

Moshin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*: A Postmodern Study

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Abstract

Mohsin Hamid is a Pakistan novelist. His writings have been bestsellers, and also made into movies. He was even nominated for the Man Booker Prize. He was selected as a winner or finalist of twenty awards. His novel *Moth Smoke* was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. The present paper is an attempt to probe into Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* through the angle of Postmodernism which is a far reaching improvement over articulations of the human experience, thinking, examination, and building that made in the mid to late twentieth century and that meant a departure from development. The term has moreover applied to the unquestionable period following advancement and the tendencies of this time.

Introduction

The protagonist Darkashikoh Shezad learns that moths that dance too close to a candle flame might ignite "like a ball of hair, curling into an oily puff of fumes with a hiss." (Mohsin Hamid 102) Daru or Darkashikoh, also comes to understand the tragic consequences of his own reckless actions in modernday Lahore. We first meet the twenty-nine-year-old, "ruggedly handsome" (47) Daru as he sits in jail awaiting his sentence. Through a series of flashbacks told from panoply of characters viewpoints we not only discover Dam's crime (a detail central to building narrative suspense) but also come to know Daru as an "almost-hero of a great story." (7)

Daru has lost his job, yet he is not now going to take just any new job. He explains: "The only people in my neighborhood who don't have servants are servants themselves except for me. And I refuse to serve." (152) Lack of money has deflated his dreams of becoming a boxer and put a check to his dissertation in economics at Punjab University. With his air-conditioning cut, Daru grows desperate and takes up with Lahore's underworld drug lord, the

"remorselessly large" (7) Murad Badshah, who speaks in a "well-bred English accent" (Cara Cilano, *National Identities in Pakistan* 90) to hide his lower-class origins. Daru deals drugs to make ends meet, gaining access to the interiors of gated Lahore, where he supplies patrons with "Hairy" (Mohsin Hamid 11) (heroin) and butts heads with the city's rigid caste system: there are the super wealthy, European-educated elites who drive around in gas-guzzling, air-conditioned "Pajeros" (103) (SUVs) with little sense of social consequence; the struggling underclass; and Daru, born and bred into neither class.

Daru cannot stand the world of the elites. On one occasion, he vomits in disgust after his manor-born friend Aurangzeb savors a shot of contraband whiskey after four wheeling over and killing a pedestrian. Daru's passionate love affair with Mumtaz, a super wealthy housewife who moonlights as a feminist journalist, is not enough to alleviate his increasing anger and frustration with a hypocritical, caste-controlled Lahore: "The air lacerates my lungs as I breathe, the world turning against me, existence an agony." For those at the city's social margins like Daru, experiencing complex emotions and realizing dreams are cut short. He finds meaning in the only action available that is by committing a crime that will seal his tragic fate.

In *Moth Smoke* Hamid richly textures a world filled with invisible and not-so-invisible boundaries that control and contain those who do not belong to the super elite. He also beautifully anchors his suspenseful and caustic novel in lyric description, even breathing life into everyday minutiae: Daru rolls a cigarette, "loosening the tobacco, coaxing it into a sweaty palm, rubbing the flake between forefinger and thumb until it's almost empty." (9) Long after the last page has been turned, *Moth Smoke's* poetic turns of complexly and phrase imagined cast of characters resonate vividly.

The narrator, Darashikoh Shezad (Daru) in the first chapter has been arrested for a murder he did not commit, though he is guilty of other crimes, including drug dealing and armed robbery. In the chapters that follow, told from the viewpoint of various characters in the novel, Hamid paints a portrait of Pakistan, a country struggling with its Islamic heritage and its future in a nuclear age. This struggle is reflected in the conflicts of two young men, Aurangzeb (Ozi) and Daru, who grew up together in Lahore, Pakistan, one the charismatic son of a rich government official and the other the erratic, brilliant son of a soldier. The competition between these two young men forms much of the conflict in the novel as they struggle for power and the love of a woman, Ozi's wife Mumtaz Kashmiri. During the summer of the novel's setting (1998), a sense of foreboding is underscored by the news that

Pakistan has indeed tested a nuclear bomb in response to India's nuclear capacity. The articulate but rather scatological Murad Badshah, an entrepreneur who owns a fleet of rickshaws and sells illegal drugs, describes the tension as akin to "atomic flatulence and geopolitical indigestion" (63). When Murad Badshah and his rickshaw drivers discuss Pakistan's successful nuclear test, the patriotism and religious loyalty of the workers emerge: "The Hindus have a bomb.... And now the Muslims have a bomb" (99).

