

Alienation, Jealousy And Betrayal: A Marxist Study Of Mohsin Hamid's Moth Smoke (2000)

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Abstract

This study explores alienation, jealousy, and betrayal in the major characters of Hamid's novel Moth Smoke. These factors are identified and highlighted through Karl Marx's theory of alienation. Moth Smoke (2000) depicts the reality of Pakistani society by pointing out this society's flaws and imperfections. Though all societies in the world are imperfect in one or the other sense, the prevailing class distinction in Pakistani society, which generates instability in its citizens, gives rise to conflict in its citizens and leads to the destruction of the whole society. The inferiors consider themselves a minority group under constant pressure from the oppressive class, which eventually instigates anger, violence, and jealousy in them. Through his theory, Marx has explained the dependency of the lower class on the elite class. Those belonging to the higher class always suppress the less privileged. The other two facets described by Marx are self-alienation and specie-alienation. He believes that a socio-economically divided society results in the self-alienation of an individual as well as alienation from humanity. This study attempts to examine these aspects of alienation in Daru's and Mumtaz's lives as they live in a stratified society.

Key Words: Alienation, Betrayal, Jealousy, Suppression, Pakistani Society.

Introduction

Moth Smoke (2000) is Mohsin Hamid's debut novel. Hamid's writings highlight the vices prevailing in Pakistani society, such as corruption, immorality, injustice, social stratification, and oppression of the lower class by the power holders, and the consequences these evils have. The protagonists of his novels are mature and sensible individuals whose lives are adversely affected by the socio-economic conditions because of which they are unable to maintain their respective positions within society.

Similar is the case with the novel selected for this study. *Moth Smoke* (2000) is set against the backdrop of the 1998 nuclear tests between Pakistan and India, which caused an economic crisis and deregulation in the country, giving rise to unemployment. This consequently led to crimes, class division, class conflict, and alienation of individuals. The government made some mistakes after Pakistan carried out nuclear tests. One of these was freezing the foreign exchange accounts, which had extensive repercussions on the economy. In the 1990s, the banking sector was already facing troubles and complications, and this decision further decreased the confidence of foreign investors and reduced foreign exports. This negatively impacted the banking sector, which serves as an essential component of the financial system of Pakistan. Hence, the author has used these historical and economic incidents in the novel to present the consequent problems and their effects on the people of Pakistan.

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The primary imperial tension at work in the novel lies in Pakistan's relation to the United States, on the one hand, and India on the other. World systems analysis places the US in the core, India at the semi-periphery, and Pakistan in the periphery of the current world system, and this tension is readily apparent in *Moth Smoke*. From an economic standpoint, the US is in a greater position of power in relation to Pakistan, and this power is represented in the novel by the characters who have accumulated American wealth. Daru's bank client, Malik Jiwan, is a powerful man by virtue of the "half a million US in his account" (18). Daru's friend Ozi has returned from the United States, after deciding that "he'd had enough of being a well-paid small fish in Manhattan"—back in Lahore, flush with American dollars, he would be a big fish instead (169). Both of these characters wield considerable power over Daru's fate: Jiwan is responsible for Daru getting fired from his job at the bank, and Ozi is able to have Daru framed for a crime that ultimately lands him in jail.

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The novel under discussion depicts the sweltering summers of Lahore in 1998 and involves characters from widely different socio-economic backgrounds, thus presenting the internal social frame of Pakistani society. The plot of the novel revolves around the deteriorating life of the protagonist, Darashikoh Shehzad, and his interactions with other characters such as Aurangzeb, Mumtaz, Murad, and Manucci, all of whom play a crucial role in the story. Jealousy plays vital role among these characters and their relationships.

Hence, this study attempts to explore the themes of jealousy, betrayal, and alienation in the novel. Jealousy is one of the recurring and dominant themes in literature since the Greek classics and has deeply influenced writers over different literary eras. The word "jealousy" is used to refer to the thoughts and emotions of insecurity, anger, disgust, and resentment. It is often evident in the people lying at the bottom of the social hierarchy because these people do not get equal opportunities and are stripped of their rights. It is a tormenting feeling that makes people feel helpless and fills their minds with thoughts of betrayal. In the novel, the jealousy factor can be seen in the character of Daru, which leads him to betray Aurangzeb (Ozi), his close friend.

This study also highlights the theme of betrayal in the novel. Betrayal is an act of intentional deceit, and it is also a commonly occurring literary element in fiction. It refers to the violation of an individual's trust, belief, and confidence and can be a cause of conflict between people or within a relationship. In the novel, Daru and Mumtaz betray Aurangzeb by making a relationship. Mumtaz also destroys her husband's trust by not telling him about her secret career as a journalist. Ozi too betrays Daru by framing him in the case of the child he hit and murdered

in his car. These events of betrayal give birth to the alienation of characters from one another as well as from humanity.

