

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

A MARXIST STUDY OF MOHSIN HAMID'S MOTH-SMOKE

Rafique Ahmed Kalwar

Associate Professor of English in College Education
Department, Govt of Sindh & PhD Scholar @IELL,
University of Sindh Jamshoro

Email: rafiq.ahmed.kalwer@gmail.com



Abstract

This study critically examines *Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid through the prism of Marxist Criticism, focusing on the dimensions of class struggle, economic inequality, and ideological control within a postcolonial setting of Lahore, Pakistan. The novel depicts the gradual moral and social fall of the protagonist, Daru, as he encounters systemic inequalities and the exclusive dominance of elite social class. The analysis explores how capitalist framework perpetuate social stratification, marginalization of haves-not, and the commodification of human relationships. It further probes the influence of power, wealth, and privilege in making individual choices and superimposing hegemonic ideologies. By highlighting the contrast between the bourgeois elite and the struggling lower-middle class, the study show the underlying tensions existing in the socio-economic structure of society. This paper argues that *Moth Smoke* shows up as a strong critique of class oppression and the pervasive impact of capitalist ideology on identity, morality, and social life.

Keywords: Marxist Criticism, Class Struggle, Capitalism, Social Inequality, Ideology, Hegemony, Postcolonial Literature, Economic Disparity

1.1 Introduction:

Moth-Smoke by Mohsin Hamid reflects vividly how economic forces disrupt life in Lahore, Pakistan in the wake of detonation of its nuclear bomb in 1998. This paper aims to explore and analyze factors which are responsible of the dilemma of the have-nots portrayed in the novel from Marxist perspective. The novel draws the parallels from the history of Mughal ruler Aurangzeb Alamgir, who murdered his brothers and imprisoned his father to pave his way to the throne and ultimately perpetuate his rule. However, the parallel drawn here does not fit the narrative adequately except the way in which Aurangzeb nicknamed Ozi revels in wealth and power attained through the corrupt practices of his father. Mohsin Hamid lays bare how the haves, lavish and spend money extravagantly, and have-nots suffer because of lack of economic resources and parish under its adverse effects. Have-nots even resort to drugs and crimes finding no other source of survival. This paper attempts to reveal how Mohsin Hamid in his novel uncovers economic predicament generated, aggravated and augmented to catastrophic degree in Pakistani society through corruption and over-consumption of resources by the elite and upper class. This paper is aims to have understanding of and get insights into the novel from Marxist perspective. The paper is intended to explore Marxist features of class differences popularly known as classism, how it is presented in the novel. Commodification would also be figured out and it would be viewed how and why it is adopted by any of the character to serve their set purposes and objectives. The novel portrays certain other aspects of life in Lahore Pakistan of its time such as love, sex, betrayal, so on, but the focus of this paper stay on the Marxist perspective of the novel in order to bring to light the aspects that fall in the ambit of Marxist worldview for its worthwhile understanding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Marxist criticism

It is the “Criticism based on the historical, economic and sociological theory of Karl Marx and Friedric Engels.” (Glossary of Literary Theory by Henderson & Christopher

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Brown). Principles of Marxian Theory enunciate that a small group of people holds control by means of money, weapons and use of force on a population through the fear of physical threat (Lois Tyson, p 53). Marxism is normally believed to be a sociological approach to understand literary works or that of art as outcome of historical, economic or cultural forces that can be judged considering the material conditions in which they were produced. (Williams, Raymond, *Marxism & Literature* Oxford: OUP, 1971). Marxism normally focuses on class conflicts between privileged and unprivileged classes of the society. However, post-modern criticism sees art as both reflective and independent to the period in which it is created. (Eagleton, Terry: *Criticism and Ideology*, New York: Schocken, 1978). Despite the failure of Marxist regimes and communist countries, Marxist theory provides a useful tool to understand past and present perspective of the world. Marxism can effectively be used to understand why & how it failed as system itself. (Lois Tyson, p 53).

