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**RESEARCH PAPER****The Unsettling Journeys: Exploring Uncanny Liminality in Selected South Asian Migrant Fiction**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study analyzes liminal characters in the selected two novels by focusing on the Uncanny and liminality and its impact on the characters. The selected novels for the current study are, "When the Moon is Low" by Nadia Hashimi and "Exit West" by Mohsin Hamid. The present research work explores the elements of uncanny liminality in the selected novels by using Victor Turner's theory of liminality (1969) and Sigmund Freud's concept of "Uncanniness" (2003) as theoretical framework. It also looks into the impact of uncanny liminality on the personality of characters because characters have undergone a serious change and transition which ultimately lead to severe changes in the life and personality of characters. Furthermore it evaluates the relationship between liminality and uncanny and the impact of its interplay on character's migrant experience and their journey. The study uses textual analysis and close reading techniques for collecting and processing data. The key findings of the study reveal that Fereiba Waziri in "When the Moon is Low" and Nadia and Saeed in "Exit West" are liminal characters as they leave their native lands in search of a peaceful and stable life. These characters undergo the process of migration and experience grave outcomes because it is a transitional process that involves significant mental, physical and spiritual transformation in the personalities of the migrants.

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**KEYWORDS** Ambiguity, Communitas, Liminality, Transformation, Uncanniness

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**Introduction**

According to Bjorn Thomassen (2014) liminality is a universal notion because human lives and cultures cannot exist without instants of alteration and changeover as we live through these transitory moments and in-between spaces. This transition formulates the personality and shapes the identity as it is vital for the improvement and mellowness of an individual as well as society (Thomassen, 2014). Dolezalova (2020) proposes that liminality is a bewildering and present-day concept that is used recently in different fields like anthropology, psychology, arts and history. In the field of literature, the meanings of liminality are varied. It is used for spatial sort as well as imaginary type or can be perceived as a way to describe imaginary courses. Another critic Mendiola (2001) is of the view that liminal is an indeterminate concept that is characterized by borders, boundaries, separation of lands, partition of states and regions and roving among them. Carnicelli (2014) further proposes that liminality illustrates unique state of affairs of the displaced individuals.

The beginning of the term Liminality can be delineated back to 19<sup>th</sup> century psychology and 20<sup>th</sup> century socio-anthropology but currently its usage in literature and other academic disciplines have been augmented multifariously. Liminality is the most recurring concept that is used to analyze fiction and in fact it is not only a concept but a capping point where parameters of normal thinking, self-understanding, interrelating and observing are relaxed and open up to new horizons of novelty, imagination, construction, destruction and thus this notion has the enough power to propel the social and political theories into new directions (Thomassen, 2014). The term 'Uncanny' finds its origins in the German word 'Unheimlich,' which translates to 'unhomely' or 'unfamiliar.' It was first introduced by Sigmund Freud in his essay "The Uncanny," which was published in 1919. Subsequently, Homi K. Bhabha employed this concept within the realm of Postcolonial studies. According to Benett and Royle (2009) the concept of uncanny is related to strangeness, scariness and with the melee of familiar as they have explored the idea of uncanny with several examples focusing on the essay of uncanny written by Freud and resolved that uncanny is all about experiences and feelings of the reader rather than theme of the uncanny.

"When the Moon is Low" novel written by American based Afghan writer Nadia Hashimi. She was born and upraised in New York and made her first trip to Afghanistan in 2002. Hashimi has written about Afghan people and their crisis particularly issues related to their identity and migration in order to highlight the sorry plight of war torn people. According to Ahmad, R and Hussain, Z (2022), this novel is written in the background of Afghan war and refugees and Hashimi has explained the story of Fereiba Waziri, who has troubled childhood due to early death of her mother. She married to Mahmood, a civil engineer who was killed by Taliban and Fereiba leaves her native city, Kabul with her three children for the sake of safety and security of her children.

"Exit West" novel written by Mohsin Hamid, a UK based Pakistani writer who is famous for writing about postcolonial issues like migration, identity crisis, homelessness, conflicts with the age and society. Michael Miller (2018) proposes that Exit West provides gestures to the experiences of everyone whether a migrant or an enduring resident. Miller (2018) further adds that this novel is a beautiful portrait of love during war time. The story revolves around Nadia and Saeed, their relationship, migration, journey through mysterious doors, facing challenges and their ultimate transition and assimilation with new status. Dietrich, K, M (2023) remarks that Exit West is appeared during the time of reforms in migration policy and increasing number of refugees worldwide. This novel provides a comprehensive approach based on compassion and empathy for reimagining the current refugee desolation.

