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Desperate Times, Desperate Measures: Time Travellesque Trapped Kinetics of Refugee Surveillance towards Exit West

Abstract

This paper demonstrates how Mohsin Hamid's Exit West deals with the pernicious consequences of war, and anarchy. The refugees Saeed and Nadia resorted to escape routes in search of an asylum, due to war. These were desperate times that called for desperate measures. When both protagonists escape using "black doors," what I call 'time-travellesque,' it transports them to an alternate reality that negates time and space. This research examines how spatiotemporal travel impacts these two characters who bypass the experience of "trapped kinetics". My argument is that refugee experience and incessant surveillance change people. Both protagonists go through similar experiences but come up with different ways to deal with life. This illuminates how these black doors transcend the restrictions imposed by time and space and how this change rebuts the travel restrictions imposed by visas and borders for the refugees.

Keywords: Black Doors, Spatio-Temporal, Surveillance, Time Travellesque, Trapped Kinetics, Refugees

Authors:

Mahwish Abid:(Corresponding Author)

Ph. D scholar, Department of English,
International Islamic University Islamabad,
Pakistan.

(Email: amahvish786@gmail.com)

Aroosa Kanwal: Professor, Department of English,
Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

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Authors:

Mahwish Abid:(Corresponding Author)

Ph. D scholar, Department of English, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan.
(Email: amahvish786@gmail.com)

Aroosa Kanwal: Professor, Department of English, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates how Mohsin Hamid's Exit West deals with the pernicious consequences of war, and anarchy. The refugees Saeed and Nadia resorted to escape routes in search of an asylum, due to war. These were desperate times that called for desperate measures. When both protagonists escape using "black doors," what I call 'time- time-travellesque,' it transports them to an alternate reality that negates time and space. This research examines how spatiotemporal travel impacts these two characters who bypass the experience of "trapped kinetics". My argument is that refugee experience and incessant surveillance change people. Both protagonists go through similar experiences but come up with different ways to deal with life. This illuminates how these black doors transcend the restrictions imposed by time and space and how this change rebuts the travel restrictions imposed by visas and borders for the refugees.

Keywords:

Black Doors, Spatio-Temporal, Surveillance, Time Travellesque, Trapped Kinetics, Refugees.

Introduction and theoretical framework

*"So I have a new name – refugee
Strange that a name should take away from me
My past, my personality, and hope
Strange refuge this." (Ruvimbo Bungwe).
Teichmann, I. (2002)*

What happens when stark realities like war leave refugees with no option but to leave behind their

loved ones and home? Why do such desperate times make refugees grasp a slight sliver of hope or die in uncertainty? Notwithstanding, rarely considering that no one leaves their home willingly it is in stark contrast to the xenophobia experienced by these refugees. My argument is that the refugees in the novel are compelled to leave their homes due to the eruption of chaotic circumstances, not willingly, and they escape the



boundaries of time and space through the use of 'black doors' (Hamid 2017, p.70).

My paper examines the spatial and temporal notions involving 'kinopolitics' regarding the mobility of migrants across the globe (Nail 2015, p/189). I am of the view that societies are always in motion and life of refugees do not resemble 'bare life' (echoing Agamben, 1998, p.47) but they have their political and ideological beliefs. My argument is premised on the maltreatment and estrangement as witnessed by those who choose between life and death to migrate due to desperate times, seeking miraculous escape from dark times and spaces. Once they make the journey, they are met with alienation or are considered as 'stranger danger' (Ahmed 201, p. 1). I will highlight how it is also up to the refugees to choose whether they want to assimilate into the new culture or remain aloof. The text further illuminates the impact of incessant surveillance on refugees. And lastly, I will also elaborate on how travel changes people and it completely transforms their personalities. As the protagonists experience a transition from their previous personalities due to their new experiences. They cannot go back to their past self, as they have come a long way and the change reminds me of the process of metamorphosis when a larva changes into a butterfly.