2.2 Literary Significance of Marxist Criticism

Marxist literary criticism helps to understand literary works through the lenses of Marxist approach by means of the sound know-how of Marxist Criticism. Readers can approach the text with deep insight into the physical factors underlying the production of a literary work. Though Marxist theories are mainly concerned with historical changes and conflicts arising in a society, they play a great role indirectly in literary designs and forms. (Rama et al *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary* Pearson Longman 2005, p.109).

Literature takes birth and holds mirror to the material as well as historical conditions. For Marxist critics, such view of literary production and reflection, a literary work either supports the ideologies it is produced by or criticizes the ideologies it reflects. Many of the texts contain both of aspects. For most Marxists, not only content of the piece of a writing but also its form is equally significant for its due interpretation from Marxist perspective (Lois Tyson p. 66).

A Marxist critic generally focuses on material and historical realities that help to produce a literary piece of work. The terms like Competitiveness, Commodification, material conditions, exploitative power of socio-economic systems so on stand out in the milieu of Marxist criticism. The concepts presented above prove greatly instrumental to get insights into the inner fabric of the literary piece of work and interpret it to its very core and come up with sound understanding of what is being studied. Marxist critics mostly raise the issues for the understanding of the literary pieces of writing in terms of history, materialism and power mechanism.

2.3 Marxists' General View of Literature.

Marxists believe literature to be a cultural and socio-economic product, so it does contain ideological conditions of the age it is written in (Tyson, p 66). Hence, literature may be interpreted and understood from point of view of the culture, society and economic conditions of the time, contrary to something transcendental revelation in platonic sense.

From Marxist perspective, realistic literature serves its purpose to its best. Realism in literary works manifests the actual conditions prevailing and affecting the individuals in the real world. It suits Marxism at the best. However, there are many Marxists who also attach importance to non-realistic and experimental literature because the modern world's fragmentation and alienation is well-represented through this type of literary texts. From this view, such literary texts offer "a critique of the fragmented world and the alienated human beings produced by capitalism in today's world." (Tyson, p 66).

2.4 Marxist Touches of Moth Smoke in Prevision Research.

“Moth Smoke is struggle of characters’ fighting for ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ and this struggle, and their consequent actions shapes for their future.” (Saleem, 2015, p161). The novel stands on the anchor sheet of fight for material comforts and prosperity. The ‘Haves’ enjoy what is categorically denied to the “Have-nots”. This is the conflict which stands as the thick trunk and the other issues are just the branches growing out of it. “When disparities become too great, a superior right that to life outweighs the right to property.” (Hamid, 2001, P.64). “The protagonist’s poor social standing is set in contrast with his best friend’s financial stability.” (Saleem P.148). The difference or disparity in financial position of two friends cause Daru’s jealousy towards him and ultimately lead him to betray him by developing unfair relations with his wife. The “Haves” enjoy the luxuries of life that can hardly be imagined by the “Have-nots.” In fact, the “Haves” squander what the “Have-nots” long and yearn to get in bits. Such state of affairs leads chaos and crime.

The society is torn into two classes: the upper and the lower class. The former is smaller but highly influential and affluent; the latter is larger but deprived of amenities of life. (Malik, Tajamul Islam, 2017). The society presented in the novel is divided into two classes. They fight each other to have edge over each other. Poor individuals like Murad Badshah with high qualification of M.A in English fails to get a job and eke out their respectable living in decent way. While, the elite individual like Ozi and his friends squander riches in aimless parties as the show off of their wealth for just a time pass. The two classes live apart in their respective world from living standard point of view but the lower suffer at the cost elite’s high-flown life-style.

In the novel Hamid portrays the fragmented society of Pakistan. Within Pakistan there is another Pakistani society which controls its economy and power structure (Ahmed, 2009, p.218). “It is a very candid portrayal of drug use, adultery, betrayals, and class relations within the Pakistani elite ruling since independence in 1947. (Ahmed, p.278). The elite class is exploitative. The lower class suffers under its negative impact and is the adverse sufferer. In Moth Smoke, the lower class is led astray under frustration and disappointment. The society as a whole in “Moth Smoke appears to be ruthless, immoral and driven by lust of money.” (Ahmed, p 278).