### **Literature Review**

Adama Bah (2024) suggests that Migrant literature focuses on the issues, experiences and crunches of the individuals and communities that have been migrated or displaced from their homelands. Migrant literature highpoints the complexities of cultural unification, homelessness, belongingness, and identity crisis of the individuals leaving their native land. Migrant literature is created by those writers who are displaced from their native home lands and they are discovering issues related to identity and experiences of individuals living in the remote land. This literature is characterized by its opulent range of subjects, inimitable storyline and impact of this literature on society (Bah, 2024). A group of researcher Ahmed, Malik and Tahir (2021) further highlight the importance of migrant literature and suggest that critics, authors, poets and literary figures are generating thought inciting literature on the idea of borders and boundaries all over the world to underline the apprehensions related to migrants' experiences. The world has seen altering

dimensions and approaches of literature due to subdued changes in the world politics and its variant trends interrelated with migration and migrants. A group of researcher Iqbal, Adil and Butt (2018) presented an analysis of Ahmed Ali's "Twilight in Delhi" and applied liminality to reveal the influence of foreign culture on natives. The technique of binary opposition is used through the character of Asghar and Mir Nihal. The character of Asghar represents how taking up new culture can lead to alteration of identity and Mir Nihal shows confrontation to the acceptance of new culture. Similarly Ozun and Yaglidere (2020) also applied liminality to Monica Ali's "Brick lane" and explored the liminal transformation of Nazneen in this novel. The researchers have highlighted the influence of cross-cultural and transnational experiences of the migrants through the character of Nazneen and accentuated that crossing borders and accepting new cultures can create uneasiness and liminal phase can elicit new changes and transformation in the personality of migrant when exposed to foreign culture.

Another researcher Asif,N (2023) studied postcolonial uncanny in Sadat Hassan Manto's "Toba Tek Sng" and investigated uncanny in relation to slums and asylums in Pakistan and India in his notable work . Asif (2023) underscored that Freud's uncanny emphasized the experiences of which are eccentric and familiar at the same time and searches vagueness. Lemus (2021) analyzed Mohsin Hamid's Exit West and explored the uncanny elements in liminal spaces which are not physical but transfer individuals from one place to another. The researcher has explored that Hamid's magical doors are built within the liminal passage and signify the ambiguity and intricacy of the character's journey. Sadaf (2020) remarks that Mohsin Hamid has presented the concept of global future migration in his novel "Exit West" and by offering this astounding concept, he has actually outlined the intricacies of humankind's prospect. Sadaf(2020) further adds that Hamid has opened a new horizon in the realm of postcolonial studies and the subject is very alarming and alluring because of global trend of migration and increasing number of refugees all over the world. Gilbert (2017) proposes about Hamid's Exit West as a novel written about refugees experience more than migrant experience furthermore the novel highlights the migration and dislocation of characters rather than describing the sufferings of travelling. Bellin (2020) argues that literary strategies which are used in Hamid's Exit West engage the readers by exciting a touching process called disorienting empathy and this process is comprised of a liable and ethical perspective that shuns the hazardous pretentiousness of fully knowing and dwelling the position of another .

Nadia Hashmi's writings are dedicated to raise voice about discrimination and injustice against women in Afghan society. Hashimi has highlighted the poor condition of Afghan woman in her work and spread awareness about women's status in society that is disregarded by state agencies and government altogether (Salman, Butt, Mahmood, 2020). Nosheen Akhtar (2020) analyzed Nadia Hashmi's novel "When the Moon is Low" and investigated the reconstruction of national identity in refugees by implying the notion of long distance nationalism. Akhtar (2020) has suggested that long distance nationalism performs a crucial role in shaping the cross-border citizenship among Afghan refugees.

## Material and Methods

The word "liminality" or "liminal" is originated from a Latin word "limen" and the meanings of limen are threshold, starter, divider and a separator. It is like the ledge of doorway which has to be traversed in order to reach into a new realm. It is a streak between external public world and inside subjective world. Liminal space has a great influence on the collective and subjective lives of individuals because it is an imperative point where choices are prepared and decisions are taken to move onward or backward depending on their acceptance or rejection in the new world( Chakraborty,2016). The idea of liminality

was first presented in the field of psychology in the year 1884. In 1909 liminality was introduced by Arnold Van De Gennep in his book "Les Rites de Passage" and then in the "The Rite of Passage" in 1960. Van Gennep presented a model based on three phases: separation, margin and aggregation (Turner, 1969).

