



## Damaged Human Psyche and Consequent Criminal Tendency: A Marxian Eco critical Analysis of Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*

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### ABSTRACT

*This article makes an Eco critical study of the novel Moth Smoke by Mohsin Hamid with a Marxist perspective. It attempts to present how the polluted environment damages human psyche and how class distinction gives way to different social crimes. The novel sets a parallel between infected environment and infected human conditions as resulted from the economic gulf that separates the upper class from the rest of the society. The theoretical framework which has been employed is Marxist Ecocritical study. The study elaborates that how class distinction and the pernicious effect of the pollution become the causes of Darashikoh's (the hero) moral and economic downfall in the novel. Thus, the basic objective of this paper is to find out that how a polluted environment leads to the pollution of the human psyche and consequently to a criminal tendency.*

**Keywords:** Marxism, Ecocriticism, Class Division, Environmental Pollution, Human Psyche, Morality, Devastation.

### Introduction

Mohsin Hamid is a Pakistani Diaspora writer best known for his novels *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How to get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and recently published *Exit West* (2017). *Moth Smoke* is his debut novel that gained huge critical acclaim. It revolves around the character of Darashikoh Shehzad, an ex-banker who succumbs to poverty, drugs and love. He gets fired from his job because of his aggression and poor dealing with a customer. Although he is very intelligent but die to the lack of a foreign degree, he cannot get a job. As his financial condition deteriorates the social gap between him and his friends widens. As time passes, Daru gets bitter towards his best friend Ozi, son of a corrupt money launderer who belongs to elite class. Things get worse when Daru falls in love with Ozi's wife Mumtaz. He gets more aware of his loneliness and as the story moves forward a triangle of love, jealousy and lust forms. Furthermore, Daru becomes a heroin addict and commits crimes like drug-selling and robbery as he descends to his destruction.

The novel was written during the time Pakistan conducted its nuclear tests in 1998. The country, especially Lahore is divided into different segments of society. The elites enjoy all privileges and are immune to the law. Hence, they engage in exploitation of the lower classes using their money and authority creating hatred in their minds of the working class for

themselves. Hamid draws this contrast between extreme wealth and absolute poverty, estrangement of the lower classes and the resulting frustration in them. Eventually they refuse to live in this state of bereavement and find their way with illegal means to fight the unjust socio-economic disorder. Darashikoh Shehzad is not an illiterate village farmer rather a capable and intelligent man always admired by his professors. But he falls victim to the unjust system in which there is a lack of employment opportunities and jobs are available only for those who have powerful references and no merit. This was an essential feature of Pakistani society at that time. Daru's ego does not let him ask for such favors from the rich fathers of his rich friends so he stops looking for any job altogether.

*Moth Smoke* makes a distinction between the upper class and the lower class which is presented through the characters of Daru and Ozi. Ozi belongs to the elite class enjoying all the privileges. He drives an expensive vehicle, has a foreign degree, he lives in a big mansion with his beautiful wife. The novel shows how the affluent and the deprived are caught in worlds of their own that lie poles apart. The cruelty of the capitalist system is criticized by the author as William Morris in his essay *Art, Socialism and Environment* comments that "whatever a man gains, he gains at the expense of some other man's loss" (Morris 32).

The novel is set in Lahore, a city that is contaminated by human activities. The environment is polluted by the vehicle and air conditioning exhaust, heat and dust. This environmental pollution can be compared with the polluted minds of the characters in the book. Both the elites and the working class inhale this infected air and they exhale their equally polluted psyches into the society. The causes of Daru's fall include economic gulf between himself and his friends as well as the lingering images of dust, smoke and heat that infect his moral and social behavior. The dead grass is his lawn, the gloomy sky that hides the stars and the smell and smoke of burning rubbish that sticks to Daru's body, refer to relation between polluted environment and polluted society.

The research is qualitative in nature. It has taken into consideration the Marxist Eco critical approach. The researcher has given a composite application of the two above mentioned theories. The two theories though, different in approach but give a pretty good blend of the two which extracts diverse range findings from the research. This research is unique in its approach in two ways. On the one hand, it highlights the psychological effects on the central character because of the economic deprivations while on another hand, it looks for the criminal tendencies to which the hero falls because of the polluted physical environment.

### **Thesis Statement**

The paper gives an insight that how a polluted environment damages human psyche and how class distinction gives way to different social crimes.

