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Threshold Identities and the Return of the Familiar: A Turner Freudian Reading of Transnational Migration in Selected Fiction

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Abstract
The present research study evaluates the multidimensional interface between the identity formation and the displacement in transnational migration through the collective theoretical lens of "liminality" and "uncanniness" as enunciated by Victor Turner and Sigmund Freud respectively. The current study explores how migrants inhabit "threshold identities" molded by enduring transition between homeland and foreign land by focusing on two novels, When the Moon is Low by Nadia Hashimi and Exit West by Mohsin Hamid. Grounded on Turner's notion of liminality as a state of transformation and in-betweenness, the current research study argues that migrant characters in both selected novels exist within protracted liminal phases that ultimately disturb the static ideas about identity, belongingness, estrangement and social and cultural dislocation. Altogether, Freud's notion of uncanny is employed to examine how accustomed places, spaces, memories and cultural symbols become unaccustomed in the diasporic condition, creating a sense of psychological disarticulation. The recurrent return of the familiar in the unfamiliar context, whether through memory, language, symbols or spatial disorientation. It breeds uncanny effects that obfuscate the migrant's attempts to renovate rational identities. Through close textual analysis, the present research study establishes that transnational migration is not only a physical relocation but an incessant intercession of identity within liminal and uncanny spaces. The selected novels reveal how migrant characters traverse fragmented selves, suspended between past and present, home and exile, by this means challenging the linear narratives of integration. Ultimately, the present research study contributes to broader discussions in postcolonial and migrant studies by foregrounding the psychological and existential dimensions of displacement, accentuating how liminality and uncanniness together bid a nuanced framework for comprehending the fluid, often unsettling experience of transnational identity formation.

Key Words: Transnational migration, Threshold identities, Belongingness, Psychological dislocation, Estrangement.

Introduction
A recent study carried by Svensson (2025) argues that the concept of transnational migration has gained immense popularity during the last few decades due to massive increase in voluntary and involuntary migration. Mountz and Mohan (2022) also propose that the idea of transnational migration is one of the most tenacious and challenging issue of present world. They add that the transnational and intersectional approaches about migration further excavate the understanding of the concept of human migration and the convolutions associated with it and eventually these nuanced approaches challenge the uniformed solution to global and national policies. Another group of researchers suggest that the notion of human migration is a universal phenomenon and

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due to adverse geopolitical conspiracies, the world has seen enormous dislodgment of people from their native places. Ultimately, refugees have significantly increased in number due to contemporary situation of migration all over the world (Ahmad, Malik & Tahir, 2021). In a separate study by Munos (2015), he suggests that the notion of transnational migration give rise to the idea of transnational social pace which describes how the migrants sustain their ties with both the country of their origin and the host land. He proposes that the migrants maintain their relation and associations with both countries and cultures instead of assimilating into one. This concept is very comprehensive and wide ranging and often criticized for being overused because the former theories of assimilation and cultural pluralism are unable to comprehend these ideas about social transnational migration. According to Sur (2020) transnational migration has emerged as a considerable presage that challenges the conventional concepts of identity, belongingness and nationhood in contemporary globalized world. The rising mobility of populations, compelled by various socio-economic disparities, conflicts and globalization, has transmuted the phenomenon of migration into a multifaceted and multidimensional process that demands interdisciplinary engagements. Glick Schiller (1995) further suggests that transnational migration is not merely physical dislocation but it encompass the sustained negotiations of socio-cultural, geopolitical and psychological ties across national boundaries.

The present study involves *Exit West* and *When the Moon is Low* novels to analyze how migrant subjects navigate fragmented identities while moving through unaccustomed yet hauntingly accustomed places. According to Ahmad and Hussain (2022) the novel *When the Moon is Low* unveils in the context of Afghan war and the consequent Afghan refugee crisis following the life of Fereiba, the protagonist of this novel. The novel describes the story of adversities and the trials that she faced which subsequently continue to shape her resilience throughout her journey from Afghanistan to London. Zainab and Rind (2024) further add that *When the Moon is Low* deals with more stranded illustration of involuntary dislocation, following the agonizing journey of an Afghan family as they muddle through fortitude, forfeiture and obstinate Prescence of home in the unfamiliar milieu. Drawing on *Exit West*, Gilbert (2017) suggests that in this novel the author moves beyond the pure political lens and human migration is presented as a substantial experience that is not only experienced by the migrants but also by those who stay rooted in one place. Dietrich (2023) further proposes that *Exit West* appeared at the time when debates about human migration were escalating globally due to enormous increase in the number of refugees all over the world, making its message predominantly pertinent. According to Sadaf (2020) the Prescence of black doors symbolize the instantaneous transition that collapse distance yet exaggerate emotional dislocation.

