

# Stranger Danger: The Imperialist Tendencies of Peacemakers

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Sara Nović's *Girl at War*, a realist novel concerned with Ana Jurić's journey through the Yugoslavian Civil War, and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, a magical realist novel detailing the lives of Nadia and Saeed during a civil war, are two different takes on one's life within a warzone. While Nović explores identities and borders within the history of the former Yugoslavia, Hamid brings modern issues including violence, surveillance, and borders into a hypothetical world. Nović and Hamid highlight hypocrisies within peace organizations, as well as a lack of accountability for abuses committed against citizens living within warzones. Rather than alleviating devastation within areas in conflict, peace organizations appear to add to the violence. With an established exploration of the globalization present in Hamid's *Exit West* and nationalism present in Nović's *Girl at War*, we can expand and

investigate the portrayal of third-party peace organizations, such as the United Nations, independent agents, and others. While observing these organizations' tactics concerning the guarding of borders and their supposedly protective measures within countries, one can examine them as bodies that self-govern, gatekeep safety, and bypass borders, all of which are distinguishing characteristics of imperialist tendencies vis-à-vis the control and authority they have exerted within foreign states.

Peace-building organizations are recognized as good, pure, benevolent saviors that travel around the world to help those in need. A negative concept such as imperialism would not ordinarily be associated with a peace-building organization like the United Nations, but the conversation has begun to change as more accusations of UN human rights abuses come to light. Most recently, an

independent panel reported “83 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse” associated with the WHO’s presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo due to the 2018 to 2020 Ebola outbreak (Westendorf). The abuses occurring within the Congo are not the first associated with UN organizations. Since about 2000, many UN peacekeeping operations have been discovered to have “sexually abused and exploited local women and children” (Westendorf). Such organizations have been “structurally unable and arguably unwilling to effectively prevent or punish sexual exploitation and abuse by its personnel,” as seen in the Congo where there were no official reports or investigations filed before the media caught wind of the abuse (Westendorf). The actions of the U.N. personnel prompt questions regarding its ability to make or keep peace across borders around the world. How can such violent actions cultivate a peaceful environment, most especially given the apparent lack of accountability within the organization? How can a disordered organization halt chaos within another territory?

Both Sara Nović’s *Girl at War*, a realist novel, and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, a magical realist novel, depict the impact of war, border crossings, and peacekeeping organizations on individuals living within tumultuous territories. In *Girl at War*, Nović establishes a loss of faith between war-impacted individuals and international peace organizations, most specifically the UN, by portraying abuses committed by peacekeepers and growing frustrations directed at said organizations by the public. Furthermore, Hamid illustrates the effects of a peacekeeping organization’s temporary assistance and how such temporary measures lead to distrust, exploitation, and violence. While the conversation about UN misconduct is only just beginning, Nović and Hamid’s novels represent the foreboding undertones of imperialist behavior by highlighting peace organizations’ abuse of power and authority at border crossings between and within war-torn countries.

To analyze the United Nations and other peacekeeping bodies as having imperialist tendencies, I will primarily use Marxist sociologist Isaac Christiansen’s definition of imperialism in the twenty-first century. Christiansen determines that imperialism acts “as a nationalistic geopolitical expression of capital” where core countries reallocate “land, labor, and resources necessary to produce commodities,” therein “[subjugating] the interests of peripheral client states” (338). In a modern sense, imperialism solely requires the elimination of a nation’s authority over its natural and human resources through the establishment of a foreign power within the territory. Regarding this definition, the United Nations and other peacekeeping organizations will operate as foreign powers that displace the authority of the peripheral states. Furthermore, the United Nations’ goal will be understood as “the maintenance of international peace and security,” which the organization accomplishes through conflict prevention and mediation (“Maintain International Peace”). Regarding

*Girl at War* and *Exit West*, the behavior at the center of this discussion will be the attempts, or lack thereof, of peacemakers to curate an environment for sustainable peace as both Nović and Hamid examine implications of different abuses that occur at the hands of peacekeepers.

