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### Conflict, Corruption and the Hollowness of a Nation in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*

#### Abstract

The paper accentuates the trajectory of conflict, corruption and disruption in a torn nation through Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*. The paper ponders over the violent clash between the two classes in Pakistan which constitute and compete in the making of a nation. The pivotal character baptised as Darashikoh, a spokesperson of the lower class, alludes to the the Moghal Prince Darashikoh whose alter ego Aurangzeb, like historical Aurangzeb ensures his doom in the novel. The historical rift is significant in portraying the fall of Moghal Empire and significantly the novel also conjectures the similar fate of Pakistan in the fratricidal war. It also features Pakistan's pursuit after nuclear bomb for which it risks the lives of its citizens. The deconstruction of social, economic and political order alters the behaviour of the characters and escorts them to discrete transgressions that invariably has inconceivable repercussions in the course of their lives. The conditioning of Lahore in Pakistan undermines the assumption of the Western reader as it manifests a life of drugs, drinks, adultery, murder, corruption etc. against different stereotypifications. Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* becomes a canonical gospel in deciphering the sordid and squalid elements in Lahore and apprises the significance of hegemony in ushering a new class-conscious and materialistic society.

Key words: Class-Conflict, Corruption, Hegemony, History, Identity-Crisis, Politics

*Moth Smoke*, Hamid's debut novel published in 2000 features a tragic tale of Darashikoh Shehzad, the pivotal character whose odyssey from comparatively well being to

psychological neurosis forms the content and substance of the novel. Hamid subtly alludes to the conflict of Moghul Empire in relation to Aurangzeb and Darashikoh Shehzad, sons of great Emperor Shah Jahan and portrays their rift which leads to fratricide, imprisonment and even ruthless carnage for the succession of the Empire. Similarly, the plot unfolds the conflict between the modern Aurangzeb and Darashikoh, not for the throne, but for wealth and for Mumtaz, who is a wife, mother and a lover. The plot also takes into cognisance the class conflict, discrimination and constant marginalisation of the lower classes by the members of upper class. Consequently in this struggle of survival, Aurangzeb signifies the members of upper class and Darashikoh becomes the beacon of the lower class and in the end, Hamid cunningly interweaves the trial where the readers are cast as judges in a case that seems somehow to favour Aurangzeb. Althusser in his book entitled *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* asserts how bourgeoisie manipulate the state apparatus and orchestrate it for meeting their selfish ends and jeopardise the existence of the lower classes. It becomes evident in the novel where subjugation of the poor is indefinite and the chances of redemption are scarce.

*Moth Smoke* is set in the famous city of Pakistan, Lahore and reflects nuclear crisis in the country in its inevitable conflict with India. India has a bomb and Pakistan craves for the one and in its thirst it stakes the future prospects of its poor citizens who are debarred from receiving various appanages. The novel captures the moment of anger, antipathy and aggression of the poor whose dreams of food, clothes and shelter are yet to be materialised against the affluency, opulence and prosperity of the members of the upper class who hardly bother such issues and which eventually gives way to economic crisis in the country. In these circumstances, Darashikoh Shehzad a middle class man and a banker strives to accomplish material amenities for himself and later even takes risk of transgressing the societal norms for securing his dreams but fails irremediably. The saga of his downfall begins early in his contentious dispute with a landlord who is adamant and reluctant to entertain his excuses. His work is not properly executed by Darashikoh or Daru and who takes his lassitude and pretext as an insult which Daru relates, "I've had a bad day. A bad month, actually. And there's only so much nonsense a self-respecting fellow can be expected to take from these megalomaniacs. So I say it. 'This is a bank not your servant quarter, Mr. Jiwan'" (23). This enlarges his predicament because his Branch Manager instantly suspends him from his job owing to the complaint of the wealthy landlord. This has a serious ramification on his status and perplexes him because of his awareness of an impending doom that awaits him. He

knows the value of money and has been grappling with his salary to pay for his bills of electricity and other appliances. Subsequently, Daru navigates the horrible path of drugs and crime and becomes vulnerable to hysteria, losing his prestige in the class torn society of Lahore. Lopa Patel ardently describes in her review of the novel that, “We witness Daru’s degradation from being a well-educated middle-class professional to being a common criminal”. Later, his problems are escalated by his promiscuous affair with his best friend Aurangzeb’s or Ozi’s stunningly beautiful wife Mumtaz.