Moth Smoke has been explored from different angles and points of views. Be it the Post-Colonial study, class conflict, Historical Perspective, or other-wise, in every research or study of the novel, the Marxist perspective appears prominently. Though this literature review is not exhaustive considering the space of this study, but whatever it has come up with reveals vividly that there has hardly been any specific Marxist criticism of the novel.

Considering this view, the research is going to be devoted to have deep dive into Marxist perspective specifically for worthwhile understanding and due interpretation of the novel under study—Moth Smoke.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design.

The research conducted on literary works normally follows descriptive designs. This

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

research is also carried out on descriptive design. It focuses on the elaboration of the reference from the text contents and literary illustrations to reach the set findings.

3.2 Research Method:

This research follows the method of in-depth study of the novel. Several close readings have been given to go through and select the material from the novel in order to present accurate references, solid facts and documentary evidences for the valid research purposes. In addition to this, I have studied reviews, research papers, research articles, research theses, and reliable internet material for the completion of this research assignment.

3.3 Analysis & Interpretation

This research assignment is based on Marxist Criticism of the novel: *Moth Smoke*. It is the Marxist Critique on my part to reach an interpretation of the novel in Marxist perspective. Both Marxist analysis and interpretation of the novel are the targets to be achieved through this research.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

4.1 Marxist Criticism of *Moth Smoke*

Moth Smoke may be studied with fruitful insights through Marxist lens leading readers to a better understanding of the novel. The Marxist study taken up here touches the major aspects of the novel that may be critically analyzed in order to see how economic factors and forces affect individual life and the entire fabric of the society. Pakistan won independence in 1947. Since its independence, the country has remained in the grip of elite who enjoy privileges to the utmost degree. On the basis of the control over the sources of production and immense wealth, the affluent elite class has been all-in-all in every walk of life and the power machinery of the country. They control and operate everything by their sweet will disregarding the welfare of the rest of population. The novel portrays the conditions of the Pakistani society, based in Lahore, providing enough stuff to get insights into what goes with 'haves' and 'have-nots' from the Marxist perspective.

From Marxist viewpoint, the novel deals with control of the affluent elite over power structure of the country, commodification of certain characters, exploitation of the unprivileged by the elite, classism, Marxist rebellion of Daru Shehzad and Murad Badshah, and state of Pakistani society in view of such material realities.

4.2 Control of the Elite over Power Structure

The rich control the power structure of the country by means of their dominating influence. They own wealth earned by hook or crook, through it they exercise overwhelming influence in every affairs of the society. On the basis of their possession of boundless wealth, they actually operate the power machinery and run it to further their nefarious designs. The upper class uses money to secure and stay in control of power. One of their tool in this respect is the acquisition of high quality education. Ahmed (2015) observes: "That rich send their sons and daughters to the advanced European Countries for high quality education that ultimately helps them to control the state apparatuses of power." Additionally, there are one's like Aurangzeb's father who has

earned immense money through corruption and Malik Jiwan who has plundered “ half a million US dollars” through misuse of public funds, such people get everything done at finger tips. Daru Shehzad tells “Ozi’s (Aurangzeb’s) dad, the frequently invested but as yet incarcerated Federal Secretary (Retired) Khurram Shah” (Mohsin Hamid, P.11). The system is controlled by such people who are corrupt themselves. Mr. Malik Jiwan gets Daru out of bank job on a minor complaint. Daru tells, “a mobile unit responsible for protecting tonight’s illegal revelry,” whereas it was the same police who held Daru for drinking wine. This is something that makes Ozi declares: “I am wealthy, well-connected and successful. My father is an important person. In all likelihood, I will be an important person.” The elite wield the power in every sphere. This is the reason why Ozi is not accounted for his hit-and-run accident killing a boy with his pajero. It happened just because of the power control by the elite which has left Pakistani society backward, unjust, paralyzed and crumbling.

