

# REPRESENTATION OF POST-NUCLEAR PAKISTAN IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *SMOTH SMOKE*

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## **Abstract**

*Mohsin Hamid's Moth Smoke reflects post-independence, postcolonial, post-Soviet war, and most importantly post-nuclear Pakistan. The novel is set in Lahore and shows how political policies, historical events, proxy wars have affected life in this city. Moral and economic corruption is at its peak, and the divide between the rich and the poor is widening. The poor protagonist, Daru, is shown on a constant downward flight whereas his friend, Ozi, the representative of the rich of Lahore, is enjoying a soaring upward movement. This conflict is theorized by Hamid as nuclear fissure as it will also result into destruction at the societal level and its magnitude would be that of the atomic explosion. This paper explores Hamid's engagement with the nuclear tests conducted by Pakistan and India in May 1998.*

**Keywords:** Pakistani fiction; Post-nuclear Pakistan; Moth Smoke

Mohsin Hamid's debut novel *Moth Smoke* (2000) is set in the 1990s, a time in Pakistan's history when its social, political, and economic problems multiplied due to a plethora of reasons: 1) Political instability and internal strife due to the bitter political rivalry between the two mainstream parties, that is, Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League; 2) Deepening economic crisis due to the flight of capital and the absence of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), as political stability remained an illusion in Pakistan; 3) Nuclear stand-off with India in 1998 and the resultant economic sanctions by the international community; 4) The Kargil conflict with India and its aftermath; 5) Dismissal of Sharif government and the imposition of martial law by General Musharraf; 6) The military regime of Musharraf and its impact on Pakistan's society, politics and economics; and 7) Radicalization of Pakistani society.

*Moth Smoke* is a powerful critique of the ruling elite of Pakistan and neo-colonialism which took roots right after the British divided India into two states. In the novel, Hamid portrays that "other Pakistan" which exists at

the fringes of Pakistani society but controls its economy and power structures. It is every candid portrayal of drug use, adultery, betrayals and class relations within the Pakistani elite, ruling Pakistan since independence in 1947. The post-independence post-nuclearization society depicted in *Moth Smoke* appears to be ruthless, immoral, and driven by lust for money. Before further discussion about the novel and its contextualization of contemporary Pakistan, I would sum up the story and important episodes of the novel for the benefit of the reader.

*Moth Smoke* is set in Lahore, Pakistan, and is mainly about Darashikoh or Daru, as he is lovingly called by his friends. It is unfortunate for him that he is poor while his friends Mumtaz and Aurangzeb or Ozi, with whom he grew up, are rich. Mumtaz is Ozi's unfaithful wife. Daru spent a normal life until he was in college but then his friends departed for the USA leaving him behind. So, while they were on a dream journey to get higher education in the States, Daru had to do so in Lahore, and this was despite the fact that Daru was cleverer than many of his friends. However, he was destined to study under the local teachers, with their desipendagogical styles, one of them being Professor Julius Superb. He measures the unfair treatment that life meted out to him in strange ways, one being the fact that his rich friends would afford imported bottle of alcohol for Rs. 4000, while he could only get the one for Rs. 800. For him, such comparisons never stop as he can neither change his lot nor his surroundings. Daru's friend Ozi could afford an American studentship because his father was a corrupt official. When Ozi comes back to Lahore, he starts earning money. Unlike him, Daru has no degree from a developed country so he goes jobless until Ozi's father helps him to secure a position in a local bank as a cashier. In such a state, he was even unable to afford electricity for air-conditioning (see a detailed discussion on importance of air-conditioning in Scott, 2014).

Most of the story is told from Daru's point of view, chronicling events as he loses his job and gradually slips into a life of poverty and escapism. However, what makes it a modernist narrative is the nature of an unreliable narrator. Therefore we are also privy to the accounts of Ozi, Mumtaz and Murad Badshah, the rickshaw driver who also leads a gang

of low criminals and provides Daru drugs. Through these narrators of Daru's story, Hamid establishes the existence of varied points of view, a sort of polyphony in the course of the story. Gradually Daru's narrative grows claustrophobic. It gives the reader a fair chance to develop his own judgment. In the final analysis, it becomes clear that no character is innocent and no character is absolutely honest even with himself/herself. The only character that can be treated with least scepticism is that of Mumtaz who has setup a double life for herself in order to deal with the bad choices she has made.