Central to this research is the concept that transnational migration produces what can be understood as threshold identities and according to Chakraborty (2016) threshold is a state of being suspended between worlds, cultures and selves. Using Turner's framework of liminality, the present study explores how migrant subjects exist in a persistent in-between state and this in-betweenness is not merely transitional, it often becomes a protracted condition in which previous identities of the migrants are disrupted but new ones are not yet fully formed (Wasiq, Rashid, Shah,2024).Zainab and Rind (2024) further propose that migrant subjects in these two novels navigate through ambiguous landscapes where their identity remains fluid and unsettled and stability is indefinable. Furthermore, the present study integrates Freud's notion of the uncanny to highlight the psychological tensions embedded in migration. As Chakraborty (2016) suggests that the return of the familiar establishes when the migrants encounter moments in extraneous spaces that inexplicably echo their lost homes and consequently generating a disorienting blend

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of comfort and estrangement. By combining together these two concepts liminality and uncanny, the present research study moves beyond the conventional narratives of migration that focus merely on assimilation and adaptation in foreign milieu. The present study foregrounds the enduring volatility the migrant identities and the haunting persistence of the past in the present. By doing a comparative study of the selected novels, the present study aims to demonstrate that transnational migration is not merely a physical dislocation but involves profound reconfiguration of selfhood, where individuals remain adjourned between arrival and departure, continuously negotiating the boundaries of belonging in a world that is both novel and uncannily familiar.

Literature Review

A recent study conducted by a group of researcher highlights that literary scholars, authors and critics are increasingly engaging with the themes of borders and boundaries globally due to mounting significance of migrant literature. Their aim is to provoke the complexities and anxieties associated with the migrant experience. On the other hand, the abrupt changes in global political landscape and evolving trends in migration have reshaped the literary perspectives consequently, giving rise to new approaches that reflect the varying realities of mobility and dislocation (Ahmed,Malik & Tahir, 2021).Another group of researcher examine *Twilight in Delhi* through the lens of liminality to show that how external cultural influence reshape the native identities and employed the technique of binary opposition to demonstrate the contrasting effects of liminality on characters. Asghar and Mir Nehal are the contrasting figures as Asghar exemplifies willingness to embrace new cultural norms, explaining how such adoption can transmute one's sense of self. Mir Nehal on the other hand, resists these changes, illustrating firm attachment to one's own cultural values and strong rejection of foreign intrusion (Iqbal, Adil & Butt, 2018). Such oscillation resonates strongly with Bhabha's ideas about third space, a space where meanings and identities are continuously re-formed through hybridity (Bhabha, 1996).

Recent research further enhances this concept by placing liminality with in the lived realities of migration for instance, Zainab and Rind (2024) suggest that migrant characters in South Asian fiction experience psychological, sociological and emotional transformations as they traverse through various geographical terrains. They argue that migration is not merely physical dislodgement in fact, it involves an unsettling process that reform the identities of the migrants at multiple levels. The migrant characters such as Nadia and Saeed in *Exit West* and Fereiba in *When the Moon is Low* remain suspended between previous affiliations and forthcoming fears and constantly negotiating their place in unfamiliar environment thereby termed as liminal identities. Parallel to these discussions, the scholars have turned to psychoanalytic framework of the Freud. Freud's notion of uncanny is defined as the return of familiar in the unfamiliar milieu and serves as a compelling lens for analyzing migrant experience that is shaped by dislodgment and estrangement as Bennett and Royle (2016) argue that uncanny evolving from the uneasy interplay between recognition and alienation and it operates less as a fixed themes and more as readably and pragmatic response. It is predominantly related to migrant literature where new spaces often evoke haunting reminders of the lost homeland. At the same time, Zainab and Rind (2024) emphasize this argument by indicating that how uncanny elements, such as war-torn familiar landscapes in *When the Moon is Low* and the surreal magical doors in *Exit West* undermine conventional perceptions of space and identity, creating a sense of psychological bewilderment.