4.3 Commodification

Aurangzeb and his friend from affluent class throw parties greatly for commodification, by which a thing or person treated as an object, not on basis of its use value or exchange value but just to show off one’s status or wealth. Aurangzeb who had been abroad for higher studies was out of touch with the fellows of upper class of Lahore. In order to display and show off his riches, he spent extravagantly in the parties so as to make the impression of his riches and affluence on the other people of the same class.

The friends of Aurangzeb whom Daru call ‘Pickles’ also throw parties with similar attitude of the display of their riches and status. One may call it a type of fashion in the upper class where they were served wine, delicacies even drugs as a sign of their high social scale and affluence. This all was primarily meant to distinguish oneself as superior to most of the people living in hard conditions. In fact, the new house of Ozi given to him on his return from America is nothing but commodification in real sense. He has already a palace like his father’s house where could live rather comfortably in union with the rest of his family but in order to strike of awe his wealth and riches, Ozi’s father builds and hands over him as a sign of his affluence. It definitely reveals Marxist concept of commodification whose burden is ultimately borne by the lower working class.

4.4 The Exploitation of the Unprivileged by the Rich

Moth smoke vividly portrays the exploitation of the unprivileged at the hands of the elite. Daru loses his bank job because he fails to flatter the affluent rural landlord, a member of parliament, with half a million U.S dollars in the bank account where Daru worked. Malik Jiwan did not just say but practically carried it out: “I can have you thrown on the street.” (Hamid, p. 21) Daru was jobless in an instant and actually “thrown on the street.”

Life of Dilaram, a pretty village girl as she calls herself, was ruined by the landlord of his village. She says, “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.” (Hamid p. 50). The exploitation of the poor village girl does not stop with the landlord but he often calls her at his house and “He let his sons rape me. And sometimes his friends” (Hamid p. 50). The landlord eventually sells her for fifty rupees to one of his friends who take her to city. That fellow, Dilaram says, “He brought me to Heera Mandi and made me have

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

sex with men until he had his fifty rupees” (P.50). A prominent example of economic inequality breeds social injustice. Had Dilaram or her family been of same economic status, the landlord would not have even imagined to exploit her so inhumanly.

Murad Badshah’s failure to get a job befitting to his qualification that was M.A in English is also the outcome of the elites’ favouritism to the individuals of their class. The elite do not let the individuals of the lower or middle class rise from their down-trodden economic state. Instead the elite push them further down economically as to hold absolute command over the sources of income in the country. Daru’s failure to get other job after dismissal from the bank job is due to the same reason. The elite class wields both economy and power structure which misuses the both to their vested-interests. The job opportunities are there but they are only for those who enjoy backing of the elite, who get inducted their relatives and favorites in jobs. An interviewer says to Daru. “The boys we are hiring have connections worth more than their salaries.” (p. 53). Such is the state of affairs where the elite steer everything to their benefit to the very sheer loss of the sources of income to their profit only leaving the rest of the population in the lurch. From the Marxist perspective, the haves’ occupy the means of production and hold others at bay. *Moth Smoke* holds faithful mirror to such realities in order to expose the elitist mind-set and their exploitation the unprivileged members of the society.

4.5 Socio-Economic Conflict and Marxist Rebellion of Daru & Murad Badshah

Mohsin Hamid presents a faithful view of socio-economic conflict and how Dara Shikoh Shehzad (Daru) and Murad Badshah rebel against it. Daru loses his job because instead of expectedly flattering response to the landlord, he calls spade to spade to him saying, “Don’t threaten me, Mr. Jiwan. I don’t work for you.” (p. 21). Malik Jiwan expects him to be submissive to his high status and affluent position, but Daru reacts absolutely contrary to his expectations. The socio-economic conflict arises with intensity out of such phenomenon. The conflict drags Daru into economic predicament, social humiliation, drugs and finally to crime. Educated and groomed partially in elitist sphere, Daru is greatly sensitive to his socio-economic status. When in conflict Daru adopts rebellious attitude towards the socio-economic setup and follows wherever it leads him to. At first he takes to drugs, initially hashish and develops unfair relations with Ozi’s wife partly being jealous of his economic position and lower in worth than that of his own. He sells drugs among upper class individuals, and then he falls prey to criminal activities of robbing boutiques. Finally, he ends being jailed for Ozi’s murder of a boy in a road accident.

