

**CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM IN ZULFIQAR GHOSE'S *MURDER*
OF AZIZ KHAN AND MOHSIN HAMID'S *MOTH SMOKE***

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Abstract

*The present study is based on my doctoral thesis, and explores how the works of two of the leading Pakistani writers in English give a fictionalized critique of capitalism in Pakistani context. Textual analysis of *Murder of Aziz Khan* and *Moth Smoke* shows that the protagonists of both the novels revolt against any such socioeconomic activity that is part of the exploitative mechanics of capitalism. The study also shows how the works under study suggest that the prevailing economic system is leading towards a conflict among different classes in the society. Both the writers seem to have consciously pointed out the means through which the elite amass riches for themselves.*

Key Words: Capitalism, Pakistani fiction, legitimacy

A number of fictional writings with the themes of the economic systems particularly with that of criticizing capitalism have been produced in Urdu and other Pakistani languages, predominantly, due to the strong tradition of Progressive Writers Movement in the region. Through various characters and situations these writings criticize all the systems of domination but mainly the prevailing economic system i.e. capitalism as being exploitative and oppressive. Zulfiqar Ghose's *Murder of Aziz Khan* brings to the limelight the outcomes of capitalism which is an economic system in which the means of producing wealth are privately owned (Barkan, n.d.).

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The major characters of the novel denounce such a system that has created unequal classes of rich and poor. The idea has been delivered by giving a fictionalized account of its effects on the common people. In *Murder of Aziz Khan*, those in possession of the capital are seen as ruthless people who are unconcerned with the misery that their insatiable greed creates as they blindly commodify all human values and relations. They seek to suppress the workers' union and refuse to raise their wages. They drive expensive cars, while the poor villagers around them travel on foot to seek help in the face of famine and misery. They take from the people of Kalapur their land and make millions from it, forcing the townspeople to work in the factory under poor conditions with little wages. The novel also presents these entrepreneurs as working in collusion with Western corporations that continue to exploit the labour of the uneducated masses. Javed, just like other such revolutionary characters of sub-continental fiction such as Mohsin of *Tishnagi* by Raheed Nadvi, Daru and Murad of *Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid, etc, sees that the only way to reconstruct a just society is to do away with the elite who gather riches at the expense of the people. He presents a vision of a socialist system in which the working classes, who create the wealth, have access to the fruits of their labour by owning the means of production, and so, are no longer exploited and oppressed by corrupt business people. The proletariats have to rise against bourgeoisies to do away with the disparity.

The novel suggests that capitalistic industrial progress is based on ruthless exploitation of the poor. One of the major characters, Akram, the eldest brother, exploits people by tricking them into giving him money to establish his factory. His younger brother Ayub exploits them by smashing the workers' union so that they cannot get their rights. And Afaq, who does

not produce wealth yet but merely consumes it, exploits another kind of proletariat i.e. women. The common characteristic of the brothers is that they want personal gratification, the satisfaction of their ego, rather than the good of the community.

Akram sees money as a symbol of this gratification and is the archetypical capitalist, the kind of exemplar who is shaping the values of the Pakistani society in the making:

Akram, in the eyes of these people, who admired his ruthless methods, was not only a Pakistani enjoying his freedom creatively; he was *the* Pakistani in whose type the successful citizens of the country would be moulded. (Ghose, 1998, p. 23)

The real motivation of the Shah Brothers' lust for possession is not, however, the profit incentive. That is merely the rationalization of the irrational desire to gratify their egos. But the desire is so irrational that Ayub tells Akram that what they really want is not Aziz Khan's land but to humiliate him:

At first we had economic reasons for wanting his land. And then, gradually, we realized we were fighting against the pride of one man. And our own pride, our own honour were in question. (1998, p. 283)

So, in Ghose's opinion, a capitalist gradually turns into a monster, who has money and, hence, power that he uses to buy his honour and to spoil others'.