Initially Daru’s reunion with Ozi, his American returned friend, Mumtaz, his wife and Muazzam, his toddler son is warm and cordial. The friends are soon driven apart by their discrete propensity and inclinations. Ozi is the son of a rich man named Khurram Shah who is involved in unlawful activities but is yet to be incarcerated. He is responsible not only for Darashikoh’s job in the bank but also for his upbringing and education. Daru detests his corrupt money and is jealous over Ozi’s profligacy who does not bother about law and order and rather is responsible in commanding them. Their different social designations also become an impediment and later Daru’s and Mumtaz’s intimacy eventually severs their friendship and turn them into enemies. In his attempt to redeem what he has not, Daru embarks on a journey of crime and is accompanied by an amusing but extremely clever man named Murad Badshah, a rickshaw owner, who is involved in petty crimes. The fate of Daru mirrors to his home country Pakistan and the title signifies his uncertain tendency to jeopardise his existence which is apparent in Pakistan’s obsession with nuclear bomb and Daru’s for hash and Mumtaz.

*Moth Smoke* reflects on the criminal extravagances, conduct and behaviour of the elites in manipulating law and order in the society. After returning from the U.S, Ozi emulates the typical paradigm of the elites who ignore the canons of law and consider themselves impervious and protected from any restrictions. When Ozi drives his Pajero, he exhibits his aggression and predisposition to break rules which otherwise apply for common people. He recklessly drives his car, “He exclaims, “Stupid bastard” (Ozi swears). “It was a red light,” Mumtaz points out. “So? “ There are rules . . .” And the first is, bigger cars have the right of way. “A favorite line [Daru thinks]. One I haven't heard in a long, long time” (27). At the end, he even ends up killing a boy but hardly bothers about its consequences and does not illustrate any compassion for the deceased but gathers momentum and escapes the place. The novel demonstrates the power circle where the rich rule the poor, make laws, perpetrate inequality, and demand obsequiousness of the lower class. The poor on the other

hand are unconscious of the vicious impulses of the rich who find them menacing and even abhor their company. This conduct is conspicuous when Daru's rich friends sift pleasure in insulting him and where he feels pathetic. Fredrick Douglass analyses relationship between the two classes and makes conspicuous the reasons of criminality of the lower class, "Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe". The rich immaculate themselves by making poor the scapegoat of their crime as is illustrated in Ozi's killing of a boy where Daru is framed, imprisoned and tried. The poor are alienated, debarred from jobs, have fewer connections or not at all, earn low and suffer indiscriminately. Butt Sahab, Khurram's friend accentuates the rift in economy and the worth of chauvinism and nepotism in hiring the workers explicitly, "We have more people than we need right now. And the boys we're hiring have connections worth more than their salaries. We're just giving them the 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" (62).

The law is prejudiced as it exclusively serves those who are in power and who amass great wealth. It is a mere tool in the hands of the upper class who manipulate it as per their wishes and desires. When Daru returns from Ozi's house in the beginning, he is intercepted by the police on the way where he has to bribe them to make his way home. In another incident, the same police guard the illegal party in one of his friend's house. Mujahid Alam, Daru's junior makes a sensible remark on the corrupt political system in Pakistan, ". . . our political system's at fault. Men like us have no control over our own destinies. We're at the mercy of the powerful" (283). Further, he narrates, "We need a system . . . where a man can rely on the law for justice, where he's given basic dignity as a human being and the opportunity to prosper regardless of his status at birth" (284). He invites Daru to accompany him to what he states the company of "like-minded people" (284) who aspire to transform things and liberate their land from the monstrous clutches of the elites. Daru contemplates over this issue for a while and then rejects his offer but is empathetic to his cause because he has also been susceptible to the crimes of the rich. In relation to the preceding lines Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno proclaim in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*:

The striking unity of microcosm and macrocosm presents men with a model of their culture: the false identity of the general and the

particular. Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through. The people at the top are no longer in so interested in concealing monopoly: as its power becomes more open, so its power grows . . . power over society is the power of those whose hold over society is greatest. A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself. It is the coercive nature of society alienated from itself . . . the need which might resist central control has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness. (40-41)