### **Research Questions**

**Question 1.** How does a polluted environment lead to the damage of human psyche?

**Question 2.** How does the class distinction in a society lead to the criminal tendencies?

### **Literature Review**

Shahbaz and Anila Zahir in their study *Unmasking Class Stratification and Psychological Ailments through Mohsin Hamid's 'How to get Filthy Rich in Asia'* note that *Moth Smoke* is a "social document on the life in modern Lahore and location like Pakistan" (Arif, Zahir 35). It draws a vividly realistic picture of the class division which is based on possession of wealth and power as well as means of production. The unequal distribution of wealth in the society disturbs the socio-economic structure as one section of people enjoy all the benefits while other are even deprived of their basic needs. This class stratification leads to a number of psychological disorders greatly affecting the lives of the characters. Psychology and Marxism

are interconnected because the psyche of the masses is formed within the social conditions that they live in. People's relations are also determined by wealth and means of production. Psychological disorders are greatly triggered by class discrimination (Arif and Anila 33). As Karl Marx states, "It is not consciousness of the men that determines their existence, but on contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx 69).

Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) records an encounter between a Pakistani migrant named Changez and an unnamed American visitor. The novel basically revolves around the 9/11 attacks in America and how they affect the life of its protagonist. It shows an image of the crisis of identity and complexity of the dilemma that is faced by a Muslim in the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. Another novel of Hamid *How to get Filthy Rich in Asia* (2013) is a social satire that draws attention to the economic desperation and the struggle of the character to go higher in his life. It is story of a man who rises from impoverished household to a respectable status but eventually ends up unhappy and dissatisfied.

In the novel *Moth Smoke*, the characters portray the class that they belong to. Their behavior and thoughts are according to their social and economic background. Ozi and Mumtaz, who belong to the upper class, have a certain "position" in the society with respect to their possessions and resources. As Rachel Aspden in her review of the book notes that:

"For Lahore's upper class, these assets are everything – life preservers that allow them to maintain their precarious position above the grimy, impoverished world inhabited by their servants" (Aspden 2011).

On the other hand, Daru, the protagonist of the novel belongs to the middle class and does not own the luxuries that most of his friends enjoy. His fall from a respectable position in the middle class to a life of crime and desperation highlight the corruption of Pakistani society. As Lopa Patel comments that:

"We witness Daru's degradation from being a well-educated middle class professional to being a common criminal" (Patel 2008).

Tajamul Islam Malik studies the novel in the light of social conflict theory and observes that it gives a developing country's outlook on crime and justice system and law and order. He notes the conflict in Daru and Ozi's character as the former falls and the latter rises. The study explores the conflict between two best friends that later become rivals. He concludes that Hamid's novel brings out the "air conditioned and non air conditioned division" in Pakistan as well as the social issues like moral corruption, injustice, unequal distribution of wealth and resources, etc. (Malik 113, 115).

Jonathan Bate believes that the environment and the men who live in it are inseparable (Bates 257). The pollutants in the surroundings certainly affect the humans as well. Munazza Yaqoob makes an ecocritical reading of the novel and observes that it has serious ecological concerns as it affects the spirituality of the people. Yaqoob calls the city of Lahore an "apocalypse" where spiritual, economic and social death prevails. The people are lonely whether they are in air-conditioned rooms or air fewer dark rooms. She refers to the characters in the novel as "waste landers" from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* that are spiritually dead and are trying to save themselves by indulging in sex, drugs, criminal activities or material luxuries (Yaqoob 94, 95).

### **Research Methodology**

The methodology for this research used is textual analysis.

### **Textual Analysis**

This research is eclectic in nature. It looks for the analysis of the selected fiction to justify the questions raised. The technique is reflexive in nature. The term reflexive has been defined by

Alvesson and Skoldberg as, "reflection means interpreting one's own interpretation, looking at one's own perspectives from other's perspectives and turning a self-critical eye into one's own authority as interpreter" (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000, p. vii).

The researcher focused on the subjective analysis of the primary texts. There is greater possibility of no objective interpretation. Culture and historical background, and changing context provide enough space for the subjective interpretation to any academic and researcher. The idea has been given by Terry Eagleton who proposed certain simple questions. He asks, "What is the meaning of the literary text? How relevant to this is author's intention? Can we hope to understand works which are culturally and historically alien to us? Is 'objective' understanding possible or is all understanding relative to our own historical situation?" (Eagleton 1983, p. 66). These questions put forward by Eagleton show that there is a greater possibility for subjective interpretation of any literary text, especially the interpretation other than the author intended to convey.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Capitalist society is divided into two classes, the have's and have 'not.. The bourgeoisie increase their wealth by exploiting the proletariat. This distinction lead to a great gulf between the two, specifically, there is centralization of the wealth. Furthermore, those who have economic power control all other institutions in society and the ideology. Ecocriticism is an umbrella term under which a variety of approaches fall; this can make it a difficult term to define, But, "simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). The theoretical framework which has been employed to this research is the composite application of the two said theories. On the one hand, it has taken into consideration Marxism which looks for the psychological implications of the economic deprivations. On the other hand, it has taken into consideration that how the physical environment lead to the disturbed state of mind. Thus the research carries the basic objective to find out that how a polluted environment leads to the pollution of the human psyche and consequently to a criminal tendency

