

Drugs, Corruption and Dissatisfaction: Lahore through ‘Moth Smoke’ by Mohsin Hamid

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Abstract

South Asia is a region that constitutes of the countries that comprise of the Indian subcontinent – India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar and Bhutan with Afghanistan believed to be the latest addition. Literature from South Asian nations thrive on pluralistic depiction of identities and nationalities. Even though the South Asian nations share a similar history and cultural background, there is a marked difference in the way the countries have come into being in the 21st century. The 21st century marked the onset of urbanization and globalization in South Asia but, the pace at which these processes developed, differed from one nation to the other. This research paper seeks to analyze the impact of urbanization and globalization on the urban centers of Lahore through an analysis of the ‘Moth Smoke’ by Mohsin Hamid. It tries to analyze the after effects of the rapid pace of developments that the nation was introduced to by the fag end of the 20th century.

Keywords: South Asia, Urbanization, disgruntled youth, 20th century, Globalization, Lahore

Published in 2000 but set in the year 1998, Hamid’s novel recounts a classic tale of love, hopelessness and disgruntled youth. The protagonist commits actions that the narrator is sure would be sorely regretted by him at the end. The novel begins by harping on to Mughal history where Aurangzeb murders his brothers for the throne and ends by giving a short epilogue of Aurangzeb’s old age where he sorely regrets his actions and appeals to his own sons to not fight amongst each other as he has divided the estate equally amongst them all. The characters in the text are compared with these historical personas and, by doing so the narrator tries to present a tale that is omnipresent – a tale of separation, of desperation, of love and of greed.

Darashikoh Shezad, nicknamed Daru, has been recently evicted from his job for arguing with an influential patron of his bank. He had secured this job with the help of Aurangzeb’s (nicknamed as Ozi) father – Uncle Khurram. Daru had never liked his job as he thought that it paid less and made him overwork. He is an example of a dissatisfied youth – one who is disgruntled due to lack of jobs and unwilling to work on a small income because his education does not permit him to. He is highly qualified, but at the same time he is unemployed and hence, dissatisfied with his life. He has taken to drinking and doing drugs in excessive amounts and has tried to become a drug dealer in hope of earning some extra money to buy food and electricity for himself. The novel delves into the lives of its characters, their struggles, and their relationships while also addressing larger themes such as class, power and corruption. It explores the stark differences between the wealthy elites and those on the edge of poverty and how these differences can lead to feelings of resentment and envy.

In the novel, Lahore is still a city that is plagued with the issues of unemployment, favoritism, corruption and hence has dissatisfied youth who often fall prey to depression and take up illegal practices in the bid to earn money. A resident of an urban space, Darashikoh Shezad is plagued by the facilities it provides and his incompetence to avail them due to lack of money. He is teased by his friends – which hurts his ego and makes his situation even worse. The novel is presented in the form of a trial where Dharashikoh's history is provided along with the imprints of his friends and acquaintances who present their impressions about him and his behavior. It starts with a table of contents which starts with a prologue and ends with an epilogue. The chapters are likewise titled as – 'judgement', 'what lovely weather we're having (or the importance of air conditioning)', 'opening the purple box: an interview with professor Julius superb' and so on. The novel combines the fictional form with journalistic form of writing and puts Daru's life on trial.

Most of the fictional works of writing based on Lahore in the 21st century see an obsession with alcohol and drugs amongst the youth even though drinking alcohol is considered to be a sin in the country. Most of this indulgence takes place in an illegal manner and almost everyone is aware of the addresses where they could obtain liquor and drugs from. Partying till late night has become another common feature in Lahore and these parties often include a free supply of drinks. Daru meets Ozi and Mumtaz for the first time in the novel over drinks. The label and brand matters as well. The better the brand the better the economic situation of the person. Ozi offers them Black Label – which Daru later discovers to be fake. Illegal smuggling of liquor has become a common phenomenon in 21st century Lahore and, this concern is often evoked in most of the novels that talk about this city where every youth has his/her own bootlegger. As the narrator comments –

Mumtaz pulls an unopened bottle for Black Label out of a cabinet. My bootlegger tells me Blacks are going for four thousand apiece these days. I stick to McDowell's smuggled in from India and, at eight-fifty, priced for those of us who make an honest living. But Ozi can afford the good stuff, and Black Label is fine by me, provided someone else is paying. (Hamid, 11)

Ozi has been described as a 'heartthrob' – a rich young man with good looks who easily impresses any woman that he meets. Smoking and drugs are looked up to as objects of pleasure. Ozi has been a chain smoker during his early youth and he taught smoking to Daru. Daru is surprised to learn that he himself has given up smoking for his own son. He tries to coax him to start smoking again but to no avail. Ozi seems to have a strong sense of self-control – an ability that he has developed for the better well-being of his family. Daru leaves Ozi's home in an inebriated state and considers the re-union with his friend to be a happy one.

