Smartphones and the Ethics of Migrant Representation

Mishal Kazmi, Class of 2021

I spent this summer exploring how South Asian authors are tackling the intersection between migration and technology in recent fiction. I focused primarily on *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid and *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh, looking at how both writers intertwined technology with migration in different, equally nuanced ways in their texts. My project, at the start of the summer, encompassed all forms of technology but the more I read my primary texts, the more I found myself drawn to how characters were using smartphones as a way to guide them through their migration experience, whether that was on their journeys, or afterwards when they had reached their destinations. I was intrigued by the "virtual migration" that our phones offer us—helping us craft memories, store the past, defy the conventions of time and space to traverse through geographical borders—and how this translates into literature that focuses on mass migrations accelerated by climate change and political conflicts.

My method for this project was to study the presentation of migrants with phones in Ai Weiwei's documentary *Human Flow*, before moving into more fictionalized representations of the same connection. I found that the possession and use of phones so frequently in direct relation to migration was giving rise to a new kind of representation, one that defied the traditional "victimhood" narrative that common media rhetoric perpetuates. Moreover, I looked at how both Amitav Ghosh and Mohsin Hamid use phones as vehicles to illustrate the possibility of a borderless world—Hamid does so by using explicit magic, presenting "doors" in his text that operate concretely the way phones do virtually by compressing a migrant's journey into an instant, whereas Ghosh takes away the geographical limits to the resources that a phone can offer by making it a constant companion for his characters' journeys.

Perhaps my most valuable, and promising, takeaway from spending this summer researching this topic was the discovery that migration fiction like *Gun Island* and *Exit West* gives voices and depth to the traditionally voiceless, and does so by equipping them with the same modes of technology available to all of us today. All of the characters I studied had their individual fascinations, goals, and aspirations. To highlight these is to move away from a generalized and reductive portrayal of migrants as beaten down, aimless people because doing so is largely dismissive of probable solutions for how to better the lives of these migrants.