In Marxist terms, socio-economic conflict between various classes is generated due to the unequal distribution of wealth. Commenting on this aspect of Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*, Orin C. Judd writes:

It captures the frustration and anger of the less fortunate in a country whose ruling class is thoroughly corrupt and where the economic divide is so vast that the wealthy can insulate themselves from the rules that bind the rest of society, and can nearly avoid physical contact with the lower classes. (para.1, 2006)

When in a country the elites go on enjoying all the privileges and still do not care for the laws, when the upper classes indulge in exploitation and maltreatment of the lower ones, when they have all the power and authority to run the state as they want to, when they hate the people belonging to the lower classes to a degree that they even do not shake hands with them, they somehow create for themselves hatred among the lower classes. The contrast of extreme affluence and utter poverty cause anger among the deprived and the less fortunate. Consequently, some of them, such as Javed of *Murder of Aziz Khan* and Daru of *Moth Smoke*, refuse to live in a state of continuous insult and resort to illegal means of their own to fight injustice and change the well-entrenched socio-economic order.

In Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*, Daru's critique of Ozi and his corrupt father is accompanied by an obvious longing to enjoy the same social status. This flammable blend of bad tasting contempt and desperate jealousy proves to be the fuel for his implosion and becomes the main metaphor of the novel.

Daru introduces Aurangzeb to the readers as the son of a corrupt father who is "...the frequently investigated but as yet unincarcerated Federal Secretary (Retired) Khurram Shah" (Hamid, 2000, p. 11). By virtue of his father's corruption money, Ozi goes off to the States for higher education,

while the more promising but poor Daru rots in Pakistan. When Ozi comes back from the United States, Daru comes to see him at his home but he is perturbed to see two big Pajeros that Ozi owns. Ozi's new and relatively bigger house also deepens the sense of economic inferiority in him. He feels nervous because he has the same little house that he already had. Daru narrates a very clear contrast between Ozi's Pajero and his own Suzuki – even the way the doors of their cars shut compels Daru to underline the difference in status. His small Suzuki car has a nervous cough while Ozi's Land Cruiser shuts with a deep thud. Ozi's vehicles supplement his elite social status and a distinctive position which gives him the license to drive rashly and kill a pedestrian for which, later on in the novel, Daru is investigated by the police. Daru also narrates the way Ozi drives. Ozi drives his Pajero by putting it on road, giving it a direction and then riding the air, expecting that everyone would leave the way for him. He thinks that: "...bigger cars have the right of way" (p. 25). It is, however, ironical to note that the novel doesn't give contrast between his Pajero and some poor man's bicycle who considers the owner of a car irrespective of the kind to be rich.

His upper strata of society gives Ozi and his likes control on the power, literally in terms of air-conditioning and figuratively in every conceivable way. John Freeman writes about Ozi's social position, in his article, 'Onward Ruin!': "Ozi has taken up with Lahore's elite, who wantonly guzzle the city's unstable power supply with their air conditioners as the rest of its denizens bake in the brutal summer heat" (Freeman, para. 3, 2006). The power distribution in the city is not equal. The lower classes have to face longer spells of 'load-shedding' than the upper class areas. Besides, the lower classes cannot afford air-conditioned houses. Murad

Badshah's thinking in this regard is typical of his character. He amuses himself with the idea that the rich too, more or less, have to suffer from the heat of Lahore due to power breakdown occasionally: "It amused him to see the rich people on the grounds of their mansions...fanning themselves in the darkness...Indeed, nothing made Murad Badshah more happy than the distress of the rich" (p. 104). He plays with the idea of rebelling "against the system of hereditary entitlements responsible for cooling only the laziest minority of Pakistan's population ... " (p. 104-105).