I would elaborate on this process of metamorphosis by first narrating the tale when Saeed and Nadia were both college students living peacefully, as their country played host to refugees (Hamid, 2017, 1). In the following chapters, their relationship blossoms as their city gets enmeshed in Civil War and riots. Both Saeed and Nadia lost their jobs as their companies were unable to pay them (Hamid, 2017, p. 67). Saeed faced another setback as his mother died as a stray bullet seen through their car's 'windscreen' (Hamid, 2017, p. 71). Nadia moved in to help Saeed and his father as things got unbearable. When the text mentions that 'Funerals were smaller and rushed' (Hamid, 2017, p. 73). I recalled a tale of a Kashmiri survivor who stated that they offer six prayers a day – five obligatory and one, funeral prayer for the deceased. In my view, it speaks volumes about the amount of grief witnessed by the inhabitants of places struck by war. There seems to be no escape from misery and trauma, people pray for a miracle.

As if to answer their prayers, both Saeed and Nadia heard 'rumors' of magical portals and decided to move on but Saeed's father declined their offer stating that his wife 'is here' (Hamid, 2017, p. 91). I think Saeed's father was, to quote Cathy Caruth, 'acting out in response to his wife's death (1996, p. 91). This is the standard response of those experiencing any personal tragedy. It takes time and sometimes, therapy to move on to the next stage of acceptance. Then only do people feel peace. It was a difficult decision for Saeed, however, he opted to leave the war-torn city with Nadia (2017, p. 91). At this point, I would like to bring in another perspective by Iain Chambers when he states that one should not interrogate 'who' migrates, but he poses a more pertinent query being 'when, how and under what circumstances (1993, p. 182). I agree with this line of questioning as in my view, no one wants to leave their home and loved ones willingly. Drastic movement is usually followed by unforeseen circumstances that compel people to migrate. On humanitarian grounds, one must look into the reasons behind such a move.

In my view, the surreality ensued as they entered the magical portal and experienced feeling parallel to 'dying and like being born' (Hamid, 2017, p. 98). What is interesting to note is that although Saeed and Nadia had the choice to take the chance of going through the doors, they did not have any choice regarding where they wanted to go. They, like many others, had no control over it. Saeed and Nadia joined the large exodus to survive the horrors unfolding around them. Just as Gubser states 'In this place, time and space are meaningful in different ways (2010, p. 54). When they escaped one dimension into another, they traveled through time and space. This made them land in a different space and we know that we all live in different time zones. Hence, they made the journey between various spatial and temporal zones.

Analysis and discussion

When I read the text, the notion of black doors fascinated me and in this respect, Rosemary Jackson talks about Stephen Hawking's notion of "black holes" in our galaxy where 'time and space collapse' (2008, p. 232). I think these 'black doors' perform a similar function. They both suck in and space and time seem to be negated in a way, which

helps to transport people from one spatial and temporal zone to another. Ryan Wasserman in his work *'Paradoxes of Time Travel'* talks about the notion of 'causal paradox' - which he describes as an exceptional force that causes time travel (2018, p. 20). In my view, *Exit West* has presented a 'causal paradox' as both Saeed and Nadia were desperate for an escape route due to the Civil War and this caused the door to appear as a form of time machine or 'TARDIS' (like in Dr. WHO), which allowed them to travel towards West for safety (2017, p. 23).

Interestingly, I found another logical interpretation of the black doors. I came across Sergio Manzetti's *The Vortex of Time and Space Curvature*, where after tracing the concept back to Albert Einstein, states that 'Vorticity' like 'water and electromagnetic waves exists everywhere' (2020, p. 2). Vortex is described as a place where all definitions of time and space collapse, and this is what gives the vortex its surreal power to cause out-of-body experiences like those described in the novel.

I am of the view that when Saeed and Nadia escaped through these 'black doors', their characters experienced a complete metamorphosis from their previous personalities and choices (Hamid, 2017, p. 70). I have termed their experience as 'time-travellesque' as they were trapped in their homeland that was enmeshed in chaos when they heard the strange 'rumors' of once in a lifetime magical opportunity - a choice between the binaries of death/life, despair/hope, real/surreal. In the case of the two protagonists, this portal transcends these boundaries between East/West, and war/peace.

