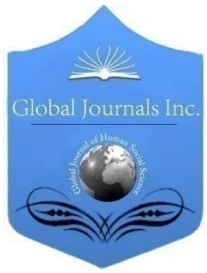
Volume 16 Issue 3
Originally issued as C1



Global Journal of human-social science: C
Sociology & Culture
Volume 16 Issue 1 Version 1.0 Year 2016
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia by Mohsin Hamid: A Social Satire on Contemporary Pakistan

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Abstract- The novel under-study is Mohsin Hamid's How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia. The study is an attempt to seek answer to the question as to whether the novel can be termed as a 'social satire' or not; and whether it is set in contemporary Pakistan or otherwise. This question precisely governs the overall research. The analysis shows that the novel under-study tacitly satirizes the social institutions of the country it is set in. It has been found that it holds the social wrongs of various institutions up to ridicule more than the individual follies. The targets of the attack are social areas like health, education, bureaucracy, industry etc., and sufficient textual proofs support the same. So it can safely be termed as a social satire. As far the unnamed place is concerned, the textual evidences and analysis of secondary sources particularly regarding the level, nature and frequency of ills like corruption, nepotism, terrorism and insecurity corroborate that the novel is set in contemporary Pakistan.

GJHSS-C Classification : FOR Code: 370105



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How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia by Mohsin Hamid: A Social Satire on Contemporary Pakistan

Hashir Iftikhar [α] & Muhammad Imran [σ]

Abstract- The novel under-study is Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia.* The study is an attempt to seek answer to the question as to whether the novel can be termed as a 'social satire' or not; and whether it is set in contemporary Pakistan or otherwise. This question precisely governs the overall research. The analysis shows that the novel under-study tacitly satirizes the social institutions of the country it is set in. It has been found that it holds the social wrongs of various institutions up to ridicule more than the individual follies. The targets of the attack are social areas like health, education, bureaucracy, industry etc., and sufficient textual proofs support the same. So it can safely be termed as a social satire. As far the unnamed place is concerned, the textual evidences and analysis of secondary sources particularly regarding the level, nature and frequency of ills like corruption, nepotism, terrorism and insecurity corroborate that the novel is set in contemporary Pakistan.

I. Introduction

Modern-day Pakistan is facing numerous socio-economic problems which have, to a larger extent, undermined the social texture and the credibility of various institutions. Inequitable distribution of wealth, improper utilization of country's resources and unchecked rise in population have engendered several concerns regarding living standard, health and education of the masses. Bulk of population living below poverty line is compelled to live in the same way - deprived of social and economic benefits. In Pakistan, poverty drastically crushes down the already down-trodden lot that in turn gives way to many social ills. As Momina Cheema quotes Bertrand Russell in her essay titled *Shaping the Future of Pakistan*. She writes, "The British philosopher Bertrand Russell once remarked, "If one man offers you democracy and another offers you a bag of grain, at what stage of starvation will you prefer the grain to the vote?" Clearly, before Pakistan can tackle such complex issues as democracy and globalization, it must deal with the most basic concerns of human survival. Poverty is the first and foremost challenge Pakistan faces in the 21st century. More than a third of the population falls below the poverty line" (Cheema, 2013). In order to get rich in this country in a relatively shorter span of time, one needs to follow an out-of-box strategy besides hard work and devotion. As the novel under-study suggests, one needs to have links with politicians and bureaucrats to legalize one's otherwise substandard business operating procedures. The novel *How To Get Filthy Rich In Rising Asia* carries one of such themes and it tacitly evinces rampant corruption and weak social institutions. Hamid styles the novel as a sort of self-help book of how to succeed in business. The book has twelve chapters each laying out a guideline for success in business in modern Asia which include "Get an Education," "Don't Fall in Love," "Avoid Idealists," "Work for Yourself," and similar others. Written as a self-help book, he addresses his protagonist as 'you'. The 'you' is not named. Neither is the country or city he lives in nor his wife or son, who are all referred to in generic terms – his lover is always "the pretty girl" no matter how old she grows. The protagonist moves from rural area to a metropolis with his family. In the big city he gets himself education and a job of delivering DVDs for a video retailer, which brings him into contact with the pretty girl, who works at a beauty salon and is plotting her escape from her dysfunctional family. He falls in love with the pretty girl and installs her as the ideal woman in his heart, where she will remain ever after. He goes to a university and falls in with some sort of political organization that in exchange for membership offers him a monthly cash stipend, food and clothing, and a bed. His mother dies of cancer. Arifa Akbar writes in her review, "The death of the main character's mother from cancer – protracted because treatment is unaffordable – is quietly devastating" (Akbar, 2013). Learning the rules to being a business success as he goes along, he leaves his village and family behind, has an irregular, long-term, mostly distant relationship with the 'pretty girl'. He gets married and has a son, and maneuvers deftly through the poverty, crime and bizarre bureaucracy. I have incorporated the said novel in my study that will attempt to seek answer to the following question.