Based on Van Gennep's ideas delineated in Rites de Passage, Turner suggested that each rite of passage has these components, separation, transition and reincorporation, even though some may be more developed than others depending on the purpose of rite (Andrews & Roberts, 2015). Victor Turner was profoundly influenced by Van Gennep's idea of rites of passage, particularly the concept of liminality which mentions to the transitional stage during a rite of passage where individuals are betwixt an between their former and forthcoming social statuses. Turner stretched and redefined this concept giving to more profundity and critical power (Thomassen, 2014).

In March 1964 Turner presented a paper in America titled, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage*. This chapter belongs to his book *The Forest of Symbols* which was published in the year 1967, it can be considered as Turner's leading investigation of the concept of liminality. "During the intervening "liminal " period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner, 1969, pg.94). Victor Turner deliberated on his own work with the Ndembu tribe, the work of Van Gennep and Durkheim and wrote his book in the year 1969, "The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure". In his work, Turner used Van Gennep's concept as a point of exodus. Gennep focused on a process that is intrinsic to any rite of passage and leads to reincorporation to society but Turner was fascinated in the anti-structure of liminal phase. Turner remarks in his work that Gennep used two set of terms to evaluate tripartite structure in the rite of passage. The first set is separation, margin and reaggregation is related to social status. The second set of terms is pre -limnal, liminal and post- liminal is related to time and space (Thomassen, 2014).

According to Victor Turner liminality is a threshold to the subsequent stage where individuals enter into a new realm where he learns a lot about new system, culture and new people (Turner, 1969). Chakraborty (2016) further adds about the nature of transition stage that it is transitory in nature and does not lasts longer but after passing through transition stage a new individual evolved. Turner accentuated the anti-structure nature of liminality, proposing that during this phase, individuals experience a momentary emancipation from social norms and hierarchical structures. This anti-structure permits for ingenuity, consideration, and the prospective for social change. Turner emphasized the symbolic and performativity aspects of liminality (Thomassen, 2014). 'For me , communitas emerges where social structure is not' (Turner, 1969, pg.126). Victor Turner proposed that society is not stagnant but vibrant and it is a perpetual struggle between structure (structured social roles) and anti-structure (blurring social roles) for Turner this anti-structure is imperative because it leads to cognizance and understanding both socially and spiritually (Thomasson, 2014).

Berry Stephenson (2020) critiques Turner for his concept that all the rites of passage that transform an individual or a group, which he named as "transformationism". Stephenson (2020) proposes this idea lacks considerable empirical support and oversimplifies the miscellaneous outcomes of the rituals. Kepferer and Gold (2024) argue that Turner's work is foundational and must be stretched and reviewed to stay relatable in current social sciences deliberation. Thomassen (2014) suggests that Turner's work is inefficient in describing the conditions where transitional phase of liminality remains unsettled and individuals stay in liminal condition perpetually.

The essay "Uncanny" written by Sigmund Freud in the year 1919 and he has put forward his ideas on this indistinct topic in this essay. Freud used a German word 'Unheimlich' for uncanny that means eccentric, bizarre and not familiar. Freud opines that human beings have outlandish fears for unfamiliar things which are not from home or for familiar things from home which have never come to light (Malewotz, 2020). "The uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud, 2003, pg. 124). Freud proposed that uncanny can only be understood through self-objectification and self-surveillance. According to Chakraborty (2016) uncanny is an intuitive reversion of the ancient and the accustomed which keeps it nearer to 'repetitive compulsion' and it is a way our mind deals with traumatic rehearses.

The use of Victor Turner's theory for the present research work permits for a contemplation of structural and symbolic elements while Freud's uncanny complements a psychological and emotional coating to the analysis. Thus the amalgamation of liminality and uncanny offers an influential lens to evaluate the unsettling experiences of the migrants.