Professor Julius, a character, delivers a lecture on air-conditioning that is superb. "There are two social classes in Pakistan," he says:

The first group, large and sweaty, contains those referred to as the masses. The second group is much smaller, but its members exercise vastly greater control over their immediate environment and are collectively termed the elite. The distinction between members of these two groups is made on the basis of control of an important resource: air-conditioning. You see, the elite have managed to re-create for themselves the living standards of say, Sweden, without leaving the dusty plains of the subcontinent....They wake up in air-conditioned houses, drive air-conditioned cars to air-conditioned offices, grab lunch in air-conditioned restaurants (rights of admission reserved), and at the end of the day go home to their air-conditioned lounges and relax in front of their wide-screen TVs. (p. 102-103)

The rich send their sons and daughters to the advanced European countries for high quality education that ultimately helps them control the state apparatuses of power. On the other hand, the poor have to be content with the poor educational system that gives them meagre chances for social

mobility. Ozi is rich and therefore avails the education in a developed country abroad whereas Daru is poor, so is left back to attend the government college. He thinks that he is unable to do so because he is not equipped with foreign degrees but Murad Badshah tells him that: “It’s all about connections, old boy” (p. 40). In his article, ‘Lives of the Rich and Spoiled’, Cameron Stracher comments on Daru’s inability to find a new job in the following words: “Daru can’t get another job because jobs are scarce, he tells us, and in a country infested by cronyism, only the cronies, like Ozi, are connected enough to succeed” (Stracher, para. 5, 2006).

However, somehow Daru is finally called for an interview but he has to listen to these disparaging comments from the interviewer: “...the boys we’re hiring have connections worth more than their salaries. We’re just giving them respectability of a job here in exchange for their families’ business...Unless you know some really big fish... no one is going to hire you” (Hamid, 2000, p. 53). All of these circumstances make him disgruntled. He increasingly sounds like a Marxist revolutionary. John Freeman notes: “As his unemployment stretches into weeks, Shezad becomes increasingly aware of Lahore’s divisions between the poor and the ultra-rich” (para. 3, 2006). Ozi, on the other hand, is well connected in the social hierarchy and reaps many benefits from his father’s connections. Describing his privileged social position, he says, “I’m wealthy, well connected, and successful. My father’s an important person. In all likelihood, I’ll be an important person. Lahore is a tough place if you are not an important person” (Hamid, 2000, p. 184). The conflict between classes is also evident through appropriation and manipulation of the state law by the powerful segments of society who get away with their breaking of common laws. Commenting on the life style of the elite, Bradley

Winterton writes in his article titled, 'Sex, Drugs and Abject Poverty in Pakistan': "They drive around their city in white BMWs, party on floodlit lawns, indulge in illicit alcohol and drugs, and dance to music specially mixed for the occasion by famous London DJs" (Winterton, para. 3, 2006). Thus, in the novel, the elite are shown to indulge in parties where drugs, extra-marital sex and similar illegal activities are carried out in abundance and remain unquestioned and unscathed by the law. These parties are made possible with the cooperation of the police, and Daru, having an access to them, witnesses it all: "... a mobile police unit responsible for protecting tonight's illegal revelry" (Hamid, 2000, p. 81). It is a bitter irony for Daru that he is arrested by the police for being drunk, and it is the same police that rather protects a party where drinking is quite openly done. Ozi hits a boy with his Pajero and is not accounted for it. This is the most flagrant case of the rich being above the law in the Pakistani society, "a horrific instance of Ozi's immunity from justice" (Judd, para. 2, 2006). This aspect is also clear from Daru's words when he says, "The police don't stop us on our drive home. We are in a Pajero, after all" (Hamid, 2000, p. 34). Daru is quite sarcastic about it as he tells Mumtaz: "It's easy to be an idealist when you drive a Pajero (p. 166)." He is fired from the bank job because of a rich client who was a landlord and politician. His name is Malik Jiwan. "Malik Jiwan, a rural landlord with half a million U.S. dollars in his account, a seat in the Provincial Assembly...His pastimes include fighting the spread of primary education and stalling the census" (p. 20). The MP Mr Jiwan promises to keep big money (most likely black money) in the bank where Daru is a small-time cashier. The bank manager, accordingly, gives him 'due' protocol. As Daru reports, "BM grabs Mr. Jiwan's hand, in both of his...bows slightly, at the waist and at the neck, a double bend..."