Moreover, alienation is also one of the themes of the novel. An alienated person feels emotionally, physically, and psychologically isolated or detached from society. This study has taken into account Karl Marx's theory of alienation, first presented in 1883. Karl Marx was a German philosopher, economist, and sociologist in the 19th century. According to him, alienation is a material and social process that influences human beings (102). His theory explains the dissociation of creatures or things that are naturally unified. In Chapter 12, Marx indicates alienation as a feeling experienced by individuals living in a capitalist society (121). The protagonist of the novel under discussion, Daru, falls prey to alienation because he also belongs to an economically divided, capitalist society, due to which he remains deprived of equal prospects of economic success.

Having said this, the objectives of this paper are to study the aspects of jealousy, betrayal, and alienation in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* and to explore how these factors influence Pakistani society at large. In order to do so, this paper probes into: how has Hamid portrayed the factors of alienation, jealousy, and betrayal through major characters in *Moth Smoke*? And how is Pakistani society influenced and affected by these factors?

Literature Review

The novel under discussion has been studied from a variety of perspectives, and many of its factors have been researched. Some of these studies are discussed below.

To begin with the theme of alienation, Farheen Shakir, in her thesis "Disillusionment and Alienation in Hamid's Selected Works", has focused on alienation and disillusionment in the major characters of Hamid's novels. The researcher writes in her work that Hamid has presented alienation, due to social confusion embedded in the community, through his novel's major characters Mumtaz, Ozi, and Daru. The three main characters face psychological confusion due to disorganised political and social affairs. She writes that the World Wars have brought drastic changes and instability in modern people's lives. Alienation is also a consequence of it. Shakir writes about the novel that Hamid has portrayed the reliance on earnings to maintain status and has also represented the hierarchy of status. Failure in achieving the desired status has resulted in alienation, and this has also happened to the novel's characters (214).

Similarly, Awan (2016) writes about the characters' transformations in Hamid's novels. In his work "Psychoanalysis and transformation of heroes in Mohsin Hamid's novels *Moth Smoke* and the *Reluctant Fundamentalist*", he has illustrated how certain incidents lead heroes to become anti-heroes. He has said that Daru, despite being intelligent and talented, could not afford a foreign education while his wealthy friends, who were less intelligent, went abroad to get a high-quality education (16). He always wanted to have a secure social life but is unable to

find a better job. Awan adds that in a society where money is preferred over merit and skill, it is hard for people like Daru to achieve success. They are always neglected and never given justice, which frustrates them. That is how the failure to gain a lavish life makes Daru a criminal and drug seller and transforms him into a wicked man. Daru represents the lower class while Ozi and Mumtaz represent the urban elite class who consider themselves above all the bounds of rules and laws (32). An impatient act of Ozi resulted in the death of a boy under his Pajero. With the power of money, he got away from all and cleverly trapped Daru in the murder case. His downfall in the novel occurred because he betrayed Ozi by having an illicit relationship with Mumtaz, selling drugs and becoming an addict. His blemished past is used by Ozi to get him caught in a murder case in which he is innocent. This incident gained him the readers' sympathy.

Most of the major characters in the novel suffer due to the economic instability. The economic instability makes the characters jealous of each other's status. In this regard, Mudassir Iqbal and Hussain Iqbal have conducted well-informed research on "Socio-Economic Crisis in Moth Smoke Depicting Pakistan's Society". Their article is about the long-lasting impacts of social and economic instability on Pakistani society. According to them, the economic crises are borne by income, education, occupation, health, and political involvement in society (12).

The factors of jealousy and hatred are induced in each other due to the instability and crises suffered by the characters in the society. Not only are male characters the sufferers, but women also suffer through these. Tajamul Islam has conducted research on the influence of jealousy and hatred on female characters of the novel in "Bad wife and worst mother: Extramarital affairs in Mohsin Hamid's novel Moth Smoke". He has shed light on the themes of betrayal and jealousy found among the novel's characters. This study also focused on the love affair between Daru and his friend's wife, Mumtaz. By stating quotes from the original text, the researcher has revealed the true realities of all characters. Daru is jealous of Aurangzeb for being rich and for creating a relationship with his wife; he has back-stabbed and betrayed him. Consequently, Ozi lost trust in friendship. Mumtaz also proved to be a monster as she was neither a faithful wife nor a good mother (16).

Awan (2017) in his research paper "The effects of Marxism on the characters in Mohsin Hamid's novel Moth Smoke" has talked about the nature of characters in Moth Smoke. Moreover, by applying Karl Marx's Marxism theory, he has highlighted the socio-economic and political conditions in the novel and the problems that always ruin lower class people's lives. He has observed that the main focus of the Marxism theory is class discrimination; the superior class and the inferior class. It's the working class due to which the higher classes enjoy their lives without hard work. He proposed that Hamid has shown a clear picture of Pakistani society regarding socioeconomic conditions. Daru is a misfit in society just because he lacks money. Elite class people like Ozi consider it right to take the law into their own hands because they know no one can stand against them (27).

