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Narrating the Capitalocene: Capitalism and Environmental Crisis in Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

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Abstract

Mohsin Hamid's How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia (2013) is examined by Jason W. Moore's concept of the Capitalocene, which is an understanding of capitalism not as a system that consumes nature but as a "world-ecology" that thrives by identifying available natural resources that are cheap and shared, and turning them into commodities that can be priced. The paper concentrates on the novel's bottled-water plot that sees the unnamed protagonist amassing wealth by boiling and bottling the same water used by the poorer parts of the community, and then selling it back to the paying ones. Drawing on the methods of close textual analysis, this paper demonstrates how Hamid's own sentences—the "neglected pipes," the "fraudulent product," and the "cooler-replenishment contracts"—stage the passage of water from a past commodity for all to use to a branded product sold on a margin. The paper claims that the novel's bottled-water imagery can be interpreted as Moore's Capitalocene made visible at the level of a single business enterprise, that is, the novel uncovers new value from a common resource that has been made to fail. What the paper offers is a reading of this one, sustained, image (the bottle itself) as the novel's most overt expression of Moore's theory, in opposition to reading it as one environmental detail of many.

Keywords: Capitalocene; Jason W. Moore; world-ecology; cheap nature; Mohsin Hamid; bottled water; commodification

Introduction

How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia (2013) narrates its tale as a self-help guide, speaking directly to the reader in the second person as "you" throughout twelve chapters that sequentially instruct "you" "Move to the City," "Work for Yourself," "Focus on the

Fundamentals.” There’s a simple business story inside that joke about self-help. The protagonist joins “the bottled-water trade” through a contact he has as a “bottled-water party” man in a city where water service is suffering. He doesn’t have to invent a new resource to sell. This is the same water that the city is already using but it has been boiled, filtered, and placed in a recycled water bottle.

Capitalocene by Jason W. Moore is an attempt to assign a name to what the character is doing. Moore claims that capitalism is not “outside of” nature or that it is using nature; it is a “world-ecology,” a way of organizing nature that means that an “outside” of nature exists, and in this “outside” some part of nature can always be found “cheap” — cheap food, cheap labor, cheap energy, cheap water — and turned into profit. If one side of a cheap nature is exhausted or comes under pressure, capital does not disappear; it will be able to put the failure on the market again. This paper’s objective is narrow and specific:

Research Objective: To analyze *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* through Jason W. Moore’s concept of the Capitalocene.

Research Question: How does the novel use the imagery of bottled water to show how capitalism transforms a shared natural resource into a private product for profit?

Significance of the Study

In general, the novel by Hamid is read as a satire of the neoliberal ambition or the writing of self-help, and when it is mentioned, at all, at least its water business is referred to as another symptom of the poorly-managed city. For that reading, the bottled water is mere scenery of the novel. This paper takes it as the argument. Reading the bottle, not the city, indicates the minute details in which the novel describes the process of commodification, a physical process rather than an abstract economic concept.

Literature Review

Jason W. Moore’s world-ecology discussion is not about the capitalist system acting on nature, but about a way of organizing nature. In *Capitalism in the Web of Life* Moore describes how capital depends on the “Four Cheaps” of food, labour-power, energy, and raw materials, and how, when a source of cheapness is exhausted, capital moves on to another source and does not register the harm done to this other source. He follows this trajectory back to the “long sixteenth century,” well before the advent of industrialization, and thus a current water crisis, in his analysis, is not a new and distinct issue, but a part of a long history of appropriation. (Moore)

Rabbani and Chaudhary are closest to this paper’s argument in marking the novel stages of “neoliberalism and water commodification.” Their reading is what leads them to notice the pattern this paper follows, a public resource becoming a private good, as well as their focus on the water plot, a focus that is not on the novel’s satire, in the broad sense, but is instead targeted specifically to the water plot — making their essay the most obviously adjacent scholarship out there. However, what they discuss is never fully developed; they never develop the theoretical language that explains how the process of commodification occurs at the sentence level. They are not world-ecology or cheap nature-denying, and thus do

not force questions about the infrastructure, the price, the appropriation, on which the bottle relies. This paper is based on their observation but does not stop there.