By the time I leave for home, I'm happily trashed. Not a bad reunion, all in all. Ozi and Mumtaz see me out, we shake hands and kiss cheeks, respectively, and I'm off, driving under the hot candle of a shadow-casting moon that's bigger and brighter and yellower than it should be. There are no clouds and no wind, and there are no stars because of the dust. The road sucks on the tires of my car. Great night for a joint, but I don't think I'm sober enough to roll one, and I should have been paying more attention because I've run into a police check post and it's too late to turn. (Hamid, 15)

While going back he runs into policemen who figure out that he is drinking. He bribes them seven hundred rupees and escapes from their grasp. However, he regrets his action later on as he realizes that he could not afford to 'throw away seven hundred rupees like that' and hence he 'drive off in a state of drunken emptiness' (17). As soon as Daru senses that he could be caught, he smartly enough goes around it and knows that he could get away by 'throwing a bribe' (16) to the policeman. He is not afraid of the moral implications of his actions; it is the monetary consequences that makes him regret drinking heavily. Almost all the characters in the novel are solely concerned with the money that they have or lack of it – it is money that makes these people go around. Excess of it can buy friendships and companionship whereas, a lack of it can make one feel depressed and at loss in the world.

The late-night party has an adverse effect on Daru's job as he reaches late to his office as a result of which he loses his job. Daru argues with a senior client and one of the patrons of the bank and is consequently kicked out of his job by his boss. It is only when this action has actually happened that Daru is reminded of the consequences. He is not ready to accept the reality and in-fact wants to reverse the situation quite desperately. The sudden loss of job takes a heavy toll on Daru's mental state as he refuses to accept that he has been evicted and wants to cling to his seat lest he should be thrown out.

The scene has a poignant depiction where Daru - who later admits that he had never liked his job - is made to forcefully quit at a time where every penny meant the world to him and he was barely making his ends meet. He had been spending his money throughout his tenure in the job without saving it up for a bad day. Wisdom says that one should spend according to one's income and money should be saved for a rainy day. Daru had been going about his life carefree and hence he falls a victim to poverty – something that he does not appreciate. He is an irremediable character who is later jailed for a crime that he did not commit – this does not mean that he had been totally innocent - he himself had indulged in illegal drug trafficking and armed violence. It would not be wrong to assume that he had been spending a large chunk of his income on drugs and alcohol.

The frequent use of words such as '*yaar*' and '*charas*' adds an informal tone to the novel thereby making it more relatable for the youth audience. Even after having lost his job, Daru goes for a party when he is urged by Ozi to come along. Though he feels slightly guilty of his action, he tries to justify it by consuming some relaxing drugs and by thinking that this was Ozi's plan and not his. Daru has been conforming with Ozi's wish but now he feels jealous of his US returned friend who, according to him, is happily married and even has a son. This party makes him realize that his friend's social standing is way above his own and that they are no longer equals.

Immediately after this realization, Daru's eyes land on his ex-girlfriend Nadira who is trying to make him jealous by dancing suggestively with another man. Daru pities his own broken relationship against his friends' marriage and this leads to feelings of resentment in him. And when Mumtaz meets him alone and choses to spend time with him instead of her husband, he is flattered and starts to develop a liking towards this strong headed woman who talks like a philosopher and considers herself as one not made for marriage or any other kinds of lasting commitments. Mumtaz could not bear the idea of sitting at home and hence, she used to write for a magazine. Most of the contemporary novels written around the city of Lahore have