Both Daru and Mumtaz are drawn towards each other inexorably, just as a moth is drawn to its own destruction on a candle flame, in order to drown their failures in sex, drinking and drugs. In fact, the metaphor is much more elaborate and is applicable to all the characters bent upon their own destruction. This is in a clear take-off from the Mughal rulers' self-destructive propensity in the wars of succession. Hamid's central characters are relentlessly drawn towards such destruction through a spectacular downfall.

The novel is about inordinate ambitions, resentment, betrayal, greed and class conflicts in the time when Pakistan was about half a century of years old and very enthusiastic in maintaining nuclear deterrence. The strongest representation is that of society's moral corruption.

Daru, who had left the rich circles of Lahore for long, got another chance of joining it again when Ozi returned from the USA along with his wife and a kid. As a matter of fact, the night Ozi returns Daru loses his job and becomes reliant on drugs and Ozi's wife financially as well as emotionally.

She's drawn to me just as I'm drawn to her. She can't keep away. She circles, forced to keep her distance, afraid of abandoning her husband and, even more her son, for too long. But she keeps coming like a moth to my candle staying longer than she could, leaving late for dinners and birthday parties, singeing her wings. She is risking her marriage for me, her family, her reputation. And I, the moth, circling her candle, realize that

she's not just a candle. She's a moth as well, circling me.' (Hamid, 2000, p. 203-204)

Like a good play, the novel allows all the characters to recount their perspective on the story of their lives. An insight into each character has been given very cleverly. Why a rickshaw driver had to become a drug supplier to Daru and others? Why Ozi takes corruption as inevitable in life? Why Mumtaz feels it important to sleep with her husband's closest friend? And why Daru had to turn towards selling the drugs eventually? Everyone has some reason to be "bad", as if inexorably, with a certain determinism upon which they have no control. Hamid's employment of multiple narrative voices indicates that history is more than a set of events in the past to be told; it is also the feelings and ideas that different people have about the events. However, Hamid has brought out a novel that gives something bigger than just a political metaphor. The non-linear account of Daru has drawn tributes from the other writers. Lahiri writes: "Every other chapter pulls away from Daru and from the linear sequence of the novel, granting Murad Badshah, Mumtaz and Ozi extended soliloquies that both lighten and complicate the scope of Daru's increasingly claustrophobic vision" (Lahiri, 2000). Corruption is the key target of Hamid's social criticism. In terms of material corruption, Ozi's character is significant. However, Hamid does not only show how they do it rather goes a step further to show how they rationalize it. For example, Ozi expresses his personal justification in the following words:

You have to have money these days. The roads are falling apart, so you need a Pajero or a Land Cruiser. The phone lines are erratic, so you need a mobile ... Thanks to electricity theft there will always be shortages, so you have to have a generator. The police are corrupt and ineffective, so you need private security guards ... You accept that you can't change the system [so you] create lots of little shell companies, and open dollar accounts on sunny islands far, far away. (Hamid, 2000, p. 185)

Daru, who primarily represents sexual corruption and middle class, has further slipped on the social and economic ladder. As he is unable to pay

even his electricity bill, he decides to support himself by selling drugs by teaming up with his dealer, a rebellious rickshaw driver. Commenting on this illicit yet complex relationship, Ira Pande writes in her review article:

A hideous Faustian tale follows as Daru gets sucked into a love affair with the bored Mumtaz. She plays Helen to his Faustian theme of damnation and leaves him a broken criminal. The end, as in all moral tales, has strong overtones of retribution, except that the victim and the villain interchange places. (Pande, 2000, para. 5)

In clear allegorical terms, Hamid has opened his book with a reference from the Imperial history of the Mughals whose relevance to contemporary Pakistan is unmistakable. As Pande also mentions: “No reader can afford to be unmoved by the strong allegorical tones that underlie Hamid's cleverly crafted book. Take the names, Darashikoh, Aurangzeb, Mumtaz -- Mughal names all, associated with the greatest tales of medieval love and tragedy, and redolent with violence and grandeur” (Pande, 2000, para. 7).