Mr. Jiwan behaves badly with Daru who thinks that: "... there is only so much nonsense a self-respecting fellow can be expected to take from these megalomaniacs" (p. 22).

He also reflects, "These rich slobs love to treat badly anyone they think depends on them..."(p. 144). Akmal, who is a member of the elite social club with an "income of a million-plus U.S." humiliates Daru through his mistreatment. Daru regards Akmal's manner "slightly condescending, in the way the rich condescend to their hangers-on" (p. 142). Later Akmal makes fun of Daru and says, "You didn't get fired for trying to sell dope to bank clients, did you?" (p. 143) and he speeds away in his car, bursting with laughter at the same time. Daru's response is such, "May be he doesn't think what he said was insulting, or that someone like me can even be insulted, really. But humiliation flushes my face" (p.143). This theme of social stratification and exploitation of the poor at the hands of the rich in the Pakistani society is elaborated by Hamid with reference to almost all the characters but particularly Daru who, in spite of his own involvement in certain unlawful practices, is depicted as the victim of the system. Hamid does not spare any sympathetic voices or tone for him in the novel but leaves it to the readers to decide for themselves who is more to be blamed for the social ills and who is more of a victim than a villain. It is a typical dilemma of a society where, as Daru contemplates, "you get no respect unless you have cash. The next time I meet someone who's heard I've been fired and he raises his chin that one extra degree which means he thinks he's better than me, I'm going to put my fist through his face"(p. 112).

When one day Ozi comes to see Daru at his house, there is no electricity there due to the load-shedding. He feels hot and cannot resist saying to Daru: "You need a generator....How can you survive without one?" (p.

91). Daru tells him the truth: “Ah, Ozi. You just can’t resist; can you? You know I can’t afford a generator” (p. 91).

The insensitivity of the upper classes is exposed in a discussion between Mumtaz and Ozi when Mumtaz urges Ozi not to use the air-conditioner for such long durations. In her opinion: “The entire country suffers because of the wastefulness of a privileged few.” Ozi’s replies, “I couldn’t care less about the country” (p. 106).

Elizabeth White comments, “The feckless life of upper-class youth of Pakistan, who talk on cell phones as they speed through congested lanes in their oversized, air-conditioned SUVs, oblivious to traffic lights, regulations, cyclists, beggars, and rickshaws...” (White, 2006). Ozi’s inhumanity is further highlighted when Daru tells him that he saw what happened. But “Ozi’s lips stretch. Flatten. Not a smile: a twitch. ‘We’ll take care of his family...I’ll make sure they’re compensated” (Hamid, 2000, p. 97). It makes Daru feel disgusted.

Instead of showing his deep remorse and guilt, Ozi still thinks in terms of money alone, that money can buy anything. The masses are not only crushed physically and economically but also psychologically. This is the case with Daru who loses his self-esteem and respect. His present condition has been described by Murad Badshah in the following words: “...Darashikoh was in rather difficult straits himself: he was in debt, had no job, and was saddled with the heaviest weight of pride and self-delusion I have ever seen one person attempt to carry” (p. 63).

Through the course of the reading of the novel *Moth Smoke*, we see how Daru’s social position is directly proportional to his economic position. With the passage of time he weakens financially and this expels him from

middle class and places him among the lower one. David Valdes Greenwood comments on this aspect in his article, 'Hamid's Debut Burns Brightly' in these words, "The fall from one class to the next is steep, with his (Daru's) self-esteem and moral balance diminished in the descent" (Greenwood, para. 1, 2006). With social and financial decline, Daru's hurt sense of dignity and morality rises and he starts resenting favors from Ozi and his father.