The current study deals with the three major characters, Daru, Ozi, and Mumtaz, and reveals how alienation, jealousy, and betrayal influence all three individually as well as socially. They eventually lose each other's trust, loyalty, and friendship.

Analysis and Discussion

This study attempts to explain alienation in Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000) on the basis of Karl Marx's theory of alienation. This study also looks into jealousy and betrayal as aspects that this study looks into as factors associated with the feeling of alienation. The plot of the novel *Moth Smoke* is set in Lahore. The author has deliberately chosen it as the setting of his book to draw a realistic picture of the lives of people of the modern generation in Pakistan. The main character of the story, Daru, lives at the periphery of the middle class. Despite his academic brilliance, he cannot afford to study abroad and starts a job in a bank that his friend's father has got for him. His salary can hardly fulfill his needs as he complains about the rising electricity prices. Ozi, however, is his best friend and a filthy rich business owner. Ozi's wife is Mumtaz, and she is a mother to his son.

Out of these three major characters, Daru and Mumtaz go through self and specie alienation both. Alienation is the primary concern of this study, besides jealousy and betrayal. For his alienation theory, Marx uses the German word "Entfremdung," which means "estrangement"(1). Theoretically, Entfremdung describes alienation in social settings, e.g., when a person feels isolated and estranged because of living in a socially stratified society. A class-conscious and highly corrupt society suppresses and exploits the less privileged. This gives rise to class conflict in society and makes the neglected feel alienated from themselves as well as from the society in which they live (46). Marx further explains that alienation causes society to split into two categories, i.e., "the toiling masses" and "the non-workers" (46). He refers to them as "the haves" and "the have-nots" (46-47). In the text analysis, we observe that Ozi belongs to "the haves," while Daru falls under the category of "the have-nots." Daru loses his job and, despite his academic accomplishments, struggles to find another one and fails to maintain his social status. He realises that opportunities are fewer for the lower class. This class distinction leads to his alienation from his society.

Furthermore, Karl Marx explains self-alienation in his theory as a state in which a person feels alone, meaningless, and alienated from his own self (53). Such a person indulges in self-destructive activities. He is not content with his life or profession and suffers from psychological distress. The individual is hopeless and unable to develop mentally as well as physically (Marx 57). Such a concept of self-alienation as presented in the theory is reflected in some of the characters in the novel. One of these is Daru, who feels worthless and is not satisfied with his job; it is only a means to fulfill his basic life needs (Hamid 12). His self-alienation is furthered when he cannot find a new job after losing the first one because of not having a foreign degree or influential connections. He bears psychological agony and feels powerless and frustrated. He

paves the way for his own destruction by indulging in an immoral relationship, becoming a drug addict, drug dealer, and criminal.

Mumtaz, Ozi's wife, is another character who is self-alienated, but not as much as Daru, because she is financially stable. She is not happy in her married life. After the birth of her son, she remains upset and believes she is living an aimless life. She says: "My head was full of a crazy silence." I felt neglected and resentful "(152). She drinks, tries different drugs, and also starts an affair with Daru, knowing that it will destroy her relationship with Ozi (153).

Marx describes another aspect of alienation as that of "specie alienation" (67). Marx called the feeling of being distanced from one's own species "specie alienation." This type of alienation can be seen when a person feels separated from his fellow members of society. Daru, too, feels alienated from other human beings. Due to his aggravating circumstances, he feels detached from his family members. He always feels inferior and rejected at Ozi's lavish parties, to which he eventually stops inviting him. Over the course of time, he transforms into a criminal, is drawn towards easy money by selling drugs at a high price, lacks moral values and exerts power over his poor servant. His wrongdoings are justified by him as: "Some men drink the blood of other men; all I drink is wine" (42). Moreover, from the very start of his life, he is merely at the mercy of those with power and influence, such as the landlord, Malik Jiwan, who gets him fired from his job, and Ozi, who frames him for a crime that sends him to jail. He is crushed by the power structure as he says: "the world is turning against me, existence an agony" (238).

The text of the novel reveals that Mumtaz also experiences specie-alienation as she remains indifferent towards others. Firstly, she does not love Ozi, who is a generous and loyal husband. Secondly, she is a bad mother and does not care about her child. It is evident when she declares: "I looked at the little mass of flesh I'd produced. I didn't feel anything. No wonder, no joy, no happiness. Nothing "(155). At the end, she isolates herself, leaving all the relationships behind and says: "A crack in my middle was splitting open, and I couldn't be just the good wife and mother anymore" (157).