This paper expounds upon the effects of environmental pollution on the minds and lives of the characters in the light of ecocritical theory. The social system of class division and its impact on the actions of the characters has been studied under the Marxist Ecocritical approach. This Marxist Ecocritical interpretation of the novel is based on what Lawrence Buell in his essay *Environmental Apocalypticism* calls the "realization that the individuals and social pathologies are coextensive" (Buell 289). The novel maintains Buell's view that human behavior and cognition is greatly influenced by environment and both are interconnected (Buell 283). Mohsin Hamid expertly relates the moral, social and psychological sickness of the characters in his novel with the environmental sickness around them.

Christopher Lawrence makes a study of Eco-Marxism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* Man's and she notes that a man's blind drive towards power and material wealth initiates resource centered secondary and tertiary drives that lead to socially and environmentally abusive behavior. Thus man disturbs the "natural" humanity and feeds or "fostered" humanity (Lawrence 162). This relationship between physical and psychic humanity is explored by Marxist Ecocritical approach. This study of Mohsin Hamid's novel aims to observe how the characters are indulged in their mad pursuit of wealth and worldly assets, in doing so they disturb their culture and environment as well as the natural evolution of humanity.

### **Delimitation**

A vast literature is available on the issues related to the understanding of psyche of the characters as well as to approach and analyze the causes and effects of the criminal tendencies

like, how and why they emerge in any particular character. This study is delimited to the Marxian Eco-Critical approach in order to give an insight to the readers with respect to the criminal tendencies and their respective causes.

### Analysis

*Moth Smoke* shows how there are made divisions between man and the environment. The people are spiritually sick and financially deprived. The book opens in a prison cell, where a guard hands a letter to the prisoner. We then see a courtroom, where Darashikoh Shezad (hero of the novel) (Daru for short), is accused of killing a boy Daru is a smart man who reduces himself to a criminal. He criticizes Ozi and his father because they are involved in corruption and money laundering business. They were best friends since childhood and although Daru is smarter than Ozi, he could not afford to study abroad. So while he rotted in Pakistan, Ozi completed his foreign degree. When he comes back from the US with his beautiful wife Mumtaz, Daru visits him and gets agitated to see his big house and big vehicles as well as the expensive liquor that he has to offer.

"I've never been in a Pajero before. Costs more than my house" (Hamid 25)

It instills a sense of inferiority in him as he was living in his old small house and drove the same old car. Ozi's Land Cruiser adds to his status as an elite and he somehow gets the license of getting away with killing a boy. Daru is disgusted with Ozi when he trails off after killing the boy on the road but he thinks that "bigger cars have the right of way" (Hamid 25). The class difference becomes more apparent when the police does not stop Ozi's pajero while he was heading back from a part but Daru's "Suzuki" was stopped by the police because only the upper classes get such favors (16).

The difference between the upper and the lower classes is also evident in the way they socialize and spend their leisure time. The rich segment of the society indulges in parties that involve sex and drugs besides other illegal activities. These activities get fully supported by the law enforcing institutions of the city.

"A mobile police unit responsible for protecting tonight's illegal revelry"

The same police that arrests Daru when he was driving drunk just because he did not belong to the upper class.

The distribution of resources and facilities is not equal in the city. The lower classes suffer longer time of "load-shedding" than the elites. Moreover they can afford air conditioners which the poor cannot. Murad Badshah also presents the psyche of the lower class, getting happy in the "distress of the rich" (104). He has a master's degree but works as a rickshaw driver because of the lack of employment opportunities for the lower class. He warns Daru about being aware of the exploitation at the hands of the dominant class. When Murad asks him about his search for job, Daru replies:

"Badly. They want foreign qualifications or an MBA"

"It's all about connections old boy" (40).

When Daru comments he needs capital to start a business, Murad Badshah dismisses his call by telling him that all he needs is "a strong mind and an obedient body" (41). Daru and Murad also feel the same towards the air conditioning facility available to the rich only. However where Murad feels disgusted by the elitist way of life, Daru secretly yearns for it.

Mumtaz is also indifferent to the problems of the lower classes. She asks Ozi not to use air conditioner for longer durations because the poor ones must not suffer because of this waste of energy. Ozi tells her: "I couldn't care less about the country" (106). What is more interesting is that Mumtaz herself is actually not as much concerned about the people but herself as Ozi points out she has a "delusional and obsessive fear of pneumonia" (106).