When Mumtaz suggests Daru to borrow some money from her husband, Daru replies with clear resentment: "I don't want any money from Ozi." Then the readers find him thinking: "I don't want any of his corrupt cash" (Hamid, 2000, p. 113). However, with no financier other than Ozi and with no means of earning, Daru could hardly stand tall. So his economic paralysis forces him to go to Ozi's father to beg for a job. So Money, the new god of capitalism, is the defining agency of an individual's identity. Daru's self-respect and ego is again defeated when he overcharges a rich client for hash and does not return him five hundred rupee note: "Pride tells me to give it back, but common sense tells pride to shut up, have a joint, and relax. I shrug and put the note into my wallet" (p. 136).

Murad Badshah is another symbol of the low life in the novel. Unlike Daru, he belongs to the lower class and has even nothing to ride. In the beginning of the novel when Daru is little aware of what lies in store for him, and thus, he is hanging on to the middle class while still looking for some chance of upward mobility, he treats Murad Badshah disparagingly. He does so owing to his relatively higher social status: "I don't like it when low-class types forget their place and try to become too frank with you" (p. 42). Once when Manucci asks for his salary, Daru prepares to give him some terrible beating but Manucci runs off in time. And Daru thinks "... I

did the right thing. Servants have to be kept in line” (p. 161). This tussle between the master and the servant continues throughout the novel and it mirrors the larger social divide in Pakistani society.

Another example of the socio-economic exploitation of the lower class by the wealthy classes is the case of Dilaram who runs a brothel in Heera Mandi, the red district of Lahore. Explaining to Mumtaz, who is writing an article on the life of prostitutes, how she got started in the business. Dilaram narrates the story, “I was a pretty girl...The landlord of our area asked me to come to his house. I refused, so he threatened to kill my family. When I went, he raped me” (p. 50). Beginning with this incident she tells Mumtaz about a series of similar events that followed.

Ultimately she is sold in the Bazar and becomes a professional herself. This reference to a landlord is deliberate on the part of the novelist who perhaps wishes to make his picture of Pakistani society complete by mentioning this very important part of the society controlled by the feudal lords, and how they control the lives and destinies of the peasants working for them. In the cities where civilized attitude is more expected to prevail, the situation is even worse.

Murad Badshah reveals his plan to Daru to rob “high-end, high fashion, exclusive boutiques” and justifies it through a statement that reveals him more like a violent Marxist. He says that rich control the poor masses by using guns, and if guns have such a persuasive power then we can also be persuasive. At this point he shows his revolver very dramatically to Daru. Thus, the lower classes, not always but sometimes definitely, resort to crime in order to satisfy their sense of vengeance and to fulfill their needs. Without saying it in so many words, Hamid seems to explore the reasons

of this class conflict, war between social classes and the everyday crimes. It is an acute commentary on the prevailing social disparity and the gradual collapsing of the social order in Pakistan.

Mohsin Hamid has crafted a complex tale of greed, corruption and social oppression that leaves the readers to study his characters, their sense of insecurity, their pride in possessions and their misdeeds. This way he has produced an honest but uncomfortable version of the 'other' Pakistan where easy money is acquired through bureaucratic corruption, kick-backs and control over means of production, both agrarian and industrial.

Moth Smoke is full of the conflicts between the rich and the poor. It hints on the dangers that may grow further in future. *Murder of Aziz Khan* depicts the prevailing situation in a capitalistic society where labour unions are being suppressed. However, the resistance is increasing and it seems that it would ultimately win over the powers of oppression. The novels suggest that systems of exploitation are not good for anyone; neither the poor, nor the rich. Decreasing the widening gaps between the rich and the poor is the need of the hour. If it is not done timely, the people like Murad Badshah would come up with plans of robbery and if their number increased, the situation may be out of anybody's control. So, the exploitative mode of the prevailing economic system needs to be changed.

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