Saleem reads Hamid's novel as a self-help book, an illusion of individual agency that is functioning within a neoliberal framework, while the second-person directives the novel mimics are undermined by the novel's narrative. This reading would support the theme presented here as the protagonist's ascent is often reliant on his own resources and failures. The illusion of agency is a literary effect, however, and one that Saleem's reader-response approach is interested in, as well as in the material substance that, in any particular scene, it is manufactured from. The bottled-water business, on this paper's argument, is, by far, the best example of that substance: it offers a clear illustration of the "agency" of self-help rhetoric in its physical mechanics.

Iftikhar interprets the novel as social satire, as it is told from the second person perspective and the concept of self-help suggests a collapse of institutions within an unidentified "rising economy". This paper does not refute that reading; it refines it: The decay that Iftikhar speaks of at the level of the whole novel, is the decay of one public utility, a municipal pipe turned into a private enterprise, in the water business chapters. Iftikhar's satire reading sees the water plot as one of a range of illustrations of a social breakdown, whereas here the water plot does more precise theoretical work than the satire frame alone can accommodate: not only is it an example of decay, and not just a miniature example of the collapse of the whole state, but it is also a miniature example of how capital profits from that collapse.

Slow violence is not just a description of the bottled-water industry that Bose reads; it is a symptom of a gradual, ongoing ecological crisis that affects the poor, and whose effects can be seen by privileged onlookers only over the long term. This paper shares Bose's fascination with the subject of water pollution, which is, of course, a class-differentiated harm, but it differs from hers in an important way – while Nixon's slow violence places emphasis upon harm that is attritional and unspectacular, the passages discussed here will make the harm immediately visible – the same paragraph in which she mentions the poor drinking contaminated water also mentions the rich people buying bottles of water from the same tap. Moore's low price, in contrast with slow violence, is designed to clarify just this type of simultaneous, easily visible exchange, which is why it's the more accurate instrument for reading the bottle in particular.

Regarding the novel's environmental content, Yaqoob sees it as one of many criticisms of the globalisation of Hamid, and he suggests that both multinational capital and unethical local business are able to take advantage of an infrastructure in decline in a city that lacks a coherent or cohesive state economic policy. Her reading is not just about the reading of the bottled waters; it's also about the reading of a larger argument that she reads as a failed urban planning strategy and the "new economic world order. It makes sense to this paper's argument, but it also makes sense of why, for a globalisation reading, her discussion of the pump, the boiling pot, and the bottle itself is comparatively brief – for a Capitalocene

reading, as Moore puts it, in those terms they are the very place where a cheap nature is produced and sold.

In “The Rise of Cheap Nature” (Moore), Moore further explores the notion of cheap nature, proposing that the history of capitalism be understood in terms of the *oikeios*, his term for the “mutually constitutive relation between human activity and the rest of nature,” rather than human interaction with the external environment. In this sense, nature is not just cheap, it's made cheap through institutional power, scientific innovation, and a division of labor which sees one element of the web of life as a free resource for another. This is relevant to the reading of Hamid's novel because the neglected pipe is not a pre-existing resource which capitalism exploits but an outcome of a previous arrangement, in this case one of underinvestment and another of a city arranged so as some neighborhoods' city systems are left to decay while others' are not.

In a history that extends back over more of the world's history, Patel and Moore demonstrate that food, energy, money, care, and lives, as well as nature in general, have all been made cheap in turn as successive frontiers of cheapness have been closed. It is their larger argument, the one that the single-business version of this process followed in this paper builds on, that it is capitalist crises, not capitalism itself, that create new value; it is capitalist crises that produce new value, not capitalism itself. When it's paired with their history, the protagonist's bottled water is a mini, readable version of one of the patterns Patel and Moore outline at a century's scale—one frontier of cheapness runs out and capital waits until another comes along to be exploited.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study involves close reading and textual analysis and is qualitative and non-empirical. It says nothing about real water supply in Pakistan or anywhere else, rather, its object is the language of the novel. The method is close reading—the passages about the protagonist's bottled-water business are rendered verbatim and read against Moore's own ideas instead of being paraphrased into more abstract and general statements about ‘the environment’ or ‘capitalism’.