Coming back to the point, my aim in this paper is to develop a critique of *Moth Smoke* as a postcolonial text representing postcolonial Pakistan. Pakistan faces typical socio-political and economic problems that confront many other postcolonial countries. The first intriguing question is this: to what extent these problems are due to a colonial hangover and to what extent the new ruling elite is responsible to perpetuate that colonial system to continue the exploitation of the masses. The upper classes – driving around the city in their white BMWs, partying on floodlit lawns, indulging in illicit alcohol and drugs, and dancing to music specially mixed for the occasion by famous London DJs – have acquired this wealth from the corruption of state money which Pakistan gets in the form of loans from the western powers and international banks for playing the role of a satellite state of America. In this regard Pakistan is no different from some other postcolonial countries.

The education system of Pakistan, for instance, is just a replica of the Macaulay model in which the rich and the poor, the ruling elite and the

common masses, go to separate schools and universities. *Moth Smoke* presents, then, an indictment of "development", multinational corporations, international finance, and neo-colonial education.

However, this novel seems more a critique of the local ways than the colonial legacy. Hamid is among the young writers who creatively responded to the two crises which exerted most negative impact on its society, economy and politics, that is, Pakistan's nuclear tests in May 1998, and radicalization of a significant segment of society due to Pakistan's role in the Soviet war and more recently the war on terror under American bidding. Growing up in Pakistan, Hamid saw for himself how disruptive social upheaval and political instability are and how they affect every facet of a society. Nuclearization is seen as a catalyst in *Moth Smoke* that widens the divide between the rich and the poor in Pakistan.

*Moth Smoke* illustrates very well this divide between the rich and the poor of Pakistan. Although Darashikoh "Daru" Shezad himself is not rich, his connections allow him to imitate the lifestyle of the wealthy from time to time. His constant awareness of the wealth around him highlights the gulf between those who have and those who have not. "Set against this exotic backdrop of nuclear confrontation and a miasma of corruption, cronyism, and kickbacks, Hamid unfolds an oddly familiar tale that's equal parts hard-boiled fiction and yuppie-descent-into-drugs and alcohol" (Adamthwaite, 2000).

Sudip Bose uses 'nuclear' metaphors for the fissures that these characters go through in their personal lives while the tragedy of a whole nation gradually unfolds: "Like the atoms that must be split for a fission bomb to explode, modern-day Lahore is itself divided: between old and new, rich and poor, conservative and liberal" (Bose, 2000, para. 2).

This socio-economic fissure between various classes is generated due to the unequal distribution of wealth. Commenting on this aspect of *Moth Smoke*, Orin C. Judd writes, "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 the society, and can nearly avoid physical contact with the lower classes” (Judd, 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, they somehow create for themselves hatred among the lower classes. The contrast of extreme affluence and utter poverty, alienation, and deprivation cause anger in the deprived and the less fortunate. Consequently, some of them 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.

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. Hamid is perhaps writing the story which is larger than individuals and the issues related to them. The rivalry between Ozi and Daru may also stand for the one between Pakistan and India centered around nuclear race. Daru represents the present day Pakistan that is always in one or the other conflict with India. Pakistan always tries to hold an important position in the modern strategic design not only for economic gains but also to assert national identity (see Costin, 2005). They would compete their neighbours in testing their atomic bombs and would become the atomic power without caring what cost they may have to pay. It is ironical that the poor Pakistanis celebrate their being an atomic power by firing off Kalashnikov rounds in the air while the rich celebrate the same by sitting in their drawing rooms and drinking Black Label. The poor are of course unaware of the fact that the price for the Black Label will also be shunted onto them. Professor Julius 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. (Hamid, 2000, p. 102-103)

