to cross borders. Class borders and the importance of money to go from one place to another play a key role in these

novels and in the main characters' lives. A lack of money also creates a border for these characters in many ways. In addition, Ana, Saeed, and Nadia are all moving westward throughout their journeys out of their countries; borders become more restrictive and more dependent on money to cross. This paper will focus on comparing the experiences of Ana Jurić from *Girl at War* and Saeed and Nadia from *Exit West* and how these characters use money to cross borders and escape the traumatic living conditions of their home countries, how the lack of money impacts their lives and ability to cross borders, and the connection between the western world and the importance of money in border crossings. Furthermore, *Girl at War* and *Exit West* both suggest that resources and opportunities should be more accessible to everyone, not just the affluent, and that wealth distribution would secure the well-being of the working class.

Currency is an essential passageway through which to cross everyday borders, and social class is one of the most substantial borders between groups of people in our society. Those with money have access to the tools necessary to live a fruitful and happy life, whereas those with less money do not have as much access and live in a cutthroat world in which they must work very hard to survive. For people seeking a better life outside of their country, this is especially true. *Girl at War* by Sara Nović and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid are two texts that exemplify how social class impacts one's ability to migrate and have access to basic needs. The novel *Girl at War* follows Ana Jurić, a Croatian girl from Zagreb, who lives through the trauma of civil war in former Yugoslavia at just 10 years old. Eventually, Ana immigrates to America after her parents are killed, but faces barriers along the way. There are many instances where money is needed to cross a border, whether it's a border of hunger or a physical border.

Likewise, the characters in *Exit West* also struggle with class borders. The novel follows young, working-class couple Saeed and Nadia from an unknown country, who are experiencing a violent war within the streets of their city while also trying to navigate their forming romantic relationship. Unlike *Girl at War*, *Exit West* contains elements of magical realism; in Saeed and Nadia's world there are magical, one-way doors that allow for a person to teleport to a distant place in the world. Although this world has magical elements, there are still borders for marginalized groups to gain access to these doors to escape war torn areas.

These novels tell very different stories, but they are similar because both display how currency plays a role in immigration and the necessity of immigration reform to ensure that impoverished people can migrate out of countries on the brink of disaster or war. The main characters in *Exit West* and *Girl at War* both face borders to seeking refuge in other countries due to their financial circumstances and must find alternative and often illegal methods of escaping. After comparing the experiences of the characters in *Exit West* and *Girl at War*, it is easy to see that social class is one of the largest determining factors in one's ability to cross a border.

One of the first encounters with class borders in Nović's *Girl at War* is the struggle of Ana's family to gain access to basic necessities. Ana describes how her parents cannot afford much and often go hungry:

My mother sent me to the butcher with a wad of new dinar and instructions to buy a bag of bones, and I watched as she made soup from the flavor of meat. She ladled out ever-shrinking portions, sometimes skipping meals completely herself ...After dinner I was never full. (Nović 56)

Ana also wears hand-me-down clothing from her neighbors because they cannot afford

anything else. This is an example of how currency is used to cross a border: money pays for food, clothing, sanitary products, and much more. When one cannot afford such items due to their financial circumstances, it not only puts a strain on their physical health, but also their mental health and motivation. If someone goes hungry or is unable to clothe and clean themselves, this puts a border between them and their health, which impacts their ability to keep working and afford basic necessities, creating a vicious cycle that is difficult to overcome.

As her family grapples with the problem of putting food on the table, there is also the matter of Ana's younger sister Rahela becoming very ill; the family must send her to America through a charity called MediMission as they struggle to get medical care in their own country. Although the main reason the Jurić family might not have access to resources such as food, clothing, and healthcare is the civil war that tore through their city, the border of class is still an issue. If Ana's family had more money, they likely would have been able to get out of Yugoslavia and seek refuge in another country. However, Ana's father applied for visas to America, but they were unfortunately denied. This is also a demonstration of how there needs to be serious immigration reform in many nations to ensure that there are fair opportunities for everyone to seek a better life in a different country. If this does not happen, social class will continue to be a border for impoverished people who need to immigrate.