women characters whose favorite hobby (even work) is to write for magazines or to start their own journal. In 'The Wish Maker', Zaki's mother used to write for magazines and had later taken up the task of starting her own journal with the help of her friend. In 'Moth Smoke', Mumtaz expresses a strong desire to work and since going outside the home was not possible for her while she had a baby at home, she decided to write for magazines. She decided to work from home in order to avoid the label of being a 'selfish mother' or 'not a good mother' and ends up confining herself to a space that she slowly grew to detest. She had adopted the pseudonym of Zulfikar Manto in order to publish her pieces while remaining anonymous herself. Mumtaz had developed a liking for Sadat Hassan Manto's work while she was young precisely because of the subject matter that he used to deal with. Following her ideal's footsteps, she visits the Heeramandi – a popular red-light area of Lahore in order to record the testimonies of some of the sex-workers and then got their stories published. She considers her work to be well-hidden from everyone, even her husband. However, she reveals her secret to Daru when she needed him to accompany her to Heeramandi.

"Do you still want me to tell you?" she asks... "But if I don't feel good about it once I've told you, we'll probably never be friends. Doesn't that possibility frighten you". "It's pretty drastic", I admit, "But tell me and let's see what happens." She looks at me and I see that she's smiling at herself. "Here it is...Me. I am Zulfikar Manto" (Hamid, 52-53).

Desperately in need of a job, Daru discusses this with his drug-dealer Murad Badshah who, as the narrator claims is 'occasionally amusing, desperately insecure, and annoyingly fond of claiming that he's a dangerous outlaw. He speaks what he thinks is well-bred English in an effort to deny the lower-class origins that color the accent of his Urdu and Punjabi. But like an over-ambitious toupee, his artificial diction draws attention to what it's meant to hide.' (44-45) Murad Badshah asks him to visit the 'family friend' who had helped Daru secure his first job but Daru is reluctant to visit Ozi's father again. Sensing this hesitance, Murad Badshah asks him to join his gang and become a person like him. Daru however draws a line and reminds him that he is his drug dealer first and friend later. Characters like Murad Badshah indulge in illegal activities and robberies in order to make their ends meet. Several such portraits are drawn up in the novel.

Daru visits a person whom his uncle had set him up with in order to help him secure a job. Butt Sahab denies the possibility of Daru securing a job successfully if he does not have any connection in the government. This critical situation could be clearly gleaned through this short conversation between Daru and Butt Sahab.

That's the problem. Work hard at what? There just isn't that much work these days.' Another French Inhale. "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."... "I'm meeting with you, to tell you the honest truth, as a favor to your uncle," Butt saab continues. "Unless you know some really big fish, and I mean someone whose name matters to a country head, no one is going to hire you. Not with the banking sector in the shape it's in." ... "things are tight these days and favors are expensive". (Hamid, 62 -63)

Getting a job in itself has become a matter of approach and power. Given this unfortunate scenario, little hope is spared for the likes of Daru – people who are well educated but with no family connections. This helplessness is one of the big reasons for the youths of a country to go astray. And it gives birth to illegal activities and crime.

Most of the relationships that are discussed in the novel are either broken or maintained by some fraud. The novel presents a very dystopian picture about relationships as none of them is thriving or involved in a happy engagement. One relationship that is frequently recalled with nostalgia is the one that Daru shared with his mother. Daru's mother died accidentally during a celebratory fire shot from some event that was happening near their home. The death of his mother had made him an orphan and he has not forgiven that night for bringing such unexpected turn in his life. The long power-cut had forced Daru and his mother to sleep on the terrace where the bullet pierced her throat leading to her death. The result of this, as outlined by Daru in a whole chapter titled – 'what lovely weather we are having (or the importance of air conditioning)- is that Daru hates power cuts. He believes that had the AC been functional on that night, he and his mother would not have slept on the terrace and her death could have been averted.

Ozi and Mumtaz married in America where both of them were studying and fell in love. As has been described, Ozi was a romantic and Mumtaz was impressed by his charming personality and good looks. Ozi found Mumtaz's easy nature to be quite unarming and both of them ended up marrying. Initially the marriage was a success as both were very happy with their lives. However, Mumtaz's pregnancy made things more complex. While Mumtaz did not want a child, Ozi desperately needed one. He goes to the extent of calling up his mother to inform her without Mumtaz's permission. The birth of their baby boy – Muzaam – led to Mumtaz's mental breakdown where she found it increasingly difficult to manage the baby by her own self. In Mumtaz's words, she 'did not feel any desire to connect with the baby' or any emotional motherly feelings that she should have developed. Mumtaz sights another very flimsy reason for her growing distance with Ozi – that of air conditioning. While she prefers to not use an air conditioner owing to her past traumas, Ozi cannot make do without the use of an AC.