World-ecology: capital, power and nature are produced together; water in the novel is never “there,” it is always “there” in terms of who can get it and who has allowed it to go wrong and who benefits from that (Moore, *Capitalism*).

Cheap Nature: capitalism responds to the degradation of a resource by offering to resell it, not repair it; when there is no cheap resource left, capitalism finds another one (Moore, *Capitalism*; Moore, “Capitalocene”).

Each statement in the analysis below comes back to the bottle: what goes in the bottle, how much does it cost to put in the bottle, and who purchases the bottle.

A note on citation:

Since the novel has been reflowed as a digital edition, there are no set page numbers equivalent to what would be found in a print edition, chapter numbers are used instead in the in-text citations to Hamid's novel. Citing by chapter is a clear and accurate method for

identifying quotations, and is used according to MLA guidelines for an unpaginated source, avoiding the assignment of wrong or fabricated page numbers.

Data Analysis

A shared resource already failing

“Your city’s neglected pipes are cracking, the contents of underground water mains and sewers mingling, with the result that taps in locales rich and poor alike disgorge liquids that, while for the most part clear and often odorless, reliably contain trace levels of feces and microorganisms capable of causing diarrhea, hepatitis, dysentery, and typhoid” (Hamid, ch. 6).

The story starts by making us realize that the water was public before the protagonist dips into it and bottles a single drop. It didn't come from his personal pipes, it came from the city pipes. In this sentence it's the words rich and poor alike that are doing the dirty work: up to this point in the story, all of them are still drinking from that broken system. There has been no one yet that took anything private. What has occurred is straightforward and, in a manner, sad, the general system is abandoned, left to rot, until it can no longer be trusted. Not any one person's decision is to blame, but the failure. What comes next is opened up by the failure not the decision of any one person.

Turning the tap into a product

“Those less well-off among the citizenry harden their immune systems by drinking freely, sometimes suffering losses in the process, especially of their young and their frail. Those more well-off have switched to bottled water, which you and your two employees are eager to provide” (Hamid, ch. 6).

This is the time when the shared resource is divided in two. The poor continue to drink the same water and take the risk, and in some cases, lose their child or their elderly family member because of this. The affluent should cease drinking and pay for something else instead. It's a dangerous free water and a safe water you must purchase, and one water supply has turned into two. Nothing new is being created here; the protagonist and his two employees are merely creating in the same way. These are just people standing at the same place where the split is and just selling the safer side of it.

“Your front room has been converted into a workshop-cum-storage depot. There, in sequence, are a pipe bringing in tap water, a proscribed donkey pump to augment the sputtering pressure from outside, a blue storage tank... a lidded cooking pot, a gas-cylinder-fired burner to boil the water... a funnel with a cotton sieve to remove visible impurities, a pile of used but well-preserved mineral-water bottles recovered from restaurants, and, finally, a pair of simple machines that affix tamper-resistant caps and transparent safety wrapping atop your fraudulent product” (Hamid, ch. 6).

Now the pieces go together in this sentence, and the whole picture comes into view: pipe, pump, tank, pot, burner, sieve, bottle, cap. There is nothing new. All of them either introduce regular tap water or make it appear to be something other. The bottles are even used ones from restaurants and refilled. This list is actually read according to the word that Hamid used to describe the finished product: “fraudulent”. No new or better inventions have been made or improvements shown. An ordinary and common thing has merely been repackaged and given a price.

Selling the crisis, one glass at a time

“‘What about you?’ she asks... ‘What is this business of yours, exactly?’ ‘Bottled water.’ ‘You deliver it?’

'That too. I make it.' 'How?' You tell her, nonchalantly, omitting mention of the many wrinkles, such as incessant natural gas shortages or long periods when the water pressure is too low and your pump screams idly, unable to fill your storage tank. 'That's brilliant,' she says, shaking her head. 'And people actually buy it? Just like you were one of the big companies?'" (Hamid, 2013, p. 58).