Ana's family traveled from their home in Zagreb to Sarajevo in order to deliver Rahela to MediMission. Since the Jurić family is denied access to visas to travel with Rahela to America, she is separated from her loved ones and must stay with a foster family. On their trip back to Zagreb, Ana's family is stopped by some Serbian soldiers. During this stop, Ana's parents are killed by these men. It is never revealed why their visas were denied, but again it begs the question of, if they had more money, would they have been granted access to visas and thus to safety? If there were immigration policies in place in America to help refugees, would things have turned out differently? Would the Jurić family have been able to go on and live better lives in America? In her essay "Borders of Class: Migration and Citizenship in the Capitalist State", author Lea Ypi states, "[T]he inconveniences of assembling paperwork, waiting for a response, living with enormous uncertainty, and all of the other familiar troubles associated with immigration bureaucracy are unevenly distributed across the immigrant population" (143). Ana's family is just one example of those impacted by the discriminatory practices of immigration systems that favor wealthy immigrants over poor ones. A significant problem in *Girl at War* is being unable to leave despite a desperate need to, but as Ypi states, borders are easy to cross for some, and impossible for others (142). Those who do not have as much money face more borders when trying to migrate, while

wealthy immigrants have an easier and quicker visa processing procedure.

As the war continues around them, Petar, Ana's godfather, decides it would be best for Ana to go live in America with the foster parents that had taken in Rahela. However, the border of class stands in the way of Ana getting a better life for herself. All the legal routes through which Ana could go to America are unavailable:

Petar contacted MediMission, who offered a terse response that family reunification cases were not within the scope of their work ...Then he considered refugee status, but there wasn't an American embassy in Croatia yet. The consulate in Belgrade was running a looping voice mail that apologized for the wait time and said, due to the high volume of inquiries, they were working through a backlog of applications at this time. (Nović 266-267)

Again, if Ana's family had more money, perhaps they would have been able to get visas earlier or might have connections to get the family to safety. However, crossing this financial border was practically impossible, and not crossing the border could be a matter of life and death. Therefore, legal migration routes were no longer on the table. However, these illegal routes still cost money, demonstrating how it is necessary to have money in order to cross many types of borders.

One of the illegal routes that Petar can afford to take is to buy fake documents for Ana. Petar's friend helps make a fake American visa and Yugoslavian passport for Ana, since hers was lost. Petar then risks his life to take Ana to Otočac to meet with a United Nations Peacekeeper, who is set to take her to the airport in Frankfurt, Germany. On the trip to Otočac, Petar gives Ana an envelope with dinar, a currency used in former Yugoslavia, and tells her: "You'll find that powerful men can often be persuaded. At least they can here. I don't know about America" (Nović 273). Currency plays a huge role in this scene because bribery is a valid way to go from one side of a border to another. Wealth equals power, and wealth inequality has allowed the rich to seize opportunities, sometimes through bribery, while the impoverished do not have that option. There are many takeaways from *Girl at War*, but most significant is how class borders and wealth inequality impact quality of life, immigration, and other notable opportunities.

Much like in *Girl at War*, Hamid's *Exit West* depicts the same phenomenon of people coming to the realization that a war is worsening and there's a desperate need to leave, but not everyone has access to the resources necessary to make their escape. The beauty of *Exit West* is its unconventional way to get out of a country; however, much like in the non-magical world, access is denied to marginalized groups of people. There are magical one-way doors to get to better places, but the best places that everyone wants to go to are typically heavily guarded once the knowledge of their destinations has spread. According to Ypi,

“Borders have always been (and will continue to be) open for some and closed for others. They are open if you are white, educated, and middle and upper class; they are closed (or much less open) if you are not” (142). Saeed and Nadia face many borders to migrate seeing that they are not wealthy and not white.

As Saeed and Nadia start forming their romantic relationship, they notice that people are disappearing around them at work:

At Saeed’s office work was slow even though three of his fellow employees had stopped showing up ...visas, which had long been near-impossible, were now truly impossible for non-wealthy people to secure, and journeys on passenger planes and ships were therefore out of the question ...At Nadia’s workplace it was much the same, with the added intrigue that came from her boss and her boss’s boss being among those rumored to have fled abroad. (Hamid 52-53)

Much like in *Girl at War*, the characters in *Exit West* notice that the desire to leave the country has heightened. Those who have more money, such as the C-level executives at Nadia’s workplace, have been able to make their way out of the country, but many working-class citizens applying for visas are unable to secure them due to their social class. In her essay, “Borders of Class: Migration and Citizenship in the Capitalist State,” Ypi talks about the advantages that wealthy immigrants have over non-wealthy ones:

[U]nder the U.K.’s Tier (Investor) visa program, those with the ability to invest two million pounds in the United Kingdom can come and stay in the country for more than three years, and those who invest ten million pounds may apply for indefinite leave to remain after only two years of residence (compared to five years for those who have reason to naturalize because of family ties). (Ypi 143)

Again, visas are not accessible to those seeking refuge unless they are of a higher social class. This issue shows how non-wealthy immigrants face more borders because immigrants are often only seen as valuable if they have something to offer the host country, such as money or labor.