Lemus (2021) identifies the presence of uncanny elements within the liminal spaces in transnational fiction and he argues that such liminal spaces function not only as a site of

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transition but serve as a zone of ambiguity where identities become fluid and unstable and this concept again resonate with Bhabha's ideas about third space, a place where identity is reconstituted due to hybridity (Chakraborty,2016).Asif(2024) also explores the elements of postcolonial uncanny in *Toba Tek Singh* and identifies how partitioned spaces and fractured identities produce a profoundly disconcerting sense of familiarity and disaffection .Another group of researcher put forward a persuasive Critical Discourse Analysis of *Exit West*. By incorporating Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis, the study reflects that how themes of identity, belonging, globalization, and confrontation are entrenched within the novel's minimalist yet symbolic prose. Khalil, Zakir, and Durrani (2025) also provide a nuanced study of this novel by focusing on the novel's amalgamation of magical realism with political allegory. They argue that the author deliberately liquifies the boundary between reality and fantasy through the recurring motif of black doors, which function not only as narrative devices but also as powerful symbols of escape, transformation, and the collapse of rigid geopolitical borders. Miller (2018) also suggests that *Exit West* deals with a shared sense of vagueness and transformation, while also recommending a gentle representation of love that persists even in the heart of conflict and upheaval.

Christena and Bose (2019) examined the aspect of multiculturalism in *When the Moon is Low.* They explore that the author has artistically brought the elements of multiculturalism in this novel and the novel focuses on the change in culture and interaction of individuals of one culture with the other culture. Akhtar (2020) evaluates the reconstruction of national identity among refugees in *When the Moon is Low* and she has utilized the notion of long-distance nationalism, as expounded by Schiller and Fouron. She has aimed to illustrate how this concept of long-distance nationalism plays a pivotal role in shaping a cross-border citizenship among Afghan refugees.

Material and Methods

The concept of liminality was first introduced by Van Gennep in the field of anthropology and sociology in the late 19th century. Later, in the year 1960 he presented his ideas about liminality in his most cherished book The Rite of the Passage (Thomassen, 2014). Gennep suggested that every rite of passage has these three stages, separation, transition and incorporation. Building on Gennep's ideas, Turner further expanded the concept by giving it analytical depths and cultural relevance. He refined the ideas by emphasizing that these stages are present in most transformative experiences, although their intensity may vary depending on context. In his influential essay Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage, Turner identified liminal stage as one marked by ambiguity where individuals lose the markers of their established social roles temporarily. During this stage the individuals enter into a symbolic realm that lacks the clear structure of both their past and anticipated future (Turner,1969). As Zainab and Kulsoom (2026) argue that Turner was interested in the second stage which is transition or liminal stage, illustrating that it is a condition where individuals exist in a betwixt and between status, suspended between their past and future identities. Chakraborty (2016) proposes that the term liminality is derived from the Latin word limen, which means a threshold, boundary, or point of transition. It signifies a space that exists in between and much like the threshold of a doorway that must be crossed to enter a new domain. Carnicelli (2014) argues that liminality illustrates unique circumstances of the dislocated individuals.

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According to Langdon (1991) liminality is actually a change agent or an agent that brings change along with it because it starts transformation and becomes a course of change itself. Liminality initiates change by untying the individuals from the structure of the customs and routine and becomes a process of change by permitting individuals to be other than they have been with new social status and altered identity. Turner introduced the concept of "communitas" to complement the notion of liminality. Communitas refers to the intense sense of community, equality, and solidarity that emerges among individuals in the liminal phase. It is a state of being where social hierarchies and structures are temporarily dissolved, fostering a sense of shared experience and unity (Thomassen, 2014). Turner (1969) emphasized the anti-structure nature of liminality, suggesting that during this phase, individuals experience a temporary liberation from social norms and hierarchical structures.

Along with liminality, the concept of uncanny by Freud also provides a substantial psychological dimension to the understanding of the transnational migrant experience. Freud used a German term unheimlich for uncanny in his essay written in the year 1919. He used this concept to illustrate something that is strange and strangely familiar. Freud argues that the uncanny emerges when something once known and intimate becomes unversed or disconcerting (Freud, 2003). As Freud (2003) relates, “The uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud, 2003, p.124). When the migrant subjects confront elements that blur the boundary between known and unknown so, as a result of this paradox gives a sense of discomfort is generated that gives rise to uneasiness. Jay (1995) proposes that the concept of uncanny has expended its boundaries and covered a wide range of disciplines including arts, literature, social sciences, philosophy, ethics, religion, cultural studies, politics, history and aesthetics as well. Chakraborty (2016) further adds about nature of liminality that this notion is closely linked to another psychological process that is repression, in which repressed memories of past resurfaced in a strange and bizarre way and this concept is parallel to Freud’s concept of uncanny when he describes that uncanny is strangely familiar. By combining Turner’s liminality and Freud’s uncanniness, the present research study offers a comprehensive analytical framework. Turner’s liminality underlines the cultural and structural dimensions of the transnational migration and uncanny highlights the psychological and emotional intensity of this phenomenon. In sum, collectively these concepts offer a nuanced lens which examines the complex and often unsettling experiences of migrants, whose lives are shaped by continuous movement between familiar and unfamiliar worlds.