What I find fascinating is the unpredictability of life presented in the narrative. Both protagonists are taking 'evening classes' and their relationship blossoms under peaceful circumstances in an anonymous city when suddenly, chaos erupts and engulfs the city in its stride (Hamid, 2017, p. 10). In these uncertain times, they took refuge in their residence, but trouble finds them and puts them into a 'precarious' situation (Nayar, 2019, p. 26). These precarious situations included physical threats such as fear of life and uncertainty due to weapons and violence, whereas loss of loved ones, as Saeed lost his mother and Nadia, her cousin, led to psychological trauma (Hamid, 2017, p. 26). Such

uncertain situations led Saeed and Nadia to escape their home for a haven.

Moreover, I find that these traumatic incidents chased their memories, even after they left their hometown, and caused noticeable personality changes in both protagonists. In my view, Saeed became a reclusive introvert and sought peace with the help of religion. Whereas, Nadia became extrovert and independent to the point that she no longer needed Saeed and moved out of their shared refugee camp.

Here, I would like to elaborate on my favorite trope in the novel, those fascinating magical portals that bypass the need for 'Waiting for Godot' (echoing Samuel Beckett 1953), or visa approval. It reminds me of multiple literary enchanted portals that transcend the boundaries of time, place, and space - Rowling narrated an enchanted time-turner given to Hermione Granger to take extra classes, Narnia had a magical wardrobe that transported between the real and the magical, and Mohsin Hamid talks about these black doors that act as a portal between East and West.

While talking about portals, I am reminded of the transcending dimensions of time and space by Steven S. Gubser in his seminal work, *'The Little Book of String Theory'* where he talks about spatial dimensions being infinite (2010, p. 62). After reading his work, I am reminded of the concept of Hamid introducing these 'black doors' that act as a portal between dichotomous notions of war/peace, legal/illegal, etc. (2017, p. 70). These doors are like cyberspaces as distances collapse and we are transported and connected to people on the other side of the world, immediately. Through these portals, spatial-temporal distances collapse. Gubser is of the view that 'There is no separate time and space, a unified medium of the universe' (2010, p. 323). I assert that these two entities seem interconnected, especially in the context of travel through the surreal portals that transport people from one end of the globe to another.

All this talk about time, place, and space reminds me to move back to the narrative. When Saeed and Nadia first navigated through these portals, they landed on a 'Greek Island' called 'Mykonos' (Hamid, 2017, p. 100). It was here that they discovered that language acts as a barrier, as they could not understand the natives and vice-versa. They were 'shooed' by the native which

reminded me of another narrative by E. M. Forster entitled 'A Passage to India', where it was mentioned outside the gate of 'Chandrapore Club' that 'Dogs and Indians Not Allowed' (1965, p. 67). Saeed and Nadia stayed at a refugee camp at Mykonos where they were met with a little hostility by the natives and a bit of 'decent people' (Hamid, 2017, p. 101). It goes to show that not all natives treat refugees with disdain. Nadia met a lovely lady at the clinic who took them to another portal that led them away from Mykonos. But at the departure, both Nadia and the lady had watery eyes, which to me means that all natives are not hostile towards the migrants (Hamid, 2017, p. 115). They landed in London, where they happened to reside in a dwelling with 'over fifty people which elicited opposite reactions from the protagonists. Saeed felt 'claustrophobic' whereas Nadia, being an extrovert, interacted with the Nigerian women and joined their meetings (Hamid, 2017, p. 126). In my view, it talks loads about how people accept change. Saeed had already witnessed the demise of his mother and his father opted to stay away and was in my view still 'acting out' his trauma as until this point, he did not discuss his parents with Nadia or anyone else. Whereas, Nadia embraced changes quickly and assimilated in new times and space. However, the natives became hostile and the refugees were monitored by every available technology like 'robots, drones, tanks' (Hamid 2017, p. 130). Soon, all migrants were alienated, deprived of food, and were attacked by native 'mobs' frequently and they wished for another portal (Hamid, 2017, p. 131). This maltreatment of refugees reminded me of 'stranger danger' as they are perceived to be aliens by the natives (Sara Ahmed, 2010, p. 18). The refugees are always under surveillance, and their camps are in the city's peripheries, whereas the natives reside at the core, which bifurcates these two groups. I would like to highlight that this gulf was so widened that when London experienced a power outage, it was blamed on the migrants.