a) *Research Question*

- Is the novel How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia by Mohsin Hamid a social satire on contemporary Pakistan?

b) *Purpose & Significance of the Study*

In the criticism of contemporary Pakistani English novels, it would be a new addition. There is a

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need to critically evaluate and recognize the contribution of the Pakistani English writers. The study is an effort to bring contemporary Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid and his latest work into critical focus. It will pave the way for other researchers to take up such projects in future. The study will analyze as to whether the novel under-study may be termed as a social satire and whether there are any evidences that it is set in modern-day Pakistan.

c) Review of Literature

Theo Tait in the book-review refers to Rana Dasgupta's article about India's new rich in which he explained that India's economic growth had been quite explosive for the small English- speaking upper class to monopolize its profits. The old cosmopolitan elites, he maintained, are now crowded by private businessmen, estate agents, retailers and general wheel-dealers that are less well-versed in English but they are making enormous money and in fact, wielding more political power. They are not the higher degree-holders but are skilled in the field of opportunity and profit and "they are at home in the booming world of overloads, connections, bribes, political loopholes, sweeteners – and occasional violence – that sends their Anglicized peers running for the nearest cappuccino" (Tait, 2013). Tait says that Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* follows the rise and fall of one of these wheel-dealers. "The novel is set in Pakistan, not India, in a megalopolis that mostly resembles his hometown, Lahore" (Tait, 2013). The reviewer adds that the novel has certain complex moves, however, initially "it seems to be a satire powered by a cool, rational fury about the condition of life in Pakistan" (Tait, 2013). The protagonist of the novel, referred to as "you" dreams of becoming rich. He learns the ways of becoming filthy rich and uses them with great acumen. The business he founds is purely based on deception but he knows he is not the only one doing so. 'When in Rome, do as Romans do' is very much in his mind. His setting up of water-business and the under-hand dealings with the bureaucrat and politician to gain success may rightly be understood as a pungent satire on Pakistani society and its standards. Michiko Kakutani writes, "From a job as "a non-expired-labeled expired-goods salesman" (which means exactly what it sounds like, selling old items that have been relabeled with new expiration dates) he sets himself up as a bottled-water tycoon" (Kakutani, 2013). The reviewer adds that the hero's business is that of pouring boiled tap water into mineral-water bottles recovered from restaurants, which gradually evolves into a thriving big-time business, enabling him to ascend into the firmament of the wealthy with a big house, a driver and lots of security to protect him from the envious rabble. Lack of transparent check and balance and approval by the authorities of something that is unethical and substandard certainly show corruptible institutions. In this regard Parul Sehgal asserts that the depiction of various things in the novel suggests that we are in Pakistan. For instance, the growing concern for the bulk of the country's population being the non-availability of clean water hardly evades the novelist's attention. Hamid satirically points towards poor sewerage system of the country, where pipes of drinking water are in dilapidated condition; their cracks allow the gutter contents sneak in, "with the result that taps in locales rich and poor alike disgorge liquids that, while for the most part clear and odorless, reliably contain trace levels of feces and microorganisms capable of causing diarrhea, hepatitis, dysentery and typhoid" (Hamid, 2013, p.99). In addition to health issues, the novelist satirizes other ills like institutional corruption, terrorism, bribery and violence etc. which are interspersed in such a way that it corroborates Pakistan as the most probable venue. The reviewer writes about the novelist, "He's never merely telling a story, he's pitting his story against prevailing narratives about Pakistan, the roots of radicalization, the unevenness of economic growth" (Sehgal, 2013). Sehgal adds that Mohsin Hamid like Mohammed Hanif, the author of Our Lady of Alice Bhatti, "creates characters who enact the life of the nation" (Sehgal, 2013). In the same vein does Alex Gilvarry call the novel a satiric commentary of today's Pakistan. The reviewer writes, "The city of Rising Asia remains nameless, but through the lens of Hamid's critical eye, we understand it to be a metropolis closely resembling Lahore, Pakistan. Drones fly overhead. Corruption, terrorism, and violence are everyday occurrences" (Gilvarry, 2013). Claire Chambers in the book- review juxtaposes the current social scenario of Pakistan with that of General Zia ul Haq's time. The aftermaths of Zia's Islamization are clearly perceptible in contemporary Pakistan which makes it most probable that the novel is set here. Chambers remarks, "The characters age and the plot spans at least six decades, but the social affairs, technologies and politics of Pakistan are pure twenty-first-century throughout, replete with mobile phones, bombings, drone attacks, bearded Islamists and covered women, even though Pakistan only began to Islamize during President Zia's despotic regime of 1977-88" (Chambers, 2013). Leslie N. Patino's review on the book suggests that it is satiric commentary on a third world country. According to the reviewer, the story of unnamed protagonist told by an unsentimental narrator look "wholly believable in the third world where widespread poverty drains individuals and impacts almost every aspect of society including questions of morality" (Patino, 2013). In fact, the events and details of the mentioned facets of life reflect Pakistani society. Ron Charles, while commenting on the genre – self-help book says that Hamid "transformed it to tell the story of an ambitious man in the Third World" (Charles, 2013). It's, according to the reviewer, a melancholy reflection on modern life where