The city of Lahore represents a capitalist society where classes are made on the basis of wealth. The rich ones enjoy all the privileges and the comforts as well as respect in the society. Those who belong to the lower class are exploited by the upper class and pay price for their vicious actions. This makes them envious of the rich and hence their feelings of revenge take them towards destructive activities. The tragic ending of the novel draws our attention to these aspects of the society.

The citizens serve as commodities for the industrialist capitalist system. They are occupied in a struggle to achieve wealth and material comforts forgetting their spiritual selves. They associate themselves with material possessions and do not care about human values. One such example is the character of Ozi who is indulged in the desire of accumulating as much wealth as possible. His love for air conditioner is “unrivaled by his love for any other species of inanimate object” (Hamid 105). The character of Ozi represents Lahore’s elite class that seeks to find comfort in big cars and huge mansions hence becoming desperate in their pursuits. Thus the balance between culture and environment is destroyed. It shows how disrespecting nature could cause devastation not only to environment but to the human society as well.

In the novel, man is represented as an enemy of the nature as well as its victim. The rich and the poor both are spiritually dead and they are like “shadows” and “stain dissolved into grayness” (5). Their lives are conditioned in the capitalist society and their souls are corrupted because of manipulation. As Daru comments:

The smell stays with me. It clings even after I shower. Even after I dump my clothes in a tub of soapy water. It clings to me” (216).

We are further told by Daru how sweat and heat radiates out of people’s bodies (85) and how they are “damp and smelly” (40).

“There are no stars because of the dust” (16).

People’s minds and souls are also lost in the haze and they have no stars or a light to guide them out of it. “Dirty water stretches across the road” (230) and the “smoky breeze stinks of burning flesh” (231). The images of smoke and dust show the lack of freshness and ambition in people’s lives as they remain stale and useless. The novel stresses upon the fact that a healthy ecosystem is necessary for a healthy individual and social life should also be facilitating a healthy environment. It should be a society where “man can rely on law for justice, where he is given basic dignity as a human being and opportunity to prosper” (225).

Citizens of Lahore are subjects controlled by the hegemonic powers in the capitalist society. They live in a false consciousness with disturbed mental condition which affects their relationship with the environment. Hence they show a complete disregard towards their environment and are ignorant of the damage that they are doing to their natural surroundings (Yaqoob 101). Their minds, bodies as well as souls have gotten sick in the polluted atmosphere that they live in. They seek comfort in drugs, parties, extra marital affairs and air conditioners.

Mohsin Hamid portrays how society based on capitalist structure breeds pretentiousness and artificiality. The dirty places, rotten food items, dead gardens and smoky air present a picture of a poor natural condition. Daru uses adjectives for himself that include “sweaty”, “filthy”, “stinking” and “dark”. The grass in his lawn is dead and it does not grow back no matter how much it rained. His room is smelly, dark and unventilated and his food is “consumed by colored molds that spread like cancer” (Hamid 211). He “smells the dead grass that lies under the dirt of the lawn” (205) and he describes Lahore as a “soggy city” (206).

### Conclusion

The research has taken into consideration Hamid’s *Moth Smoke*. The theoretical framework which has been employed is Marxist eco critical approach. The research has raised two major

questions. The very first question which has been raised is, how does the polluted environment lead to the damage of the human psyche while the second question raised is, how does the class distinction lead to the criminal tendencies of an individual. Both the questions are answered very fairly by selecting the central character of the novel. The analysis of the novel shows that one cannot be isolated from his/her physical environment, neither from the economic positions.

To sum up, the novel draws a comparison between the sickness of its characters and the sickly environment to show how class stratification affects people's lives. It makes them indifferent to their surroundings from which they are inseparable. The novel makes a complex world of social, economic and ecological issues to show its readers the relationship between man and environment. It shows if there is distance between humans and nature, it will adversely affect the entire society. In order to live a healthy life, man must take care of his surroundings. Moreover, the class differences among the people must be abolished in order to focus on more healthy issues like the ecosystem and environmental issues. Because those who have material resources, they do not care about creating a healthy environment since they are so involved in their worldly pursuits that they ruin their surroundings.

### Findings

The research has found out that one cannot be separated from his/her physical environment. The sick physical environment leads to the sick mentality of the characters. On the other hand, the research has also found out that social stratifications lead to the disturbed state of the society. In case of the novel under consideration it has given the complex social, economic and ecological effects which highlights the root causes of the criminal tendencies and the lack of prosperity in the society. The article paves the new avenues for the upcoming researches to find the road towards the success of the society, free from physical and economic illness.

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