The tool of air-conditioning in a light mood helps Mohsin Hamid reveal the corridors of power and self. But the most tragic example of the callousness and inhumanity of the elite is the incident where Ozi crushes a teen-age boy to death while driving his Pajero. Ozi has a desire to put some fear into the people who have smaller cars than his. He ignores the red light and thus hits a boy on bicycle. Daru is a witness of the accident. "The boy's body rolls to a stop by the traffic signal that winks green, unnoticed by the receding Pajero" (p. 96). 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).

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 HeeraMandi, 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.

It is not the corruption of the elite alone which is the subject of Hamid's scathing satire. The corruption of the ruling elite has a trickle-down effect. For example, through Murad Badshah's narration we come to know that the war between the rickshaw-owners and the newly introduced yellow-cabs is waged in which many people lose their lives. The underprivileged and the poor, in some cases, resort to robberies and other crooked practices. It is not only a matter of existence. Overambition and the desire to live an easy life are strong motives to entice the less privileged like Daru to live a secret and criminal life. Daru has lost all his desire to improve his social status when he loses the job. For Daru the company of Ozi and his wife Mumtaz, proves paralyzing. His fascination with Mumtaz and envy of Ozi eventually pushes him into the vicious circle of corrupt courts. Tehmina Durrani's book, *My Feudal Lord*, set in the '70s and '80s, depicts a Lahore that is disturbing enough. But Hamid's 1990s Lahore shows us to what depths a society can stoop when corruption rules the roost. In fact, to my understanding, the city of Lahore is painted and described as one of the heroes of the book. With unscheduled load-shedding, uneven narrow roads, streets occupied by the criminals and terrorists, air full of gun-powder and tear gas by the

police, and the absence of any basic civic amenities, the survival of the city is no less than heroic.

Nuclearization is one of the recurring themes of the book. As I have stated earlier, the nuclear competition between Pakistan and India quietly mirrors Daru's relationship with Ozi while building the tension and discomfort in their environment. Pakistan is a country where, as discussed, the ruling class is corrupt and the economic disparity is so wide that the haves can have immunity against laws of the country while the have-nots can have frustration and criminal identity. However, in a post-nuclear context a wave of visceral pride runs across all the sections of the society when it is propagated that now the Muslims, particularly Pakistani Muslims also have the bomb just as the Christians, Jews, and Hindus have it. The race and rivalry between India and Pakistan to gain power and to challenge each other has its parallel in the novel where Daru and Ozi are the rivals. In the book, Daru and Ozi discuss the possible apocalyptic scenario after India tested its nuclear capability at the Pokharan site on 11 May 1998. It also satirizes the great outpourings of joy on the part of the members and sympathizers who organized festivities and handed out celebratory sweetmeats on the streets after the successful nuclear tests. Arunthathi Roy in her book *The End of Imagination* rightly criticizes the madness that gripped India and Pakistan as they decided to show their nuclear muscles:

May 1998. It'll go down in history books, provided of course we have history books to go down in. Provided, of course, we have a future. There is nothing new or original to be said about nuclear weapons. There can be nothing more humiliating for a writer of fiction to have to do than restate a case that has, over the years, already been made by other people in other parts of the world, and made passionately, eloquently and knowledgeably. (Roy, 1999, p. 121-22)

The reaction of saner segments in Pakistani society was no different than that of Roy in India. Eqbal Ahmad wrote, "Nuclearisation of nationalism has further degraded India's environment. The tests have worsened the xenophobia of Hindutva supporters" (Ahmad, 1998, para. 6). When

Pakistan followed India's nuclearsaber-rattling, Ahmad responded: "I saw on television a picture more awesomethan the familiar mushroom cloud of nuclear explosion. The mountain had turnedwhite. I wondered how much pain had been felt by nature. God's most wondrouscreation"(Ahmad, 1998, para. 1).