Dilaram's plight is also very unfortunate and very clearly gauges the brutality and lack of sympathy for the impoverished and rather makes ostensible the self-centeredness of the opportunists. Dilaram narrates to Mumtaz who works as a furtive journalist and writes under the pseudonym Zulfikar Manto, "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" (58). The atrocities on the poor by the rich enrich their anger and incite them to adopt unlawful activities. This attitude is ostensible in Daru's, Murad's, Dilaram's, Mujahid Alam's and other characters who aspire to undermine the power symbols of the rich. Murad Badshah, Daru's accomplice in the crime makes Daru sentient about the situation in the following words:

"You see," he explains to Daru, it is my passionately held belief that the right to possess property is at best a contingent one. When disparities become too great, a superior right that to life, outweighs the right to property. Ergo, the very poor have the right to steal from the very rich. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the poor have a duty to do so, for history has shown that the inaction of the working classes perpetuates their subjugation. (76)

Subsequently, Daru's financial resources begin to exhaust and his impecuniosity upsurges without which he is unable to pay for his electricity bills and as a result, goes without it. Its repercussions are baleful because his social prestige begins to diminish and even Manucci, his servant starts to behave unusually which he asserts, "I yell for Manucci and he sticks his head into my room with a smile. "What are you smiling at, idiot? Our electricity is gone." "It will come back, saab," he says, still smiling. The boy has no fear of

me” (86). Unable to retrieve his assets, Daru contemplates of taking part in criminal enterprises and when Murad Badshah offers dope, not only he begins to vend it for money, he also starts taking it for pleasure. His consumption becomes a regular act which points to his emotional ravings and psychological breakdown. It is at these circumstances that Ozi integrates him with a life which Daru can only dream about, with lavish parties where he gets familiar with rich people. His intricate knowledge of their attitude and conduct incites anger in him because he feels marginalised and isolated in their company. The rich have surreptitiously concocted their own perfunctory utopia which is exemplified by the behaviour of a woman who screams, “Forget that you’re Over Here! Pretend that you’re Over There,” and the narrator interjects that “. . . the utopian vision of Over There or Amreeka promises escape from the almost unbearable drudgery of the tribe’s struggle to subsist” (79). The more Daru associates with the rich, the more he becomes aware of his lowliness and deprivation. All this time, Daru keeps on reflecting the richness of his friends and often feels unimportant in their company due to absence of resources, “The driveway made of brick and in better condition than most roads in the city, purrs under my tires. We park near the farm-house, big and low, with wide verandas, and I notice the difference in the sounds of slamming car doors: the deep thuds of the Pajero and Land Cruiser, the nervous cough of my Suzuki” (98). Moreover, Jamal, Daru’s cousin also has a similar experience and works for his friend in a web designing agency making Daru anxious for his fate. He is skeptical about his adventure and becomes concerned about his future as he finds a parallel in his condition. His dependence on Khurram and Ozi as well as Jamal’s on his friend reflects their uncertain position in society, Daru narrates, “I’m happy to see Jamal so excited, but the more he tells me, the more worried I become. . . . The entire venture is being bankrolled by his friend’s father. . . . And unlike wide-eyed Jamal . . . his friend looks very business-savvy (115).

The motif of air conditioning plays a vital role in delimiting the prospect in the lives characters in the novel. Prof. Julius Superb, Daru’s teacher limelight’s the significance of ACs in the life of the characters. He divides the masses of the Pakistan into AC users and non AC users on the basis of this luxury which also makes conspicuous the class divide in Pakistan. AC users are those who are rich, influential and cherish all facilities whereas non AC users do not have any amenities to relish. Such binaries are accentuated to portray the evil of inequality and deceased psyche of people. Prof. Superb proclaims:

There are two social classes in Pakistan. . . . 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 the 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 are a mixed lot – Punjabis and Pathans, Sindhis and Baluchis, smugglers, mullahs, soldiers, industrialists – united by their residence in an artificially cooled world. 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 to relax in front of wide-screen TVs. (125-26)

Prof. Superb also comments upon the indifference of the elites towards the adversities of the poor as well as their tendency to avail the benefit of various rights. Daru's incapability to arrange things for himself and particularly an AC takes him to the abysmal depths of crime. His constant yearnings for material amenities plunges him into despair and further in Murad's company, he feels emboldened to emulate his footsteps. Murad instills in him a hope to gain an access to money which is reflected immaculately in the novel in the following words:

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Murad Badshah is a pivotal character in transforming Daru's life. He steers Daru's character and takes him into the path of drugs, robbery and even murder. He tempts him but he refuses vainly but is driven by aggression inherently. Later Mumtaz shows interest in Daru, shares an intimacy, brings him into the circle of higher class and then altogether decides to sever her relation with him. Daru is perplexed because their trysts and cavorting has further aggravated his misery. It is at this time that Daru finds sense in Murad's valiant endeavours and becomes anxious to act under his supervision in criminal ventures. Murad

utters, "Quite frankly, Darashikoh Shezad, you're better off this way. Pinstriped suits are the cages for the soul" (46) and further eloquently asserts, "All you need is human capital: a strong mind and an obedient body" (41). Cameron Stracher explains in his article Daru's importune in getting a new job, "Lives of the Rich and Spoiled", "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." Aurangzeb, on the other hand is ambitious who yearns for success and achieve it quite easily because of his contacts and money. He does not bother about the poor and often disparages their poverty and helplessness. He owns amazing elite cars, sleeps in AC rooms, and at times becomes crooked which is visible in his later conduct towards Darashikoh. He asserts:

People are robbing the country blind, and if the choice is between being held up at gunpoint or holding the gun, only a madman would choose to hand over his wallet rather than fill it with someone else's cash. . . . "What's the alternative?" he asks: The roads are falling apart, so you need a Pajero or a Land Cruiser. The phone lines are erratic, so you need a mobile. The colleges are overrun with fundos who have no interest in getting an education, so you have to go abroad. And that's ten lakhs a year, mind you. 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. It goes on and on. People are pulling their pieces out of the pie, and the pie is getting smaller, so if you love your family, you'd better take your piece now, while there's still some left. That's what I'm doing. If anyone isn't doing it, it's because they're locked out of the kitchen. (230-31)

Mumtaz is a romantic figure whose character is shrouded in mystery. She is a woman for whom both Daru and Ozi compete and who on the other hand seems to go her own way. Her estrangement from Ozi after the birth of Muazzam makes her feel less significant in his life. She had anticipated an amazing married life after their love affair but her dreams proved to be her illusion. Further, Ozi's materialistic desire as well as his pursuance for money makes her feel negligible. She tries to win her time by writing scandalous newspaper articles against the upper class under the pseudonym of Zulfikar Manto. Her furtive and secretive endeavours which she never shares even with her husband but who is thoroughly aware of her secret as well as her later affair with Daru (with whom she surprisingly reveals her secret) describes

her liberal and authoritative approach towards life. She comes into Daru's life at uncertain moment as he miscalculates his relationship as becoming and escalates his trepidation and consternation. Mumtaz's promiscuity and fornication is one of the most complicated part of the novel. What brings her close to Daru remains an ambiguity, which the novelist seems to decipher in the following words:

Mumtaz would later wonder whether Darashikoh's lack of air-conditioning played a role in attracting her to him. No one will ever know the answer to that question, but it must be said that if air-conditioning doomed her relationship with her husband, it doomed her relationship with his best friend as well. You see Mumtaz was over-air-conditioned and longed to be uncooled, while Darashikoh was under-air-conditioned and longed to be cooled. Although they walked the same path for a while, Mumtaz and Darashikoh were headed in opposite directions. (131)

After their trysts and cavorting, when she feels guilty owing to her severing of her obligations to Ozi and her son Muazzam, she splits from Daru, thus, enlarging his aggression and ruthlessness. Daru's identity seems to be at odds and Murad's contriving embraces him into final doom. His brief love affair and presumptions of a happy life make him miserable. Also, before this, his vending of drug to a minor named Shuja leads to his physical ruin. Shuja's father becomes aware of his misdemeanor and seeks Daru in his house where not only he is assaulted and abused by his guards but his car is also smashed and damaged. When Daru recuperates and Murad integrates him in his scheme of robbing boutiques which he asserts dramatically, ". . . together we formed a duo that would strike fear into the hearts of purveyors of fashionable clothing everywhere" (75).