### **Results and Discussion**

The novel "When the Moon is Low" is set in the background of Soviet-Afghan war and rise of Taliban, the Afghan freedom fighters in the mid-1990. Nadia Hashimi has presented a kind of setting that signifies uncanny and liminality as the city of Kabul is both accustomed and outlandish for its dwellers as their acquainted world disintegrates into havoc, "The country suffered immeasurable loses in the tug of war between the Soviet Union and the mujahedeen, Afghanistan's freedom fighters. More mothers buried their sons. More children limped to school, their limbs amputated by explosives disguised as dolls or toy cars" (Hashimi, 2015, p. 86). This shakiness provides a reason for the exploration of uncanny and liminality in the novel. Due to intensifying violence and massive destruction of infrastructure, Fereiba Waziri and her family decide to leave the country because their survival in Kabul becomes very tough and the situation aggravates due to assassination of Mahmood, Fereiba's husband, "We were too scared to stay" (Hashimi, 2015, p. 91). The representation of milieu in the novel is very uncanny as it becomes bizarre and inexplicable due to war and migration, "Rockets showered our city as rival faction tried to lay claim to the capital" (Hashimi, 2015, p. 87). Eventually Fereiba leaves her native land and starts her liminal journey with her children. Similarly the novel *Exit west* is also set in the background of the civil war and accelerating violence. The exact location of the city in which Nadia and Saeed reside is not mentioned in the novel but it bears likeness to many countries in the world facing civil wars and geo-political crisis. Hamid has presented the transformation of a peaceful city into war stricken place, "In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war" (Hamid, 2017, p. 1).

Due to civil war, ever-increasing violence and many other social, economic and geo-political factors Nadia and Saeed decide to leave their homeland in search of a peaceful and stable future, "Saeed and Nadia meanwhile had dedicated themselves single-mindedly to finding a way out of the city, and as the overland routes were widely deemed too perilous to attempt, this meant investigating the possibility of securing passage through the doors" (Hamid, 2017, p. 82). The black doors are the most protruding uncanny element in the novel because their appearance is ordinary but function is astonishing as Freud (2003) relates that human beings have fears for strange and unfamiliar things which are not from home and they have also fears for unfamiliar things which are from home but never come to light. Just like the existence of these magical doors, present in surrounding but never come to light. These black doors transport individuals instantly to other parts

of the world and reverses the natural order by transmuting the ordinary into extraordinary and thus disturbs the conventional order of time and space and create a mystifying impact, "All the doors of which save one were normal doors, all but the one through which she had come, and through which Saeed was now coming, which was black, and she understood that she was in the toilet of some public place" (Hamid, 2017, p.98-99).

These doors serve as liminal spaces and threshold as well transmuting characters from one state to another state as well. Nadia and Saeed use these black doors as a means to escape from their war stricken homeland and these magical doors lead them into series of in-between spaces. According to Victor Turner(1969) liminality is founded in a situation or circumstances that has traits of doubt and lack of predictability between what is known ,has gone before and future outcome. As Nadia and Saeed pass through various countries their identities undergo somber changes which is a liminal trait as Turner relates, "During the intervening "liminal " period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state"(Turner,1969, pg.94). Nadia and Saeed move from one country to another and adapt to numerous cultural norms and changing environments and this unremitting adaptation highlights the liminal nature of their journey.

Their journey can be perceived as long-drawn-out liminal experience from their habituated life in their war torn city to numerous strange and unstable milieu through black doors according to Bjorn Thomassen(2014) during liminal phase the individuals are at the focal point of change and are prepared to embrace new changes .Just after reaching Mykonos , Nadia attempts to get rid of the prohibitions imposed by her family and homeland and kisses Saeed in public place but Saeed reacted angrily, "Nadia squatted down beside a scraggly bush and bade him squat down as well , and there concealed tried to kiss him under the open sky, he turned his face angrily"(Hamid,20177,p.102). The refugee camp at Mykonos served as a *communitas* for Nadia and Saeed, " *Communitas* emerges where social structure is not" (Turner,1969,p.126).From Mykonos they move to London through another black door and appeared in a lavish bedroom , this stark contrast between their previous conditions in refugee camp and suddenly shifting into lavish bedroom creates bizarreness and evoke uncanny. From London they finally arrive to California through magical door and assimilated there in their own spheres of life.