Saeed and Nadia get desperate in their search for ways to exit their city. The couple risk their lives to meet a man who called himself an agent and claims to be able to find doorways that are not already occupied by militants. He requires payment for his services, which resembles how bribery functions as a passageway much like in *Girl at War*. While they wait for the agent to contact them, Saeed and Nadia continue to struggle in their living conditions. They no longer have electricity in their building and have to use the bathroom outside. This is another example of how there are borders to gain access to basic resources for those with less money. Saeed and Nadia meet the agent at a converted house, fearing for their lives, as the agent could have sold them out to militants. Much like how Petar has

to risk his life to get Ana out of Croatia, Saeed and Nadia have to risk their lives in order to gain access to safe living conditions, while the wealthy bypass borders with relative ease. To Saeed and Nadia's relief, they are able to get through the door and arrive on the Greek island of Mykonos, yet they still face borders as poor immigrants trying to survive in a country they have never been to before.

As Saeed and Nadia continue to move west, they run into borders to receive help as struggling refugees. This is largely due to the fact that impoverished immigrants are not welcomed by the native people of many places such as the United Kingdom. The couple travels through another door and arrives in an empty mansion in London. As they explore their surroundings, more people start to appear in the house through the door. However, when a housekeeper comes to the mansion and sees that it is occupied by people, she calls the police (Hamid 127). From then on, London natives and authorities are on a mission to remove migrants from the city. The instant response of trying to rid the city of poor migrants shows how much of a distaste there is for immigrants in need. There is no response from the government showing empathy or asking how these people might need help. The impoverished immigrants are seen as a threat, especially since they are occupying a space owned by affluent people. No one stops to question why migrants were forced into this position to begin with. This puts a border between the migrants and their ability to have access to basic needs, resulting in the need to forage for resources.

It is rumored that millions of migrants have come into the city and occupied many empty homes and spaces. Although police show up to where Saeed and Nadia are staying, the couple remain there along with others who came through the magical door because there is nowhere else they can go, and London is a good place to search for food and other necessities. One night, when Saeed and Nadia are returning to the mansion, they find themselves up against an angry nativist mob that is intent on harming those they perceive as migrants. After the altercation, Nadia's eye is swollen shut from the bruising and Saeed has a bloody, busted lip (Hamid 134). Three people die that night from rioters across the city, and soon the authorities cut electricity as an attack on the immigrants. Hamid begins to describe the border between the dark and light sides of London. The affluent are on the light side and the impoverished immigrants are on the dark side without electricity (Hamid 141). Saeed and Nadia wonder what life is like in light London as the border between them and the wealthy grows wider. Garbage begins to pile up on their side of the city and the trains keep running but do not make stops in dark London. This section of *Exit West* depicts how poor immigrants are segregated and dehumanized because they are seeking help and resources.

Later, Saeed and Nadia find themselves in worker camps for migrants in which they do labor clearing terrain and building infrastructure, in exchange for housing (Hamid 169).

Saeed finds himself working in a road crew, and he admires his foreman, a knowledgeable and experienced native man. He seems to tolerate migrants and Saeed believes the foreman likes him, but when Saeed decides to thank the foreman for everything he is doing for the migrants, the foreman says nothing (Hamid 179). In capitalist nations, one's labor and wealth are the only things worthwhile, and the white, affluent people and politicians would rather blame poor, nonwhite immigrants for the drain on resources rather than taking responsibility for the wealth inequality taking place in their country. This does not excuse the xenophobia and bigotry of nativists, but it shows how poor nativists have fallen victim to propaganda that is extremely harmful and only benefits the rich, who continue to exploit the labor of both natives and immigrants. For example, in her essay "Borders of Class: Migration and Citizenship in the Capitalist State," Ypi states:

Animosity will fall predominantly on those with lower skills and lower incomes who are more likely to make use of a range of such state-subsidized services. After all, Arab or Russian millionaires living in London typically visit private clinics, send their children to expensive private schools, and make no claims to, say, public housing. Thus, the kind of competition that leads to resentment is typically between poor working-class natives and poor immigrants. (144)

The way in which Saeed's coworker reacts to his comment depicts this resentment that Ypi describes. Although Saeed and other migrants are not responsible for the lack of funding going into state-subsidized services, the blame is shifted to them in order to create a border between poor, working-class natives and poor immigrants.

Exit West was published in February of 2017, less than a year after the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Although there were many reasons why people might have voted to leave, conservative politicians advocated for the UK to have more control over immigration and borders. In her piece "Fences: A Brexit Diary," Zadie Smith notes that when the class and age breakdown of voters came out, there were many working-class citizens that identified with the populist party, which is for stricter borders and immigration policies (25). There is no doubt that tensions were high among immigrant and native populations around the time this novel was released. Although *Exit West* is fictional, it was inspired by real life borders.