Aurangzeb loved Acs with a passion unrivaled by his love for any others pieces of inanimate object ... Mumtaz hated Acs with the sort of hatred one normally reserves for members of other religions and ethnic group... Her relations with her husband had grown chilly since their return from America, and his persistence on the AC issue did nothing to restore the warmth that had disappeared... Mumtaz would later wonder whether Darashikoh's lack of air-conditioning played a role in attracting her to him. (Hamid, 129)

It is very hard to believe that a marital bond could be affected by such a flimsy reason as too much or lack of air conditioning. Another possibility is that the partners had grown so chilly towards each other that almost anything could cause a strife in the relationship. On the other hand, there is Manucci – an orphan who was taken in by Daru's mother as a servant. He had only experienced the air that the AC vents give out – the hot air that is blown out by the AC – and had grown up believing that this is what everyone calls as chilly or cool air. He started calling the let-out air as the 'cold air' and when he experienced the inside of a room where

the AC has been turned on, he immediately said “this air is hot”. This short episode brings out the stark reality and the differences between people belonging to different class status. Manucci had grown up on the streets and had considered an air conditioner to be a wonder, Ozi and Mumtaz on the other hand are breaking up because they have had access to too much of air conditioning. In between these two contrasting classes lie Daru who has experienced air conditioning, liked it and understands its value but cannot afford to restore his electricity connection. After being totally disappointed in life and failing several times, Daru discovers a hidden power that he never thought he had –

I often find myself smiling when I’m playing moth badminton. What amuses me is the power I’ve discovered in myself the power to kill moths when I feel like it, the power to walk up to someone and take their money and still put a bullet in them, anyway, just for the hell of it. (Hamid, 275)

He had earlier explained to Mumtaz that it is easier to be an idealist when you drive a Pajero and so he has himself given up this quest. He believes that he has given a lot to everyone around him –

I refuse to serve. I’m done giving. Giving service to bank clients, giving respect to people who haven’t earned it, giving hash and getting punished. I’m ready to take. (Hamid, 259)

Now he will take even if that task has to be accomplished by force, even if he has to pick up a gun and murder some baby in order to reach his goal. Daru has turned into a monster – ‘feeling helpless. Self-pity is pathetic. Hear that moth? Ping!’ (Hamid, 276)

In Daru’s family, the relations are maintained by his grandmother – who had been a victim of partition herself and hence hates to stay away from her family.

Dadi is the real spirit behind these get-togethers. She hates being separated from family, hates rifts and division, maybe because she’s lost so much to partitions: her husband on a train from Amritsar to Lahore, and her eldest son, my father, in Bangladesh. (Hamid, 64)

Daru has been reduced to a state where he really needs the food that is being served at his family get-together and thinks of consuming so much of it that he doesn’t have to go hungry for a few days. He even enjoys the air-conditioner that has been turned on in his Dadi’s room as his own bills have not been paid for and hence his electricity connection has been disabled by the board.

Murad Badshah’s testimony which shows how he became the feared ‘gangster’ that he is considered to be is another example of how poverty and lack of avenue can drive one to the verge of performing illegal actions.

All sorts of rumors were circulation: that I had killed six men with my bare hands and eaten their livers, that I could shoot the cap off a bottle of Pakola at twenty paces, that I had once caught a bullet in my teeth and spat it away unharmed. Truth be told, I have never killed anyone, was a fair shot at best, and had teeth so weak I avoided eating sugarcane, but I encouraged the rumors, because they deterred would-be aggressors and, to be frank, flattered my ego. (Hamid, 81)

Murad Badshah wants to give the impression of a strong personality knowing completely well that he is not what he is often described to be. This is his way of living well and earning enough while staying in an unfair city-space.

Daru mentions the relationship that he had with Ozi's father – Khurram Uncle. He had taken up the role of the absent father-figure in Daru's life. Daru had often gleaned the complicated relationship that Khurram Uncle shared with his (Daru's) mother and it is suggested that they had sexual involvements with each other. Whether this involvement was forced – on part of his mother so that she could secure Daru's future – or mutual on both sides is not clear. But Khurram Uncle had visited Daru's home quite frequently after his father's death and had treated Daru like his own son. He made Ozi and Daru spend time together and would scold Ozi if he treated Daru to be somewhat inferior or as other. He had been seen crying at Daru's mother's funeral.