Nationalism which creates war euphoria among the masses to serve thepoliticians' agenda is a clear target of Hamid's criticism. The socio-economicstratification between the haves and the have-nots is minimized by using themilitary conflict with the eternal enemy across the border. The news of war withIndia brings the individuals under one flag. Hamid's Pakistan stands forcontemporary US, Israel, China, India or any other country. "Hamid's book is justa prologue to a frightening tragedy that will one day emerge from this siblingrivalry that has become an unending war of succession between our two nations"(Pande, 2000, para. 12).

The ghost of the atomic bomb holds the centre stage in the novel. It comesdramatically as an apparition and brings troubles for the poor wretched people.For example after the nuclear explosions a storm comes and sweeps the electricityposts, thus causes prolonged power breakdown across the new nuclear power. Soour hero, Daru, is left miserable and powerless against the moths flock around thewax candles only to be destroyed.

The propensity to mutual destruction by a potential nuclear war is aptly summedup through the central metaphor of the book, that is, a moth circling a flame. Daruand Manucci watch a moth: "A few times he seems to touch the flame, but dances off unhurt. Then he ignites like a ball of hair, curling into an oily puff of fumeswith a hiss. The candle flame flickers and dims for a moment, then burns as brightas before. Moth smoke lingers"(Hamid, 2000, p. 139). Hamid has made effective use of myth andhistory in developing the theme of self-destruction in which Pakistan and Indiaare involved. Daru's ambition to imitate the life style of the ultra-rich iscomparable to the ambition of Icarus, the mythical figure that embodies all typesof self-destruction. By flying too high and

too near the sun, in spite of the warnings of his father Daedalus, the ancient artificer, Icarus met his end in thesea. In a similar way, Daru, the modern-day Icarus, rarely admits his own misdemeanor and immoral behaviour, always trying to shift the blame of his fall to factors external to himself. Whatever be the reason of Daru's decline, he is ultimately like a moth spiraling around the candle flames like Mumtaz and falls from a respectable position of a banker to the depths of a drug seller. Daru's downward flight is comparable to yet another tragic hero, that is Milton's Satan who starts as the rebellious hero and leader of the fallen angels but ends up crawling like a snake, the 'lowest' of all animals.

The sacrificial attraction of the moth towards the candle flame is used as a metaphor of disparaging love in Urdu literary traditions. To Hamid, nuclear bomb is also a destructive love and fascination exactly as the use of heroin and the illegitimate affair between Mumtaz and Daru is; and it happens in a situation which "plays host to a fundu convention the weekend after the Kamikaze moth's last flight. The bearded boys are celebrating our latest firecracker with parades, marches and speeches. The score is 6 to 5 and we're up" (p. 139).

The most significant socio-political trait of the 1990s Pakistan was that it was still reeling from the consequences of Russian occupation of Afghanistan and the resultant influx of millions of Afghan refugees within its borders. As a result, drugs, illegal arms, and the Jihadist *madrasahs* (religious seminaries) became a norm in the Pakistani social fabric.

*Moth Smoke* was published a year before the September-11 attacks in America and Pakistan's fateful alliance with the United States in the 'war on terror'. Though there are clear references to the radicalization of Pakistani society in this novel, but the reasons for this social change are attributed to Russian aggression in Afghanistan and Pakistan's participation in the proxy war of the United States in Afghanistan. The Zia regime dragged Pakistan into this war from which it is still reeling socially, economically and politically. At the turn of the new century and millennium, a new war, much more devastating in consequences was

launched by the United States in which Pakistan once again became its frontline ally to fight an enemy that is unknown. It should be regarded as one of the greatest ironies of history that this time around, too, the United States once again found a more pliable military regime in place in Islamabad to do its bidding. This war is still on but the consequences of this fateful alliance with the United States are already visible. The Pakistani society has further deteriorated due to new wave of extremism. In a nutshell, *Moth Smoke* is a novel that documents Pakistan's troubled history. It gives a successful critique of the divide between the rich and the poor that is affected by and contributes to radicalization and nuclearization of the country.

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