Daru's predicament aggravates in relation to his sour relation with Mumtaz and even contrives to kill her minor son, Muazzam considering him an impediment in their relation. When Murad gives him a pistol, he feels empowered and capable of taking vengeance. They barge into a boutique in an anticipation of ransacking the shop and precariously ignore all the risks, disarm a guard close to the shop and cautioning the customers. Daru, who at this time is consumed by Mumtaz's memory, sees a small boy running outside and mistaking him Muazzam shots in his direction possibly killing him and astounding Murad Badshah. Shortly after, he sees Ozi doing the same in a different manner because he too kills a boy and escapes

the place instantly. Both manifest horrific incidents of the plot and result in the bloodshed of minors. Daru states:

Ozi's Pajero roars by me, piercing the intersection. The boy is staring straight ahead, his eyes desperately focused on the opposite curb, now not far away, when his foot slips from the pedal and he wobbles. . . . Then the quick flash of brake lights, a sudden scream of rubber sliding like skin on cement, too little too late, the front of the Pajero dipping like a bull ready to gore, a collision unheard because of the squeal of locked tires. A brief silence. The sound of an engine gathering itself as the Pajero charges away. The boy's body rolls to a stop by a traffic signal that winks green, unnoticed by the receding Pajero. (117)

Disconcerted and perturbed, Daru hastens to help the boy, takes him to the hospital, and defiles his car with blood and then confronts Ozi over the issue who is indifferent to his death and suggests offering monetary compensation. Ozi does not display any compunction or apprehension over his callousness and rather thinks materialistically not humanely. Spontaneously, Daru's damnation begins after this incident because soon he is arrested, by Ozi's manipulation, for the crime he has not committed. He bribes the police officials and turns this accident against him. Ozi has been familiar of Daru's betrayal and affair with his wife. When Mumtaz discerns her perfidy has been known to Ozi (who still loves her) she abandons Ozi and her son Muazzam. She endeavours to rescue Daru by writing an article "The Trial, by Zulfikar Manto" (308) interrogates different persons including Prof. Superb who has been his teacher and mentor. He admiringly delineates his character and speaks at length over the circumstances of his life. Mumtaz even questions the witnesses of the accident who reveal that Pajero not Suzuki hit the boy making this case weaker against Daru, "It is even transpired by the members of the Accountability Commission that it would be inconvenient for Khurram Shah who is himself under investigation, if his son were to be accused of this crime" (306). Daru's prosecution in the court is shown in the beginning where the trial lawyer describes him as, "The balancing scale awaits, Milord; redress for wrong is to come. Tender humanity screams in fear, confronted by . . . a monster. . . . The law licks its lips at . . . punishing such . . . justice can shut its eyes today . . ." (7). The novel concludes unexpectedly convincing the reader to adjudge the prosecution of Daru's case who on one hand may be a scapegoat but on the other hand is also involved in contraventions including killing of a boy. The reader is left on his/her own discretion to pass the judgment and close

the trial, “. . . one by one the other actors in this drama turn to you. The audience awaits. The director bites his nails. Critics and producers will judge your decisions. Here comes your cue. “Come on,” someone hisses from offstage. “What’s it to be? Guilty or not?” (297). The historical narrative of conflict between Mughal princes Darashikoh and Aurangzeb is revisioned and concocted to limelight the incongruencies and fissure in the stratified society where Aurangzeb dominates Darashikoh and monopolises his future and that of Pakistan. The novel highlights tension, corruption, avarice, adultery, subversion and carnage where the capitalists dictate the future of the masses. The slightest disorder can have serious ramifications on the fate of the poor who are speculated to emulate a typical figure of a good citizen but without cognizance and conscience.

### Conclusion

*Moth Smoke* delineates the tale of contemporary Pakistan besieged with turmoil, anarchy, class-conflict, adultery, crime etc. Mohsin Hamid has adeptly manifested the cronysim of the rich, subjugation of the underprivileged and the redundancy of law in intercepting the perpetration of crime. The novel also illustrates depravity of the country’s political system which is indifferent to the plight of the masses but on the other hand ventures to obtain nuclear power. The poor are vulnerable to the aggression of the rich, confront marginalization and become scapegoat for their transgressions. The turbulence aspired by those like Daru against upper class make them susceptible to antagonism and usher their damnation. The hegemony of the rich is reflected in the consent or submissiveness of the lower classes who consider their wretchedness as their destiny which is disguised in the manipulation of various institutions by the members of the upper class. For example, Ozi contrives law to incarcerate Daru. Daru’s and Murad’s misdemeanor is an attempt to fight symbols of capitalism but their lassitude and lack of seriousness brings their doom.

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