In the book *Selected Studies in International Migration and Immigrant Incorporation*, there is a section titled "The Function of Labour Immigration in Western European Capitalism" by Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack (21). This section contains discourse about how immigrants are a source of labor for host countries to exploit and how Western European countries have used racism and nationalism to divide the working class:

...the employment of immigrant workers has an important socio-political function

for capitalism: by creating a split between immigrant and indigenous workers along national and racial lines and offering better conditions and status to indigenous workers, it is possible to give large sections of the working class the consciousness of a labour aristocracy. (Castles and Kosack 24)

Both the renowned German philosopher Karl Marx and the German revolutionary Friedrich Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, which outlined the idea of a labor aristocracy in their work (Brown and Fee 1248; Castles and Kosack 22). A labor aristocracy is when capitalists try to erode class consciousness by separating the values of the working class. By giving some members of the working class more privileges, it convinces the impoverished to align themselves with capitalist values (Castles and Kosack 23). By creating this border between members of the working class, such as pitting nativists against immigrants, a corrupt system can flourish. In *Exit West*, it is important to consider this concept when examining why London nativists are so against poor immigrants coming into their country. They have been taught that these immigrants are a drain on their resources when in reality there are people who choose to hoard their wealth rather than share it, which is a far more insidious threat than people seeking refuge.

This concept of creating a border between the working class can also be applied to *Girl at War* which is based on the events of the Bosnian War (1992-1995) which caused the fracturing of Yugoslavia. Although this war involved ethnic conflicts between Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, and Croats, the events that led up to the war involved class tensions that erupted following a destabilization of their country. In the 1980s, Yugoslavia's economy began to decline after the death of the President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) offered to loan the country money; however, mandatory economic reforms were to be put in place in exchange. Nick Beams notes this in "IMF 'Shock Therapy' and the Recolonisation of the Balkans":

The International Monetary Fund [then] took over economic policy, implementing a number of all too familiar shock therapies: devaluation, a wage freeze, and price decontrol....As the economy contracted from this shock, revenues to the central government declined, triggering pressure from the IMF to raise taxes to balance the budget....These centrifugal forces began to tear apart at the federation, with the richer provinces of Croatia and Slovenia objecting to being drained of resources by the poorer provinces...Yugoslavia broke into pieces as ethnic and religious rivalries were reasserted in an attempt to control the rapidly shrinking pool of resources. (10-11)

Girl at War and *Exit West* both depict the class tension that can occur when resources are withheld from people who need them and how fear mongering can lead to violence. Often conflicts like these appear to only involve ethnicity or immigration; however, they also often

also incorporate largely overlooked economic issues and class borders at play.

Unfortunately, borders like these are extremely normalized in the world. One's wealth determines their value as a human being, and it is a hard concept to unlearn because of the borders of class created in our society. In *Exit West*, Nadia even tells Saeed that she understands why the London nativists are frightened and frustrated:

“Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived.”

“Millions arrived in our country,” Saeed replied. “When there were wars nearby.”

“That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose.”

(Hamid 164)

Nadia's perspective in this conversation with Saeed displays how easy it is for someone to internalize this propaganda about immigrants. In *Exit West*, eventually immigrants in London are provided with accommodations. Although it was probably not the best solution nor was it ideal for Saeed and Nadia to live in worker camps, it was an opportunity for immigrants to seek refuge and form a life for themselves. The United Kingdom always had the resources to do this. However, it is very telling how the first reaction from nativists was to find a way to eliminate immigrant presence through whatever means necessary either through deportation or violence. Poor individuals are seen as a threat and drain on resources while affluent immigrants have value to a host country. This phenomenon is very dehumanizing, and puts unnecessary borders in place for people who are in desperate need of help.

Although the characters in *Exit West* and *Girl at War* go on to live better lives, class borders and their effects continue to impact the world. Money is like a ticket to cross borders, and without that ticket, basic necessities are difficult to access. The reality is that there are people looking for a better life who cannot get it because they do not have the money to migrate elsewhere. The border between rich and poor immigrants is one of the biggest issues that *Exit West* and *Girl at War* both address. Unfortunately, anti-immigration advocacy by many far-right politicians has led to catastrophic consequences for poor immigrants. Without equal wealth distribution and immigration reform in many countries, like the United States and the United Kingdom, money will continue to be a border for immigrants to migrate somewhere they can make better lives for themselves.

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