Nović first introduces the United Nations and challenges the organization's fulfillment of its intended goals when the main character, Ana Jurić, presents her story in front of UN delegates. Upon walking up to the UN buildings, Ana notes that "over the years [she had] lost faith in the UN" seeing as how "their interventions, in [her] country and across the globe, were tepid at best" (Nović 96). While Nović establishes that Ana previously had faith in the UN, the organization's lack of substantial action ruined any such beliefs. Ana continues her reflection by "imagin[ing] the delegates ...discussing the body count of [her] parents and friends and determining that yes, something would have to be done to keep up appearances, but that it would be best to stay out of such a messy conflict" (Nović 98). Ana's narrative asserts that the UN does not intervene in conflicts to help civilians, but rather "to keep up appearances." Despite the UN's intended purpose of helping parties in conflict make peace, the organization would prefer to refrain from engaging in real conflict. Through Ana's interactions with UN delegates, Nović establishes the UN as a controversial organization and begins a discussion concerning the continuity between peace organizations' intentions and their behaviors.

Similarly, the UN and other peace organizations' lack of action against China regarding the ongoing genocide of Uyghur Muslims is illustrative of such critical descriptions. In March 2021, the United Nations acknowledged the allegation that, in China, abusive working and living conditions were forcefully inflicted upon Uyghur Muslims ("Rights Experts Concerned"). However, instead of taking any direct action, the organization responded solely by "respectfully urg[ing] the Government [of China] to immediately cease any such measures that are not fully compliant with international law, norms, and standards relating to human rights" ("Rights Experts Concerned"). Even with an increased number of humanitarian experts begging for China's government to be held accountable for their human rights violations, there is a lack of real interference within China (Richardson). The UN's consistent calls for the Government of China to act and begin investigations are nothing more than empty actions meant "to keep up appearances," as Nović dictates (98). Because the UN considers China a permanent member, China can use its authority to undermine the intentions of the UN and maintain its reputation in the international system ("Current Members"). While the UN has yet to intervene in China, Nović and the world's ever-present understanding that it could illustrates that a peace organization's power extends beyond physical borders.

After introducing the United Nations, Nović develops a disconnect between the organization's intentions and its employees' behavior. When Ana gives her presentation at the UN, she determines that "the UN delegates ...would be thirsty for gore" (Nović 100). Nović contrasts Ana's conclusions concerning the UN's desire to avoid messy conflict with the affirmation that the delegates "would be thirsty for gore." Kapka Kassabova of *The Guardian* describes Nović's UN workers as "criminally well-meaning" in that there is a great divide between their inaction and their potentially good intentions. At this moment, Nović appears to establish a border between the UN as an international peace organization and its employees. This border signifies that, even with peace-driven intentions, their actions do not follow these aims, which leaves the opportunity for human rights violations and power imbalances that resemble imperial outreach.

Nović's observations are congruent with the number of abuses committed by individual UN employees outside of organizational direction. As of March 2017, an Associated Press investigation found roughly "2,000 allegations of sexual abuse or exploitation" against UN peacekeepers and staff (Daigle and Dodds). Despite finding employment at an organization dedicated to maintaining peace around the world, UN employees appear to lack the desire, dedication, and wellbeing necessary for such a meaningful and challenging initiative as the UN's. Moreover, this contrast between violence and ambivalence is further emphasized when Ana spots two boys in the room, thus prompting her to wonder whether Sharon, the UN peacekeeper who worked with Ana, "had recruited them, too, or if they were someone else's project" (Nović 101). Nović's use of the word "project" dehumanizes not only the presenters but their experiences as well. UN peacekeepers do not see Ana or the boys as people that went through incredibly traumatic experiences, but rather as mascots meant to uplift their pitches for humanitarian committees. The dehumanization of civilians living through war, seen through abuse and belittling rhetoric, minimizes the importance of both the civilians and their histories while creating an environment in which the peace organization can place its will above others involved. Peace organizations, as depicted by Nović, can be understood to "subjugat[e] the interests of peripheral client states," not necessarily through the literal extermination of the conflicting country's human resources, but rather through deprivation of human qualities and respect for the country's human resources (Christiansen 338).