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"Rampant nepotism, bribes and corruption are the rule. Political parties are just rival gangs, assassins ride motorcycles down the crowded streets and terrorists' bombs randomly rip apart lives and homes without any particular reason" (Charles, 2013).

Jim Cullen in the book-review puts in, "It (How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia) is a wonderful love story, an eloquent case study of the pros and cons of family nepotism as a society safety net and a brilliant expose of the inner workings of military/industrial / governmental corruption" (Cullen, 2013). This shows that the novelist has deliberately launched satire on the country's sorry state of institutional affairs. William Skidelsky makes a good point on the first word of the novel's title. He writes, "Hamid adds extra satirical bite to this tale by presenting it in the guise of an inspirational 'how to' guide, of the sort that has become popular in sub-continental Asia" (Skidelsky, 2013). He terms it an effective satire. However, the technique of not naming people and places give it more generality. He remarks, "And the truth is that *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, while effective as satire, works less well on the human level. The basic problem is that the generalising tendency of self-help (a genre whose goal is to suggest that we are basically all the same) rubs up against literature's need for specificity" (Skidelsky, 2013).

II. Research Methodology

a) Methodology and Plan of Research

The present study falls in the category of qualitative research and it will make use of 'social satire' as a perspective. A close textual analysis as well as analysis of the secondary sources on the work concerned will be carried out. The study is related with whether the novel under-study is a social satire on contemporary Pakistan or not. With the definition of the term 'satire' and keeping in mind the current social scenario in Pakistan, certain benchmarks will be set to test the hypothetical question. Textual evidences will be quite important in this respect and the supporting ones will be highlighted. I intend to carry out close reading of the suggested text to sort out relevant passages for the analysis. Ultimately the project will be shaped as social and literary analysis.

b) Structure of the Study

The sequence of the steps to be followed during this research is as under:

- To explain the term 'social satire' to set it as a benchmark against which the analysis can be carried out.
- To find out the evidences from the text as to whether the said work falls in the category of satire.
- To see if the novel is set in Pakistan, though the locality is unnamed.
- Conclusion

c) Research Method and Procedure

This research focuses on reading the selected text of Mohsin Hamid's How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia other related researches/reviews that have been done in this field before. 'Social Satire' is used to form the basis of the study. The work under study is analyzed from the perspective of social texture depicted therein. Important texts, sourced from academic and public libraries, are consulted as the most significant sources of critical information.