I saw less and less of Khurram uncle as I grew older, especially after Ozi left for America. The summer my mother died, I went to a restaurant with some friends and found her having lunch with Khurram uncle. She told me he had found me a job at a bank. I don't remember being happy at that moment. Maybe no one wants to stop being a student. The last time I saw him was at her funeral. He was crying. Ozi's mother was sick and couldn't come. Khurram uncle told me to contact him if there was ever anything I needed. I never did. But even though we weren't in touch, I kept hearing about him, that he'd built a mansion in Gulberg, that he was being investigated by the Accountability Commission. (Hamid, 89)

Uncle Khurram has been charged of corruption and throughout the novel, he has been depicted as falling under this lens. When he gets to know that Ozi has been evicted from his job, he tries to help him secure another job but this time as a salesperson – an offer that Ozi rejects outrightly. A proposal to which Daru replies that he would “like something with a bank or a multinational” (90). Daru thinks that this job does not match his qualification and is very hesitant to consider it as an option as he does not want to be a mere salesperson. He compares his situation with Ozi who is living off his father's wealth quite comfortably and he on the other hand has been asked to work as a salesperson by Ozi's father. Growing up together with Ozi, Daru can consider him to be a competition and the difference of opportunities to each of them would but commonly lead feelings of resentment. Ozi's reluctance to invite Daru to his party where the rich people of the town would be present further adds fume to fire. And Daru considers this to be a serious snub by his childhood friend.

Again when Daru is not invited by his school friend to his cousin's party, Ozi offers to take him along in his Pajero. There is a frequent mention of the cars and the status that comes along with it. Daru's Suzuki had been a sign that he does not belong to the affluent class and Ozi's Pajero is a sign of affluence and hence, success. Daru goes with Ozi to the party as he could not afford to deny a free meal and desperately needs friends to help him go around. The party crossed Daru's expectations as he realized he alone amongst his school friends has been left behind and that most of his friends have managed to secure a fortune for themselves – either inherited or earned.

Daru is immensely impressed by the ‘cool stuff’ that exists in this party. One notes an obsession with money and coolness rather than the traditional wisdom of earning it and spending wisely. Daru wants money so that he can live a lavish lifestyle, buy whatever drugs he wants just like Mumtaz who doesn’t have to think twice before buying a two thousand rupees ‘Ex’. He wants money to enjoy air-conditioning, to be able to spoil himself with food, to earn a reputation amongst friends or to be able to get the woman of his dreams. He does not want it for any of the ‘morally acceptable’ reasons and this attitude is surely not limited to Daru in the novel, almost every character is inflicted with it.

Ozi want Daru to remain his friend as he does everything that he wants him to. While Ozi wants to maintain a respectable social circle, he also wants to stay in touch with Daru who would have his back whenever he wanted. In Ozi’s own words, Daru is like a toy for him who does things as he wants him to. This is the reason when Daru is upset at not having been invited to party, Ozi tries to console him by saying that “You always look out for me. But I don’t want to be friends with those people. We’ll be friendlies at best. People who party together. But that’s good enough. That’s all I want from them. They’re the best party in town.” (103) Even when Ozi commits a crime, he gets away with it by putting the blame on Daru. Daru saw Ozi’s Pajero killing the child and speeding away. He decided to take the child to the hospital in his car because of which he becomes the prime suspect in the eyes of the police. When Daru goes to visit Ozi immediately after the accident, he is getting the car cleaned of any blood spot.

The red Pajero is parked in the driveway, Ozi watching a servant wipe the dent in its bumper with a wet cloth. My best friend is wearing sunglasses, a bright T-shirt, and knee-length shorts. He looks like an overgrown child. A child who gets everything. Gets away with everything. (Hamid, 118)

Ozi’s father’s wealth and reach had enabled him to lead his life freely as per his own terms. Daru’s jealousy for Ozi is quite justified. Ozi could get away with murder but Daru would be convicted for crimes that he did not even commit.

When Daru meets his cousin who has established his own business with his friend, he is surprised and also in awe of him at having managed to earn so well at such a young age. He is quite in awe of the fact that his cousin who is twelve years younger than him is earning while he himself is sitting at home. He is somewhat ashamed when he asks for a free meal from his cousin and realizes that he was actually in need of a free meal.

References

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