The bureaucratic detachment Nović describes is not unique to the UN's peacekeeping efforts, as reports of UN bureaucratic struggles have emerged for years. In March of 2016, "a former president of the General Assembly was charged by the US attorney for the Southern District of New York with tax evasion after corruptly receiving \$1.3 million in bribes" (Baumann 462). Furthermore, the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo

was recognized as failing to “comply with applicable human rights standards in response to the adverse health condition caused by lead contamination of the [internally displaced persons] camps” (Baumann 462). What is significant about these investigations, along with many others concerning UN malpractice, is that they were initiated by the Secretary-General and other internal agencies associated with the UN (Baumann 462). The sole presence of internal handling creates a lack of external accountability and enforcement, which can lead to a lack of genuine accountability. In response to the negative reports of the UN’s work culture and bureaucracy, the UN posted a blog that launched a bottom-up procedure for culture changes within the UN (Javan). The current Chief Secretary-General Antonio Guterres aims to focus on the mission rather than the bureaucracy while also “vow[ing] to boost the UN’s culture of accountability” (Javan). However, many argue that, because “organizations are led from the top,” if the UN truly wants to change and become more efficient and accountable, “it must be from the top” (Bannock and Kweifio-Okai; Baumann 469). The lack of responsibility for real change by United Nations executives means that the organization itself may not be truly committed to change, thus leaving room for the bureaucratic errors that cultivate an environment tolerant of abuse.

In addition to the UN’s bureaucratic struggles, the structures for holding peacekeeping operations accountable have failed in several ways. Not only have UN peacekeepers been found guilty of sexual abuse, exploitation, and spreading diseases but they have also been found guilty of “inaction in the face of genocide” and other crimes against humanity that have led many to demand increased accountability regarding peacekeeping mandates (Bosco; Di Razza 1-2). Today, the lack of clear and concrete regulations and procedures has led to many failures to protect citizens within conflicting regions (Bosco; Cooper; Di Razza 2-10). The internal procedures for accountability currently rely on the UN Charter, performance management, ethical standards, and several other documents (Di Razza 3). Furthermore, the legal accountability of UN staff is limited because of the immunity privileges of the UN (Di Razza 6-8). While the immunity can be lifted, there are still additional difficulties in the prosecution process because of “limited evidence, limited access to victims, and variations in criminal codes and legal interpretations and approaches from country to country” (Di Razza 7). A lack of clear direction, legal accountability, and internal and external transparency has cultivated a space where varying performances of peacekeepers are passable within the UN (Bosco; Di Razza 1-13). The UN’s bureaucratic struggles concerning direction and legal responsibility perpetuate peacekeepers’ negligence and abuse provided by the lack of structural accountability.

In contrast to Nović’s bolder introduction of the peacekeepers, Mohsin Hamid introduces the independent agents in *Exit West* through whispers across main characters

Nadia and Saeed's home. Hamid uses a subtle and uncertain introduction, therein establishing a trepidatious relationship between the agents, characters, and the audience. As the civil war in Nadia and Saeed's home begins to progress, "rumors began to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere" and "some people claimed to know people who knew people who had been through such doors" (Hamid 72). With the increasing reports of violence, these rumors began to fester within Nadia and Saeed's minds, leading them to seek out the agents who operate the doors that allow for relatively safe border crossings. When Nadia and Saeed first meet their agent, "[t]hey did not hear the agent approaching," and were even unsure of whether or not "he had been there all along" (Hamid 89). In their efforts to understand whom they were working with, the pair determined that the agent's demeanor reminded them of either "a poet or a psychopath" (Hamid 89). However, any understanding of kindness or assurance of decency that one may find with "a poet" is disavowed when the agent refused to elaborate on instructions, given that they "[were] not a request" (Hamid 89). At this moment, Nadia and Saeed lose any inkling of control within their interactions with the agent. Because of their desperation to find safety amidst the civil war, the agent becomes aware that the pair is willing to do anything. With this understanding between the three characters, there is a blatant power imbalance that leaves Nadia and Saeed at the agent's will. This power imbalance stems from a similar dehumanization that Nović depicts within Ana's experience of being labeled as a project by UN delegates. Both authors use dehumanization to illustrate that peace organizations create metaphysical borders based on authority to separate themselves from those whom they are helping.