This small exchange encapsulates the whole situation in a few lines of dialogue. She is not impressed with a factory, or a brand – she is impressed that a man boiling tap water in his front room can be mistaken for “one of the big companies.” This is exactly what you are not supposed to do. Water Company, multinational or man with a pump and a cooking pot, both are doing the same thing, only on a different scale; taking the water that was once everyone's and selling it back to those who can afford to pay for it. This novel does not see this as a scandal. It sees it as normal and indeed a bit funny which is part of the reason it works so well in the comparison.

“It's fuel”... “It stinks”... “will make our water smell like a motorcycle's wet fart”... “Too much soot. Turn it off” (Hamid, ch. 6).

This scene is nothing clean and impressive. It's soot, foul smell and a stove that shouldn't be burning in the first place. That's why it's important. A small room, a smoking burner and someone yelling to reduce the heat before the batch gets ruined lie behind the bottled water rack, as though it were all finished and ready to go, yet. Hamid doesn't want you to get out of that mess. The exchange of one water resource for another that people pay for is not a clean, invisible exchange. It is a job that is done by hand, rough, close up, and it has all the smell and soot.

From a front room to a contract

“Corporate customers with which your firm has its most lucrative cooler-replenishment contracts” (Hamid, ch.7). “Been in the water business almost twenty years” (Hamid, ch. 7). “The aquifer below the city is plummeting and becoming more contaminated every year” and water will need to be drawn from “canals intended for agricultural use” (Hamid, ch. 9).

The business is not small and it's certainly not simple. The man who used to boil tap water in his front room is now a man who is negotiating supply contracts, and deciding on water supply in decades — but not just on a city tap — an aquifer, and water farmers rely on for their crops. It's an altogether different measure. The reasoning remains the same. It is always the same, whether you are selling an individual bottle to a neighbor or selling a contract for a canal to be pumped out for a new housing development, find a demand for water that someone else has or shares, and sell it to whoever will pay. The front room bottle is the same concept as the aquifer, only on a larger scale.

Findings

With the bottled water business as the focus rather than the city, reading *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) through Moore's concept of the Capitalocene yields four main conclusions. First of all, the novel shows the process of commodification as a transparent physical process, one that progresses in a step by step fashion through pipes, pumps, tanks, sieves, bottles, and caps, rather than as an abstract economic idea, so Moore's theory is easily compared with the novel's own language. Second, the novel demonstrates that the business of the bottled water industry and the suffering that results from the business are happening simultaneously – as the poor drink the contaminated water from the tap, the

rich can afford to purchase the water from the bottled water company – Moore's approach of cheap nature is not the gradual process of environmental degradation that Bose describes. Third, it expands from a small business in an individual room to a large supply system of aquifers and canals, and the same dynamics of appropriation and exploitation of nature continue at a larger scale, as Moore maintains that capitalism always seeks out new supplies to cheaply exploit and use. Finally, while earlier works by Rabbani and Chaudhary, Saleem, Iftikhar, Yaqoob and Bose have touched upon the topics of commodification, self-help, social satire, globalization and environmental damage, they have mentioned bottled water only briefly. This paper treats the bottle as the focal point of its analysis and provides a more thorough discussion of the novel's use of bottled water as a lens for examining the capitalist, natural and unequal nature relations.

Conclusion

Read along with Jason W. Moore's concept of the Capitalocene, and in this case, examine the bottle instead of the city itself, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) demonstrates how capitalism can work as Moore predicts: it can convert a resource that was once shared—even if it is broken or worthless—into a product that can be sold for a profit. Through rather simple and potent details like "neglected pipes", "fraudulent product", and "cooler-replenishment contracts", the novel itself makes this argument, demonstrating the physical acts of commodification. Protagonist does not develop water, find a new resource, or enhance nature. Instead, he waits for the public water system to malfunction and then he boils the contaminated water from the tap, pours the water into old bottles, seals them and sells them. Before the expansion to large-scale sources like aquifers and canals, the novel demonstrates that this small-scale enterprise already embodies the minimal principles of capitalism: exploiting a public failure for one's own profit through appropriation of a common resource.

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