Results and Discussion

In the first novel *Exit West* the author reimagines the concept of human migration by using an unusual narrative structure that disturbs the linear progression associated with displacement. The defining feature of this novel is the presence of magical doors that also serve as an influential metaphor for liminality. These black doors eliminate physical journey and transport individuals instantly from one place to another place as the author relates, “The passage was both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it, and she felt cold and bruised

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and damp as she lay on the floor of the room at the other side, trembling and too spent at first to stand" (Hamid, 2017, p.98). The presence of black doors exaggerates the liminal condition instead of simplifying it. Turner (1969) argues that during the liminal stage of a ritual the initiates are in a betwixt and between status which is a kind of threshold or starter from which a new individuality or social status can appear. By eliminating the gradual transition between spaces, the characters are thrust into an immediate state of betwixt and between, where the boundaries of identity, culture, and belonging are no longer constant.

In the light of Turner's viewpoint ,liminality is a temporary stage and leads to assimilation but in *Exit West* the nature of liminality is not momentary in fact Nadia and Saeed , these two characters exist in a protracted liminal stage as they do not move towards a fixed endpoint, rather , they inhabit multiple transitional spaces from Mykonos to London and from London to Marin, each offering only provisional belonging and can be termed as perpetual liminality, where the process of becoming never resolves. Turner (1969) suggests about the traits of liminality, "The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (" threshold people ") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions" (Turner, 1969, p.95). The novel thus inflates Turner's framework by demonstrating that how a liminal phase is not an exception but a sustained condition of existence in the context of contemporary transnational migration. Furthermore, Turner's ideas about anti-structure are also evident in this novel which is a momentary liberation from social norms and hierarchical structures. Turner's notion about communitas is also vividly realized in this novel as he relates, "Communitas emerges where social structure is not" (p.126). Yet, the author obscures this ideal by showing how new forms of exclusion and power structures gradually emerge. The liminal space, therefore, is not purely liberating; it is also marked by instability and conflict, reflecting the ambivalent nature of anti-structure.

Freud's concept of uncanny further enriches the migration discourse in *Exit West* by delineating the psychological dimensions of the migrant experiences. In this novel uncanny manifest itself through the blending of familiar and unfamiliar and the symbolic representation of this paradox is black doors "They emerged in a bedroom with a view of the night sky and furnishing so expensive and well-made that Saeed and Nadia thought they were in a hotel" (p.117). The black doors are presented as extraordinary yet part of every day's life, thus creating a sense of unease. Furthermore, the environments that Nadia and Saeed encounter often mirror aspects of their homeland, producing a haunting sense of repetition. Violence, surveillance, and social tension reappear in different forms, suggesting that migration does not erase the past but reconfigures it. Freud (2003) suggests uncanniness occurs when repressed memories or feelings resurface in an unexpected context and create sense of uneasiness. The characters' sense of dislocation is thus not solely spatial but psychological, as they struggle to reconcile their past identities with their present circumstances. Likewise, the evolving relationship between Nadia and Saeed also demonstrates the interaction between liminality and uncanny as they were bound by shared displacement initially and later on, gradually deviate in their response to migration as the author relates, "She wished, therefore, that she could be the old

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Nadia. But much as she enjoyed their chats and the improved mood between them, they rarely touched, and her desire to be touched by him, long subsided, did not flicker back into flame" (pp.198-199). While Saeed adheres to cultural continuousness and looking for comfort in the familiar Nadia, on the other hand, embraces transformation and adaptableness. According to Khel, Anjum and Rahman (2021), when the migrant subjects attempt to assimilate into new culture, they undertake a process of transformation. During this process inevitable changes occur so, the need to improve identity arises. In sum, *Exit West* represents transnational migration as an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a journey toward resolution. The liminal state in this novel persists, and the uncanny ensures that the past endures to form the present. By employing the dual theoretical framework, *Exit West* enunciates a vision of identity that is fluid, liable, and continuously in flux.