This international nuclear motif parallels the self-induced destruction of Daru, who cannot turn his life around. These redeeming characters are worth the trouble if for no other reason than Hamid's engaging style. His description, for example, of Daru's bribing the traffic cops who have caught him driving under the influence of alcohol is almost poetic. Daru pays the police officers 700 rupees. He then tells the reader, "I drive off in a state of drunken emptiness ... I can't afford to throw away seven hundred rupees like that. But for now I'm still buzzing, so I take swoopy turns with a grin that's so separate from my eyes it feels like my face belongs to two people" (14).

An interesting aspect of Hamid's style is his use of multiple narrators. One effect of this technique is to show us inconsistent descriptions of a single character through different points of view. For example, Daru describes his drug dealer, Murad as is so often the case in *Moth Smoke*, the reality is more brutal than the dream. Badshah, who has an MA in English: "He speaks what he thinks is well-bred English in an effort to deny the lower-class origins that color the accent of his Urdu and Punjabi. But like an overambitious toupee, his artificial diction draws attention to what it's meant to hide" (30).

Daru may denigrate Murad but, in a chapter told from Murad's point of view, we find Murad to be witty, charming, and articulate. We also discover his avarice and his shrewd manipulation of people. Although Murad's rickshaw business and drug dealing keep him out of poverty, he hopes to enlist the handsome, urbane Daru in his efforts to supplement his income by robbing upscale boutiques. Murad exudes, "together we formed a duo that would strike fear into the hearts of purveyors of fashionable clothing everywhere" (48). As it is so often the case in *Moth Smoke*, the reality is more brutal than the dream. In Murad's description of their only robbery, we are left to wonder whether Daru killed a customer in the store. Murad gives partial details, Daru never mentions it. Mumtaz Kashmiri also narrates a chapter that reveals her increasing boredom as Ozi's rich wife and her sense of failure as a mother. Though she wishes to be free of Ozi, she recognizes his charm. For her, "he was, is, the most romantic man I've ever met" (109). The reality, however, is that Ozi is just a corrupt

as his senior-civil-servant father. Mumtaz finds no satisfaction in caring for her son, Muazzam, though her guilt keeps her from abandoning him. She carefully thinks through the provocation that led her to an affair with her husband's best friend, Daru. She begins her deception of Ozi with an undercover job as an investigative reporter. Using the male pseudonym Zulfikar Manto, she travels around Lahore, Pakistan, writing stories about prostitutes and interviewing college professors. She confesses that both her love affair with Daru and her life as Zulfikar Manto result from her desire to be independent of Ozi: "I wanted to create a life that he knew nothing about" (116). Although much of the attraction of *Moth Smoke* derives from its characterization and style, the novel also abounds with metaphors that ground the story in Pakistani culture.

The very name of the country itself creates an irony. As Christopher Hitchens explains in "On the Frontier of Apocalypse," Pakistan, which was founded in 1947 from parts of India, is an acronym that stands for Punjab, Afghania, Kashmir, and Indussind; the suffix Stan means land. The resulting name Pakistan is, in Urdu, Land of the Pure (*Vanity Fair*, 2002 86). Yet Hamid's novel emphasizes the intrigue, the deception, and the corruption of Lahore's privileged upper class, who wear suits that cost "as much as a farmer will make in his lifetime" (Mohsin Hamid 49). The intense competition between India (with the "Hindu" bomb) and Pakistan (with the "Muslim" bomb) also reflects the explosive relationship between the former schoolmates, Daru and Ozi. Although much of the attraction of *Moth Smoke* derives from its characterization and style, the novel also abounds with metaphors that ground the story in Pakistani culture. Daru's family, with little money, could not offer their brilliant son the prestigious opportunity to study abroad, so he remained behind at a university in Pakistan as he watched less capable but wealthy classmates go to school in London or New York.