Hamid's description of the power imbalance between the agent and Nadia and Saeed, created through the possession and disposition of goods and means, reflects real-world transactional relationships between peacekeepers and civilians. In a report published by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, in the period between 2008 and 2013, about 480 instances of UN peacekeepers sexually abusing Haitian and Liberian women and children in exchange for resources were reported ("UN Peacekeepers"). The report further dictates that these transactional abuses are not new to peacekeeping but are rather common (Chandler; "UN Peacekeepers"). UN peacekeepers can—and do—withhold resources with an understanding that the desperate, hungry, and poor civilians they are meant to serve are willing to do anything to better their situations. As Dean Spade and Craig Willse, associate professors at Seattle University and George Mason University respectively, discuss in their article concerning "Sex, Gender, and War in an Age of Multicultural Imperialism," imperialism uses "sexual, gender, and family norms as technologies of intervention and violence" (7). By manipulating and surpassing cultural norms concerning sex and gender, both peacekeepers and Hamid's agents create an uncertain environment in which they have

power while the civilians are kept guessing and submissive. Nadia and Saeed are not familiar with the agents or their intentions, thus making them vulnerable to unpredictable behavior (Hamid 90). These vulnerabilities provide the agents the opportunity to exploit and harass the pair. The agents do not commit sexual violence in the same way the UN peacekeepers did against Haitian and Liberian civilians, but they do challenge gender and family norms by demanding Nadia remove her headscarf while nearly engaging in physical contact (Hamid 89). Within Hamid's depiction of Nadia and Saeed's interactions with the agents, he reflects imperial behavior through the use and abuse of sex and gender by peacekeeping organizations. By blatantly crossing the metaphysical border of a region's cultural norms, the peacekeepers illustrate their chauvinism and imperialist power by placing their organization above the authority and values of the peripheral state.

Sara Nović further describes how physical resources are used by peacekeeping organizations to subjugate the citizens living within territories in conflict. While recollecting the UN's interactions with civilians and Serbian nationalist fighters, Ana describes a lack of peacekeepers' presence and how the Serbian soldiers "stole the aid meant for civilians," concluding that "[i]f you drop the food and leave, you're just feeding your enemy" (Nović 104). While the UN and other peacekeeping organizations cannot be everywhere at once, there were nearby areas that had surplus amounts of peacekeepers (Nović 274). Since there were other locations with far higher concentrations of people, one can understand that there were enough peacekeepers to have some in Ana's village. Furthermore, while no one in the village had seen any peacekeepers, there was a certain UN presence within the community illustrated through the armored trucks that delivered aid (Nović 225). Ana also explains how the Serbian soldiers would not kill all the villagers to ensure the continuation of UN and NATO food deliveries (Nović 224). In one understanding of imperialism, Robert Biel describes the imperial tactic where the oppressed are used "as agents in their own oppression," which can be seen with the soldiers' control over the other villagers through the food supply (86). By "drop[ping] the food and leav[ing]," the UN allowed the villagers to be victims of further oppression, thus increasing the civilians' vulnerability and dependence on UN aid (Nović 104). By furthering the villagers' oppression, the UN creates a larger border between the civilians and the outside world, for there are fewer opportunities to escape or find more advantageous circumstances.

Physical resources as aid are critical in conflicting zones where citizens may struggle to find their next meal, but they can cause harm long term. While speaking about the UN World Food Program, WFP, Deepmala Mahla who works with Mercy Corps and WFP has discussed how food drops are "only an immediate rather than long-term answer" that pose the danger of falling "perpetually into a cycle of more and more relief" (Cole). Without

prolonged assistance that serves as a supplement for food programs and other aid to lead countries to be self-supporting, conflicting countries become dependent on the UN for survival. The countries are forced into subordinate positions in which they are subjected to the authority of the UN, and if the countries do not abide by the UN's authority, then they risk losing their established assistance, and therein their survival as a country.