This reminds me of another aspect of my paper; the transition in one's personality – as experienced by Saeed and Nadia in the text. The narrative is about the complexity of relationships and how travel and adversity change people - for better or for worse! That is another debate. In my view, these characters evolve into completely new people - unable to fit into the previous mold of their past selves. People change, even if they do not face

difficult times and these changes exacerbate manifolds when confronted with stark realities of life; such as death, war, and dislocation.

In my view, Saeed was fighting his demons and was an introvert which prevented him from making acquaintances like Nadia. She made a friend in Mykonos and even in London, she made friends with a group of Nigerian ladies. She embraced change and changed colors like a chameleon. She assimilated in different environments, effortlessly. Whereas, Saeed remained aloof in Mykonos and London as well. In my view, Saeed had not come to terms with his mother's death and leaving behind his father. His nature also prevented him from talking to anyone. I think Saeed remained hostile in a hostile environment. Which is never a good thing!

However, good things come to those who wait – Saeed managed to find migrants at the Mosque where he went to offer Friday prayers (in memory of his father and late mother) (Hamid, 2017, p. 148). There, he found the preacher who spoke his native tongue. It was as if Saeed was waiting for someone to communicate in his language. Thus started Saeed's journey towards religion. He offered prayers more fervently and attended those sermons. Later on, he even joined the philanthropic efforts of the preacher. There, Saeed met the preacher's daughter and for the first time, talked about his parents. In my view, it offered a catharsis for his grief and in terms of Cathy Caruth, allowed him to "walk through" his trauma (1996, p. 45).

All this talk about time, place, and space reminds me to move back to the narrative. When Saeed and Nadia first navigated through these portals, they landed on a 'Greek Island' called 'Mykonos' (Hamid, 2017, p. 100). It was here that they discovered that language acts as a barrier, as they could not understand the natives and vice-versa. They were 'shooed' by the natives which reminded me of another narrative by E. M. Forster entitled 'A Passage to India', where it was mentioned outside the gate of Gymkhana that 'Dogs and Indians Not Allowed' (1965, p. 48). It reminds me of the bifurcation between 'us' and 'them' (Edward Said, 2003, p. 38).

My discussion about the stratification comes to a standstill as I need to acknowledge the kindness of a lady towards Nadia. Here I would like to mention that despite such antagonistic times,

Nadia managed to befriend a lady at a clinic in Mykonos. It was her friendly gesture that this unnamed, pale-skinned, “light-eyed” lady helped Saeed and Nadia escape Mykonos by finding another magical portal. While departing, both Nadia and her friend were teary-eyed (Hamid, 2017, p. 115).

The departure from Mykonos led them to London (Hamid, 2017, p. 115). It was here that they got a ‘room’ rather than a camp (Hamid, 2017, p. 120). They also witnessed a large influx of refugees and here, they were considered aliens. Even the tabloids printed the refugees as ‘black holes in the fabric of the nation’ (Hamid, 2017, p. 126). I mention this to elaborate that often tabloids measure the pulse of the citizens and here, it is obvious that the natives are not happy with the sudden influx of refugees. Here, they are perceived as ‘stranger danger’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 2).

Furthermore, the interactions between the natives and the refugees portray the power dynamics where there is an asymmetrical balance between the superior natives and inferior refugees (Ahmed, 2010, p. 9). I assert that the discrimination did not end with the end of the colonial empire, but it continues in this day and age of globalization. I would also like to talk about another aspect that traveling changes people. When Saeed and Nadia migrated, Nadia embraced the changes and with her positive approach made friends in Mykonos and London. Saeed took time to accept change and open up to new experiences.

All the refugees were put under incessant surveillance by host authorities and the rations were low. This made many refugees feel not completely satiated (Hamid, 2017, p. 130). As if these difficulties like sharing a dwelling, lack of food, and being constantly monitored using ‘drones, helicopters, and all the latest technology even during blackout phases were not enough, these migrants were attacked by mobs of natives (Hamid 2017, p. 131). After one such attack as Nadia and Saeed were nursing their wounds, Saeed became nostalgic and criticized the natives by comparing that they did not attack when their country played host to the refugees. Nadia replied to this, as I call her the voice of reason in the narrative, that since they belong to a ‘poor country’ they did not have the same facilities and luxuries and had ‘nothing to lose’ (Hamid, 2017, p. 138).