The novel opens with Daru, the college graduate, working at a bank in Lahore. Ozi, his best childhood friend, returns from his education in the United States, beautiful wife and son in tow, and assumes the lavish lifestyle of his father. Daru is poor, uncertain, undependable is much like Pakistan, while Ozi is richer, more confident, more certain to succeed, possesses traits that Pakistanis in the novel associate with India. That each country has nuclear weapons does not give Pakistan parity with India. The Pakistanis are not confident that their bomb will work; they are sure that India's bomb will. Similarly, when Ozi seeks revenge for Daru's having made him a cuckold, the impoverished Daru is the one who ends up in jail and on trial

while the "righteously treacherous, impeccably dressed" (7) Ozi sits calmly in the courtroom looking "unfairly sexy" (7).

The prologue to *Moth Smoke* directs the reader's attention to the historical connection between the drama played out in Lahore and the turbulent history of India and Pakistan. Hamid begins the novel with a kind of fable depicting Shah Jahan, the Mughul emperor who had the Taj Mahal built for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal. The emperor consults a Sufi saint about the fate of the Mughul Empire. He learns that his younger son (Aurangzeb, Ozi's name), rather than his older son (Dara, named after Darius, a variation of Daru's name), will sit on the throne after him. In fact, Aurangzeb later charges his older brother with apostasy and has him sentenced to death. The same fable is then reenacted with Daru and Ozi. To protect himself and his way of life, Ozi will allow Daru to die, not just for a crime Ozi committed but also, and more tellingly, for Daru's betrayal of Ozi's friendship. Daru is not, however, an innocent bystander. He is fired from his job at a bank for being rude to a customer and, although he is willing to break the law to make money, he remains too proud to take a lower paying job. The title of the book is a powerful image for the life of Daru, who idles away his time doing drugs and watching the moths in his airless bedroom go up in smoke as he lures them to a candle flame. As the moth smoke ascends to the ceiling of his room, so Daru descends into joblessness, depression, addiction, adultery, and incarceration. Throughout the book, Daru is acted upon rather than acting.

The title also reinforces the historical and cultural roots of the novel. In an interview with Terry Gross during the September 20, 2001, broadcast of National Public Radio's *Fresh Air*, Hamid explained that the moth drawn to light is a common metaphor in Islamic literature to express a person's unity with God as he or she approaches and is consumed by the flame of God's presence. While Hamid also pointed out that the image represents the lover (Daru) consumed by love (Mumtaz), he sees a parallel between the moth and flame and Pakistan's attraction to Islam. The concept of a country defined by its religion Islam was once only a dream. Now that the dream is a reality, the country, like the moth, has entered the flame, or the purification, that comes from union with God. In the image where the moth entering the flame represents the human becoming one with God, the person is welcomed into but consumed by this union. But the flame has not had this purifying effect on Pakistan, charred as it is by the avarice of Murad Badshah, the graft of Ozi, the instability of Daru, and the confusion of Mumtaz. A significant event that foreshadows Ozi's disregard for human life occurs when Ozi, Mumtaz, and Daru careen through the narrow streets of Lahore in Ozi's

expensive Pajero. Here we see Ozi's unmitigated arrogance in a scene where he runs a red light and almost hits a pedestrian. "Stupid bastard" (20) [Ozi swears). "It was a red light" (20) Mumtaz points out. "So? He could see me coming" (20). There are rules, you know. And the first is "bigger cars have the right of way" (20). A favorite line (Daru thinks). One I haven't heard in a long, long time" (20). Later we find Daru driving his car, a battered Suzuki, when he spots Ozi speeding down the street in his Pajero. This time the person who gets in Ozi's way is a child on a bicycle who is not so lucky. Hamid's spare description of the accident achieves an excruciating effect of slow motion, ending with the following:

Ozi's Pajero roars by me, piercing the intersection. The boy is staring straight ahead, his eyes desperately focused on the opposite curb, now not far away, when his foot slips from the pedal and he wobbles....Then the quick flash of brake lights, a sudden scream of rubber sliding like skin on cement, too little too late, the front of the Pajero dipping like a bull ready to gore, a collision unheard because of the squeal of locked tires. A brief silence... The sound of an engine gathering itself as the Pajero charges away. The boy's body rolls to a stop by a traffic signal that winks green, unnoticed by the receding Pajero. (71)