Associated with alienation is the vital emotion of jealousy. It becomes very evident from the text when the readers become acquainted with Daru's best friend, Aurangzeb, nick-named Ozi, in the story. He had gone to the United States to get college education and now returns after several years with his wife, Mumtaz, and son named Muazam. Daru goes to meet him. They spend the evening reminiscing old times and drinking expensive whiskey (6).

Daru finds a stark contrast between his own life and his friend's. Unlike himself, Ozi is financially stable and belongs to the corrupt elite class with a Pajero and bungalows (7). This socio-economic gap makes him conscious of his low status and deprivation. He feels jealous of Ozi's success and lavish lifestyle. After losing his job, he becomes even more resentful of Ozi because he is dependent on others and does not have the money to fulfill even his basic

necessities. He notices his gorgeous wife Mumtaz as well and this further sparks his envy which is evident when he says:

She (Mumtaz) is beautiful and I don't want to stare. I haven't seen her since the wedding, and I must have been drunk than I thought because I don't remember thinking then that Ozi was such a lucky bastard (12).

Daru's jealousy contributed to his betrayal and he longs for everything Ozi has in life.

The factor of betrayal surfaces in the novel from the moment Daru and Mumtaz meet for the first time, and he is drawn towards Mumtaz (6). Another example of his attraction is when he says: "You know you're in trouble when you can't meet a woman's eye, particularly if the woman happens to be your best friend's wife." So I am in trouble, because I keep looking at Mumtaz "(13). Mumtaz also feels attracted to Daru. She does not love her husband anymore and is unhappy despite enjoying all the pleasures of a rich life. She proves to be a licentious wife and deceives Ozi by taking initiative in forming a bond with Daru. They spend a lot of time with each other and share drugs. Though Daru initially feels guilty because Ozi was his best friend, when Ozi murders a child and gets away with everything without being caught, he no longer feels guilty about having an affair with his wife.

Moreover, in a chapter narrated by Mumtaz, she describes how her unfaithfulness begins when she starts journalism. She mentions it by saying, "There has to be a first lie, a first deception." And mine began when I decided to start working as an investigative journalist" (Hamid, 125). Ozi knows nothing about her career as an investigative journalist under the pseudonym Zulfiqar Manto. She keeps it a secret from him, lies to him, and roams all around the town without his knowledge.

The element of betrayal is also present in the character of Ozi. He finds out about the betrayals and loses faith in true relationships, as he announces:

There is a reason that prophets perform miracles: language lacks the power to describe faith and you have to land on faith before you can even begin to hike around to its flip side, betrayal (p. 193).

He betrays Daru in his desire to get revenge on him. He gets him imprisoned by framing him in the killing of the child which in fact he himself has murdered. He says: "I am not sad to hear he (Daru) killed the boy" (Hamid 194).

Hence, the whole novel revolves around these three aspects of human life, and the study explores how these factors destroy the characters' lives.

Conclusion

Moth Smoke (2000) by Mohsin Hamid reveals the themes of jealousy, betrayal, and alienation. The narrative is mainly concerned with the life of Darashikoh (Daru), who is a banker and

belongs to the middle class. His decline starts when he loses his job, becomes a drug addict, starts an affair with his best friend's wife, and indulges in drug dealing and crimes. The characters of Ozi and Mumtaz also play a central role in the story, as their presence affects Daru's life profoundly. The setting and the time in which the story takes place are also very important because they facilitate the occurrence of the themes mentioned above.

This study finds out that the factor of jealousy is present in the novel from the very beginning. Society is depicted as divided into different classes, with some characters belonging to the authoritative class while others to the lower stratum. This distinction creates an imbalance in society, with a few people having all the economic power and others striving throughout life to fulfill their basic needs. This lack of certain possessions in an individual's life can trigger jealousy, as can be seen in the character of Daru. In the story, when Mumtaz starts an extra-marital affair with Daru, his jealousy becomes one of the reasons that he cannot resist her advancements and betrays his best friend. His betrayal, obsession with Mumtaz, drug abuse, and drug dealings lead to his utter destruction.

As already mentioned, the aspect of alienation is explored under Karl Marx's theory of alienation. He believed that a socio-economically divided society results in the self-alienation of an individual as well as alienation from humanity. Accordingly, in *Moth Smoke*, the characters of Mumtaz and Daru are alienated. Daru does not meet his family nor tell anyone about his problems. He grows highly dissatisfied; his solitary life leaves him in despair. He is no longer welcomed among the elite circles of the city. He ends up in jail despite being innocent because he belongs to a society where the judiciary favors those in power. Because of these authoritative figures, he is fired from his job, but his imprisonment proves to be a severe blow that causes him to end up in an agonising and alienated state. Along with highlighting the selected themes, the study of the novel also brings to light the way in which certain people or incidents in people's lives impact and transform them completely.

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