They have migrated to one of the developed and posh areas of the globe, which is why they are worried that the refugees are meant to steal from them (Hamid, 2017, p. 142).

Due to Nadia's positive approach, even Saeed began to see reason in the ‘mob’ attacks (Hamid, 2017, p. 131). However, he could not accept the alienation, food shortage, and constant surveillance. In my view, Saeed did not make the effort to get assimilated into a new culture. Whereas, Nadia was just his foil. I think these two are polar opposites in terms of their personalities, how they embrace change, and terms of their overall approach towards life. Just as Saeed was grumbling at the influx of the globalized poor south into the rich and developed north (Hamid, 2017, p. 68). This was a truly globalized experience when people from various parts of the world migrated, including refugees from Nigeria (Hamid, 2017, p. 142).

While in London, Saeed and Nadia had to share a dwelling with ‘fifty other refugees’ from various parts of the ‘poor south’, which made Saeed ‘claustrophobic’ (Hamid 2017, 129). He was miserable when he found that the Nigerian males carried weapons upon their person for safety (Hamid, 2017, p. 147). Everything about his ‘global migrant’ experience made him more pessimistic. In my view, Saeed is one of those who take life a bit too seriously. This made him even more miserable and reclusive. One day, he decided to offer Friday prayers at a local Mosque and found that the preacher spoke his language (Hamid, 2017, p. 149). He discovered that they are involved in helping the large influx of migrants settle down in London. This impressed Saeed and he started to help with the humanitarian efforts. I think that helping those less fortunate gave Saeed a purpose in life. It motivated him and in this way, he was finally able to assimilate. Saeed was so impressed with the set-up where all gents stayed in one portion and ladies in another, that he wanted to move in as he found peace in the Mosque (Hamid, 2017, p. 149). However, Nadia was averse to the idea of living apart and rejected moving out.

Additionally, in my view, this was enough motivation for Saeed to take an interest in spirituality and later, in philanthropic work (Hamid, 2017, p. 150). There, Saeed became

attracted to the preacher's daughter and talked about his parents. I think when he opened up about his grief, it offered him some respite and catharsis. Saeed started to heal, but it widened the gulf between Saeed and Nadia. This created a void that severed the close bond shared by the two.

Nadia is portrayed as an optimistic and extrovert person and has no issues adjusting to Mykonos and London. So, when refugees from Nigeria migrated to London, they made a 'council' comprising of females and worked to resolve issues faced by migrant women in London (Hamid, 2017, p. 143). Nadia was also invited to these meetings. Initially, she found it difficult to understand due to the language barrier but she tried to make up the meanings and got the gist of it. Later, she found happiness in social work (Hamid, 2017, p. 151). While Nadia was engrossed in social work to help humanity; Saeed was content with his prayers and humanitarian efforts until one day, he was provided arms and ammunition for protection (Hamid, 2017, p. 153). This, in my view, scared the daylights out of Saeed. However, he accepted it and when Nadia saw it, she did not comment on it.

Things were already looking murky as the tabloids were filled with news of 'war, migrants', and clashes with the citizens (Hamid, 2017, p. 155). Meanwhile, in central London, a 'great massacre' and the way I see it, 'genocide' or ethnic cleansing was planned (Hamid, 2017, p. 159). This made Saeed and Nadia want to escape and wish for an outlet as the aversion towards the migrants grew and they were genuinely scared for their lives. Here, I would mention that Saeed and Nadia left the dwelling and moved to a camp in the "periphery" of the city (Hamid, 2017, p. 159). It is here that all seems lost and for the first time in the narrative, Saeed starts dreaming of his deceased parents and he has a hard time letting go of his past in terms of 'acting out' his traumatic past (Caruth, 1996, p. 17). Saeed did not know how to mourn for the deceased or even acknowledge his loss when his cousin contacted him through social media that his father passed away due to 'pneumonia' (Hamid, 2017, p. 170). In my view, Saeed had just come to terms with his mother's death and he had 'worked through' his trauma when the news of another tragedy came crashing his nerves (Caruth, 1996, p. 21). Saeed did not know how to manage his emotional turmoil and with no one to help, he turned to God. He

started praying diligently while staying at the 'camps' provided for the refugees (Hamid, 2017, p. 175).