“Murad Badshah was a firm believer in the need for a large-scale redistribution of wealth.” (Hamid p.104). Murad was ideologically a staunch Marxist. He believed in equal economic status of Pakistani citizens. He stands much higher than Daru in socio-economic conflict with the system. After failing to get a decent job in the system dominated by upper class, he starts rickshaw-captain business with a few rickshaws at his hand. Earlier his business ran well, so he was satisfied with their income, but when yellow-cabs were launched under public policy, his income shrank substantially. The marauding yellow cabs had devastated rickshaw industry, so I conducted a little redistribution of wealth on my own.” (p. 63). He did so by robbing yellow-cabs drivers when they were asleep. He said that it was his strong belief that the right to property is at best “a contingent one.” He further says, “Ergo, the poor has the right to seal from the very rich,” when economic inequality forces them to do so (p. 64). He is fan of

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Professor Julius superb for such Marxist views and beliefs. Like Daru, Murad also moves from rickshaw business to violence, to robberies, to drugs-trafficking, killings, and other criminal activities. His predicament is immensely rooted in economic injustice in Pakistani society, which may be viewed in the Marxist perspective to its better understanding.

In the view of these realities presented in the novel, one can gather the idea that economic inequality, corruption of the upper class, misuse of the resources and disregard for the welfare of the poor on the part of elite has led Pakistani society to the verge collapse. The gap between the haves and have-nots is increasing day by day. The revelries of the affluent only add to the sufferings and degradation of the middle and lower class. The society seems to fall apart. Implication of Daru in Ozi's murder case because of Ozi's influential position leaves the impression of endless sufferings and injustice to the middle and lower class of society in Pakistan at the end of the novel. *Moth Smoke*, viewed through Marxist lens, reveals the ugly face of Pakistan society.

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored Marxist aspects in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Moth Smoke*. The research study was carried out in descriptive design following the method of close-reading and textual analysis and interpretation of the novel keeping in view the other research available at accessible sources. This study reveals that the novel highlights domination of elite over economic resources and power mechanism of the state of Pakistan, commodification of upper class as sign-value, in certain characters, exploitation of the unprivileged by the upper class socio-economic conflict in Marxist perspective, and Marxist rebellion of Darashikoh Shehzad and Murad Badshah. Finally the current state of affairs in the view of these facts reveal gloominess hovering ahead in future. The novel touches the very aspect which ails Pakistani society so seriously that calls for immediate remedy. It is the ailment of economic disparity which is the mother all other ills such as injustice, poor law and order, drug-trafficking and its consumption, crimes so on. The Marxist study of the novel reveals that major disease is economic inequality and possible salvation is redistribution of means and sources of economic production at the grass root level in the Pakistani society.

References:

- Hamid, Mohsin (2002). *Moth Smoke*, Grant Books, London,
Glossary of Literary Theory by Henderson & Christopher Brown
Eagleton, Terry (1978) *Criticism and Ideology*, New York: Schocken,
Rama et al. (2005). *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary* Pearson Longman.
Saleem, Ali Usman (2015). PhD Thesis titled *Paracolonialism: A Case of Post-1988 Anglophone Pakistani Fiction*, University of Bedfordshire
Malik, Tajamul Islam, *Moth Smoke: A study in the light of social conflict theory*, research Journal of English Language & literature, Vol: 5 issue 1. 2017
Ahmed, Munawar Iqbal, PhD Thesis; Title: *post Independence Pakistani fiction in English: A Socio-Political study with focus on Twilight in Delhi, The Murder of Aziz Khan, Ice-candy Man & Moth Smoke*, 2009, NUML, Islamabad.
Tyson Lois. *Literary Theory Today: A Friendly Guide to Readers*