Even though Daru rushes the boy to the hospital, his rare act of kindness ultimately results in an extremely unfair consequence. Daru will later be placed at the scene of the crime and be convicted for it. Though Daru is shocked by Ozi's insensitivity toward the death of this child, Daru himself will show us an even more audacious display of inhumanity and immaturity when he shoots at a wailing child that resembles Muazzam, Mumtaz's son, the person he incorrectly blames for keeping Mumtaz from leaving Ozi. We do not know if Daru kills the child, but we do know he assumes that the police have come to arrest him for that murder. Because of Hamid's use of multiple narrators, we know more than Daru about the arrest and its relation to Ozi's anger over Daru's affair with Mumtaz.

Conclusion

Mohsin Hamid's first novel, *Moth Smoke*, told the story of a marijuana-smoking ex-banker in post nuclear-test Lahore who falls in love with his best friend's wife and become a heroin addict. It was published in 2000, and quickly became a cult hit in Pakistan and among Indians who speak English. *Moth smoke* had an innovative structure, using multiple voices, second person trail scenes, and essays on such topics as the role of air-conditioning in the lives of its main characters.

The poor verdict and ill decisiveness of Darashikoh would be accounted as a poignant force behind his downfall. It will come to notice that he blames family, system, society and corruption for his entanglements, failures and rolling fortune but he has been a failure to grasp the conviction that whatever he is, it is due to his own effort and toil. Aurangzeb punishes him for disposing his wife; Mumtaz and making his family life miserable. The habit of Darashikoh to get himself off from every conviction and blame others for his failures will prove the inauthenticity of his being. There will be a clear-cut analysis that Darashikoh have not posed any intellect, he has not taken his life seriously and considered it a child's play.

Aurengzab's life is full of corruption and that corruption has entered into his relation with his wife as well. He is not willing to give her any special attention to remove her craving for independence. Although he shows that he is very caring and loving to her but in heart of hearts, he begins to consider her just her showpiece for dinner parties and for gatherings.

When his friend, Darashikoh tries to steal Mumtaz, from him, Aurangzeb makes full use of his power and relations to make his friend a lone survivor in the prison house but Aurangzeb never poses the courage to own his this decision; he does this under the coat and poses himself an innocent convict of the whole situation. This pretension moves his being towards inauthenticity. The major cause to focus upon the character of Aurangzeb will be to face the fact that whatever Aurangzeb has done with his best friend, Darashikoh, is not unjustified. He has the power and he can do what suits to his purpose, just as Darashikoh never retreats from robbing other helpless people. Mumtaz has been attributed the role of a deceiver in the story.

She is a beautiful demon, in the text, which deceives men from their paths. She is a scrupulous lady who takes every decision mindfully and owns them courageously. She develops relation with Darashikoh out of her physical desires, later leaves him and her husband as well, because she has come to the summation that her own essence is much more important than the living in which she is required and desired to fill the demands of others. She changes over time and courageously appraises her choices and moves her being towards authenticity.

Manucci, a servant of Darashikoh will be dealt here as a foil for the character of Darashikoh. He is a pious person and a man of courtesy. He fully knows his position in society and never aspires to be rolled in money. He is a flat character but he is one who will manage to attain his dignity and prestige in life. He has an authentic being in the text; he has developed his personal identity and has captured the notion of his existence and is not ashamed of it.

In the brief moment of the arrest lies the ultimate irony of the novel: The crime for which Daru is sentenced to death was clearly committed by Ozi, and Daru's actual crimes of robbery and possible murder will never come before the court, it is indeed an ironic justice. In the end we are told that Mumtaz plans to tell Daru's story but, given her penchant for deception and the pressure she feels from the wealthy upper class, it remains to be seen how honest and open her account will be. As the moth smoke ascends to the ceiling of his room, so Daru descends into joblessness, depression, addiction, adultery, and incarceration. For all its reprobates and unreliable narrators, *Moth Smoke* is a haunting book replete with silences and unfinished stories. It leaves us wondering how one promising young man descends into a dungeon largely of his own making and how a country like Pakistan, born of a desire to honor a religion and its principles, is thrown off course by self-indulgent intellectuals. For both the man and the country, Hamid's words in the last chapter say it best: they are "an ember unable to catch fire" (*Moth Smoke*, p. 245).

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