In my view, when Saeed took his grief to God, he found peace. In this way, his naturally introverted and reclusive personality helped improve his optimism in the world and its people. Moreover, Saeed also started working as a 'manual labor' (Hamid, 2017, p. 186). This helped him in multiple ways; not only did he get to earn money despite having the status of a migrant, manual labor added to his physique as Nadia noticed multiple females being attracted towards him, and lastly, he also found himself a purpose in life as he felt motivated by this positive change in life. So, as I see it, Saeed was redeemed by spirituality and manual work.

However, life was made difficult for the refugees and another portal gave them a chance, which took them to Marin (Hamid, 2017, p. 193). Upon reaching the new destination, Saeed did not let go of spirituality and Nadia started working in a 'food joint' and took to a 'smoking joint' with her colleague (Hamid, 2017, p. 193). The way I see it, both of them are transitioning into completely different people who are moving apart from one another. Another interesting thing about Marin was that there were 'almost no natives' due to the influx of refugees (Hamid, 2017, p. 195). Saeed managed to find a place to offer his Friday prayers and found him attractive to an unnamed lady (Hamid 198). Saeed used perfume while offering his prayers as it reminded him of his late mother (Hamid, 2017, p. 199). This time, he took less time in making the transition from 'acting out' grief for his late father to 'working through' his pain with the help of God (Hamid, 2017, p. 200). Ironically, in my view, it was the winter season when coldness crept into the relationship between Saeed and Nadia as they grew apart due to changes in their personality. These changes were so profound that Nadia opted to move out of Saeed's apartment and move in with the cook in the food joint (Hamid, 2017, p. 213).

In my view, Mohsin Hamid raised an interesting narrative about changing personalities due to experiencing the horrors of life like war, migration, and poverty. But what about those who never moved out of the residence they were born in? To answer this, he narrates a tale of another un-

named lady in 'Palo Alto' who spent her entire life in the same dwelling, her parents bought it, she was born in the same house, she spent her youth, got married, had kids, divorced her first husband, her kids moved out for college, she married twice and saw the death of her second husband (Hamid, 2017, p. 206). She became a rich lady due to the price hike and her kids were asking her to sell the property. She asked them to wait until her death after which they can do as they please. Now Hamid seems to be of this view that although, the lady did not move from her dwelling. The world around her changed, so much so that she did not recognize the people of her city (Hamid, 2017, p. 207). So the debate is that even if one refuses to change, does not travel, or faces hardships - change is an inevitable part of life. I also assert his view that 'We are all migrants through time' (Hamid, 2017, p. 209). At this point, I would like to add to this point that life is transient - even if we try to freeze the moment like 'Miss Havisham' of *Great Expectations*, the time and space around us will surely change, as change is an inevitable part of this worldly life (Dickens, 1938, p. 3).

Conclusion

In a nutshell, I would like to conclude my discussion about the transitional life is so unpredictable due to war, inequality, migration, and dislocation that places people in precarious situations, and in such desperate times, they look for options that will help save them. These are all

tough situations. These times also create opportunities for surreal experiences as explored in the text through 'black doors' which led migrants through time and space. And space. I also think that the process of being a refugee is not linear, as each experience varies according to their fictional accounts. I view this experience as '*trapped kinetics*' as these refugees are trapped because of their undocumented status (Kunz, 1996, p. 31). This also prevents their assimilation into host communities as they are marginalized. They are unable to contribute to the host community and lose their sense of worth. *Exit West* explores the '*trapped kinetics*' of Saeed and Nadia, as they experience (im) mobility due to incessant surveillance and media presence by the host authorities (Kunz, 1996, p. 31). This, in turn, results in their (de) subjectification as Saeed transitions into a more religious man, whereas Nadia evolves into a more extroverted person (Hamid, 2017, p. 200). As revealed, going through these portals was itself a surreal experience and once these migrants landed in a different space and place, their experiences - good and bad, changed them. Both protagonists were round characters and they metamorphosed into a completely new self. Saeed took refuge in spirituality for comfort and peace and became slightly optimistic - a huge change from the pessimistic person. Whereas, Nadia faced a better time due to her positive outlook and extrovert nature. She transitioned into a global citizen who can settle anywhere.

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