Hamid further explores the role of peacekeepers in relation to goods through the lens of monetary resources and the elitist position of peacekeepers standing guard at the doors. Rather than physical goods, the peacekeepers within *Exit West* control opportunities and circumstances by blocking doors, or physical borders, that lead to desirable places (Hamid 115). The agent's gatekeeping leads many to fear the moment when "hunger force[s] them back through one of the doors that led to undesirable places" (Hamid 115). As more people traveled to an area, the camps became more expensive, meaning that, without enough money to pay off guards, many lost their access to shelter and other physical resources. With a lack of resources, people also lost the ability to find newer, better opportunities, which only served to enforce a cyclical pattern of less-than-optimal circumstances (Hamid 118). Christiansen engages with this devastating cyclical pattern by detailing how imperialism "shift[s] ...wealth and resources upward" by using redistributive mechanisms that benefit the wealthy (341-342). With Christiansen's understanding of the relation between imperialist powers and the flow of resources, Hamid's depiction of peacekeepers' efforts to gatekeep opportunity is indicative of imperial behaviors. Peacekeepers shift money and opportunities to populations that are already wealthy, therein making the general population dependent on any and every resource provided to them as aid.

While there are no portals for the UN to block like Hamid's peacekeepers, newfound opportunities and discussions are often stunted by the UN's permanent occupation, even when many developing nations support the efforts. For example, as recently as March 2021, "richer members of the World Trade Organization," an agency of the UN, "block[ed] a push by over 80 developing countries ...to waive patent rights in an effort to boost production of COVID-19 vaccines for poor nations" ("Rich, Developing Nations"). These wealthy countries used their position, power, and wealth to ensure the prioritization of capital within their own industries. Rather than supporting an initiative that held the backing of many UN member countries and had the potential to benefit the globe, the permanent countries acted solely out of their own self-interest. In this instance, the UN participates in Christiansen's idea of imperialism being "conceived of as a nationalistic geopolitical expression of capital ...by which capital from core countries appropriates the ...resources necessary to produce commodities and subjugates the interests of peripheral client states to those of capitalist in the metropolis," or those of the imperial power (338). The UN acted



as an outlet for powerful core countries to withhold the information needed to produce the vaccines, which therein suppressed the interests of the peripheral states. Hamid's portrayal of peacekeepers and their manner of controlling circumstances reflects how the UN has blocked opportunities and therein suppressed foreign interests as a way to exert imperial-like power.

Nović and Hamid's depictions of peacekeeping organizations in their respective novels, *Girl at War* and *Exit West*, illustrate the imperialist tendencies of peacekeeping organizations through corruption and abuse. While traditionally one may think of a singular nation, large in size and population, in relation to imperialism, it is significant to understand that an imperial power "is defined solely by its cultural diversity and flexible borders," as noted by Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (190). Nović and Hamid's depiction of guarded borders, lack of aid, lack of accountability, dehumanization, power imbalances, manufactured dependence, and more reflect real-life events and atrocities and are illustrative of imperialist tendencies within peacekeeping organizations. At their core, these actions stem from a body, or core country, displacing the interests of another for their own through the means of "land, labor, and resources" (Christiansen 338). These peacekeeping organizations, as depicted by Nović and Hamid, use physical and metaphysical borders to exert control over various populations through the containment and oppression of entrances and exits, opportunities, resources, and cultural norms. These controlling efforts displace the authority and will of "peripheral client states," while simultaneously violating the very nature of what a peacekeeping organization is meant to be. Through the understanding that even a well-known, highly respected peace organization can become an abuser, perhaps other large, powerful organizations within different pieces of literature can be examined for abusive behavior. Literature is an accessible resource that has extensive outreach to the public, meaning that authors can expose wrongdoings throughout the world and everyday life and educate the public in an intimate and expansive manner.

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