Saeed used to miss his family and homeland in fact he is worried about the safety of his father whom he left behind after the death of Saeed's mother. Nadia and Saeed migrated leaving behind their loved ones and henceforth ,they dwell in a present which is continuously wavering with a past chasing their retentions and a future disguised in vagueness . As Saeed often had dreams about his father, "Whose death has been reported to Saeed by a cousin who had recently managed to escape from their city" (Hamid, 2017, p.170). Nadia also had dreams of her birthplace and the girl from Mykonos. Throughout the novel these dreams, visualizations and nostalgia play a substantial role in the development of characters and underscore the psychological and emotive liminality that generates a space where uncanny interweaves with the character's subconscious suspicions and longings.

In Hashimi's " *When the Moon is Low*" outlandish landscapes, scrappy identities and unfamiliar cultures are the most bulging uncanny elements which evoke a sense of bizarreness and Uncanniness in the characters. As Fereiba Waziri finds herself in odd landscapes with shattered identity and unaccustomed culture , her sense of Uncanniness is intensified. According to Freud, " Not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening.All one can say is that what is novel may well prove frightening and uncanny ; some things that are novel are indeed frightening, but by no means all. Something must be added to

the novel and unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny" (Freud,2003,pg.125)." The sudden demise of Fereiba's husband and many social, economic and geo-political factors force Fereiba to leave her native city, Kabul and she starts her journey with her three kids. First, she moves to Herat , " Herat is the doorway to Iran" (Hashimi,2015,p.112). She asks for God's help and instructs her children to wear sturdiest shoes and get ready for journey. Fereiba moves towards Iran-Afghan border, "The guarded passage is ten kilometers that way. There's a trail that cuts through the mountains. I'll lead you across. It's not easy, but many have crossed it before you. Keep your children close and keep them quiet. Watch your feet. There are loose stones, Scorpions, and snakes to worry about. Watch for my flashlight"( Hashimi,2015,p.116). This sudden shift in environment from known to unknown and familiar to strange signifies uncanny nature of Fereiba's journey.

Fereiba moves with her children through various borders and countries in order to reach her final destination England with fake documents. As Fereiba moves from one border to another and from one country to another country, she must acclimate to various cultural norms and environment and this incessant adaptation of foreign culture and customs signify fluidity in her personality which is a liminal trait. In Iran she wears a black robe for not looking different among Iranians and in Turkey, Fereiba removes her black robe and wears a head scarf and after reaching Greece she even removes that scarf and enjoys the cool breeze and moves her fingers in her hair freely. This constant change in personality is well explained by Bjorn Thomassen (2014) and he remarks that liminal phase is a time of indecisiveness and possible conversion.

Fereiba often recalls her husband and the memories associated with him as Freud (2003) suggests that Uncanniness occurs when the repressed memories of past come to surface in an unexpected way. Fereiba Waziri abides in a present which is constantly in fluctuation with a past pursuing her memories and a future masquerading in fuzziness. Throughout the novel, dreams, intuitions and visions play an important role and underline the uncanny liminality of migrant's experience. As she often recalls her loved ones, "But those people I missed so much, those faces I would only see in my dreams , whispered in my ear that all would be right" (Hashimi,2015,p.338). After arriving London, Fereiba saw Saleem in her dream, these dreams and visions reflect the means our mind relapses the traumatic experiences in order to cope with tormenting practices.

## Conclusion

The above discussion helps us find that uncanny and liminality is present in both novels. The most prominent uncanny element in *Exit West* is the presence of black doors that violates the conventional understanding of time and space and leads to the feelings of estrangement and bizarreness that provoke Uncanniness. Nadia and Saeed undergo the process of transition as they traverse through various countries. They experience numerous personal, social, psychological and emotional changes as result of this liminal experience. Similarly in the novel '*When the Moon is Low*', outlandish landscapes, scrappy identities and unfamiliar cultures with hunting memories of the past are the most bulging uncanny elements which evoke a sense of bizarreness and Uncanniness in the character. Fereiba's personality endures serious personal and social and psychological changes as she moves from one country to another country. In both novels the characters experience vacillating present , hunting memories of past and vagueness about future which signify the psychological and emotional liminality , a space where uncanny interrelates with liminality and breeds involuntary suspicions and yearnings. The Uncanniness of Nadia , Saeed and Fereiba's migrant experience generates the feelings of distancing, apathy ,separation, and rootlessness in the alien land , however these emotional states are not challenging but are very much part of in-between experiences of the characters on the

foreign land. This estrangement is actually a driving force and should be considered as an opportunity because it reassesses and reviews the identity and personality of characters enduring the process of transition due to dislocation.



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