The second novel *When the Moon is Low* presents a more realist depiction of transnational migration which is grounded in socio-political realities of refugee's life as compared to magical realism in *Exit West*. Despite of this stylistic difference, *When the Moon is Low* equally engages with the concepts of liminality and uncanny as in *Exit West* by offering a complementary perspective on transnational displacement. The physical journey of Fereiba Waziri and her family depicts the Turner's model of rite of passage with a critical deviation. As Turner (1969) 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, p.94). Initial stage of the rite of passage is separation, which is marked by their departure from Afghanistan and the second stage is transition or liminal stage, unfolds through their arduous journey across borders and the final stage assimilation remains uncertain in this novel. The family's prolonged stay in refugee camps, coupled with bureaucratic delays and social marginalization, prevents full integration into the host society, giving rise to protracted liminality which is characterized by constant negotiation of identity. Thomassen (2014) proposes that liminal experiences shape the individuality, foreground mind and experience and focus human agency. Fereiba makes quick decisions and finds ways to secure and support her children in unfamiliar and precarious settings as she narrates, "If I wanted to give my children a real chance, we needed to continue. The longer we waited, the heavier our feet would become" (Hashimi, 2015, p.119). Fereiba, once firmly positioned within her social and familial roles, finds herself in a state of perplexity where new roles must be redefined. Her identity as a mother becomes central to her survival and it is also reshaped by the demand of dislocation. Liminality thus becomes an intense, personal and touching phenomenon that assists individuals in their understanding of self-hood and is not merely a geographical or spatial element. Turner's concept of communitas and anti-structure is also evident in the connections amongst refugees. Shared experiences of loss and dislocation create bonds that transcend cultural and national differences. In *Exit West* this type of bonding is not present. A fragile sense of unity persists in this novel and it is often undermined by external pressures, including competition for resources and the hierarchical structures imposed by host societies.

Freud's notion of uncanny also plays a vital role in analyzing the psychological and emotional dimensions of Fereiba's migrant experience. In this novel uncanniness is tied to memory and trauma but in *Exit West* there is subtle and atmospheric uncanniness. As Fereiba navigates through various and strange landscapes she encounters unaccustomed environment, recalls her life in Afghanistan and the memories with the lost one. By doing this, the past

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recurrently interrupts the present as Freud (2003) suggests that uncanny occurs when repressed memories of the past resurface in a strange way because this phenomenon gives rise to inexplicable sentiments. The family dynamic is another important factor in this novel that further illustrates how liminality and the uncanny interconnect. Fereiba's relationship with her children is shaped by both protection and loss, as she strives to maintain a sense of stability in an unstable environment as she narrates, "My child's heart was more broken than mine. I buried the rage I felt towards my husband, for his decisions that had brought me here. So much was not his fault and I knew that when I had the strength to be rational. But other times, when my shoulders started to give under the pressure of it all, thoughts of my husband clouded with resentment. I saw pigheadedness instead of preservance, pride instead of principle and denial instead of determination. The light of our marriage dimmed. I prayed for a way to love my husband in death as wholly as I 'd loved him in life. In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate, cried my heavy heart" (p.140). The three children of Fereiba adapt differently to their circumstances which signifies that individuals respond in a different way to the experience of dislocation and liminality thus is not dependent on age, gender and personal history. In this novel liminality is not presented as a process of linear progression but as a continuous struggle marked by indecision and emotional complexity that does not conclude in a clear resolution, and the uncanny ensures that the past remains an active force within the present.

Conclusion

The present research study evaluated that how the phenomenon of transnational migration can be more fully comprehended via the twin lenses of Turner's liminality and Freud's uncanniness in *Exit West* and *When the Moon is Low.* Through the intersection of these two frameworks the research has argued that transnational migration exceeds geographical relocation. As an existential condition, it gives rise to threshold identities marked by both transformation and haunting continuity. The analysis reveals that the migrant characters in both novels exist in a persistent state of in-betweenness, with identities that are continuously deferred and renegotiated. Yet this liminal condition does not lead to full reintegration or final resolution. Instead, this condition recurrently evolves into an enduring and perpetual state of liminality. In such a space, individuals find themselves persistently composed between what they once were and what they are becoming, oscillating between belongingness and estrangement. Simultaneously, Freud's, notion of uncanniness further excavates this understanding by highlighting the psychological dimensions of migration. As depicted in both texts, the migrant experience is shaped by the disconcerting return of familiar in unfamiliar setting whether through language, culture, identity, relationship or memory. Fragments of home reappear in ways that destabilizes the binary between the known and the unknown, arguing that the migrant does not leave the past behind but carries it forward in haunting and transformative ways. In *Exit West* the magical or black doors dissolves physical distances, amplifying the sense of the uncanny experience, whereas in *When the Moon is Low* the glaring depiction of involuntary migration highpoints the profound emotive and psychological echoes tied to the memory of home left behind. Ultimately, this study attains its main objective by presenting that bringing together liminality and the uncanny offers a rich and astute lens for inferring transnational migration in selected fiction. The idea of threshold identities pertinently reflects this encrusted experience, as migrants inhabit a space where change and memory cohabit, where evolving identities take shape even though earlier selves continue to reshape but not erased.

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