d) Data Analysis

i. *Satire*

Concise Encyclopedia defines satire as an "artistic form in which human or individual vices, folly, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other methods, sometimes with the intent to bring about improvement". Robert Harris in the essay titled *The Purpose and Method of Satire* states that the best definitions of satire should be coined from the blend of its corrective purpose and its literary use. A reasonable definition of satire, then, is "a literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humor and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved. The true satirist is conscious of the frailty of institutions of man's devising and attempts through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling (Harris, 1990. P.1) Harris is in the same essay says that satire is essentially moral even when the values are not explicitly stated. The satirist draws the attention to something that is being violated. As he puts in, "The satirist does not need to state specific moral alternatives to replace the villainy he attacks because the morality is either already present in the lip service his target pays to virtue, or it is apparent by implication" (Harris, 1990, p.3). It is in the light of these lines that the novel under-study is to be judged as to see whether it falls in the category of satire or not. In this novel, the incidents and occasions are not wanting where Hamid has launched attack, mainly through irony, on the social institutions and malpractices therein. They can be analyzed in separate headings.

ii. *Health and Education*

Both these sectors, without doubt, serve as backbone to a country's strength. Progress of a nation is largely dependent, among other things, on these two areas. If a country ensures its citizens proper health and education facilities irrespective of their caste, class and creed, it sails smoothly on the track of progress and success. Illiterate and diseased majority is a drain on country's economy. It is quite ironical that in modern-day Pakistan, these two areas are ignored more than any other sector. As a result, many fatal diseases are spreading at an alarming rate at one hand and uneducated mindset getting dominant on the other. Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is

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basically the story of a poor rural boy who becomes a business tycoon by a dint of his understanding of the ways of getting rich. In the backdrop of his story, the novelist gets a chance to highlight the social degradation in several areas. The technique of not naming the characters and places is used to render the novel a wider sweep and generality. The village the young boy lives in gives the description of general rural landscaping of the country. The residents are compelled to drink water from the same places their cattle do and rainfall in monsoon leaves many pools of stagnant water which are feeding grounds for the germs causing various diseases. "The people of your village relive themselves downstream of where they wash their clothes, a place in turn downstream of where they drink. Farther upstream, the village before yours does the same" (Hamid, 2013, p.6). The fact that protagonist's sister died of dengue fever points towards the indifference of health authorities and lack of strategies on their part to combat the killing virus that has claimed the lives of many in Pakistan in the past few years. "Your sister is killed by dengue, her high fever relenting, and briefly offering false hope, before internal bleeding starves her organs and causes them to fail" (p.131). Besides, the miserable plight of governmental educational institutions and exam system are also brought into satirical focus. Corporeal punishment is still in practice in many educational institutes in Pakistan. "You" – the hero of the novel studies at a school where students are not allowed to ask questions. They have to give affirmative nod to what their teachers say. "You" makes the mistake of correcting his teacher's error for which he pays the penalty as Hamid points, "Today your teacher reaches into the pocket of his tunic, where he keeps a small amount of coarse sand, and grips you by the ear, the sand on his fingertips adding abrasion to the enormous pressure he applies, so that your earlobe is not only crushed but also made raw and slightly bloody" (p.23). Such practices are common in Pakistan where teacher-student relationship in most parts is considered as brute master and slave relationship. The novel also satirizes the state of affairs in the school and during exams. He writes, "There are fifty pupils in your class and stools for thirty. The others sit on the floor or stand"(p.21). Even worse is seen during exams. "A small payment and exam invigilators are willing to overlook neighborly cheating. More and someone else can be sat in your seat to write your paper. More still and no writing needed, blank exam books becoming, miraculously, a first-class result"(p.60). These things certainly don't look surprising to a Pakistani reader.

iii. *Rampant Corruption and Nepotism*

The analysis of the novel shows that corruption pervades even the most sacred of professions like teaching and schooling. Hamid's satiric fingers do expose it in the novel. He asserts that there are many incidents where the inductions of teachers are done through bribery and nepotism. "A bribe", he writes, "equivalent to sixty percent of one year's prospective salary, and a good low-level connection in the education bureaucracy in the form of a cousin, secured only the post he (teacher) currently occupies" (Hamid, 2013, p.23). It is quite ironical that the people who are supposed to be the stakeholders in the esteemed enterprise of nation and character building get a place not on merit but through unfair means. It is a big satirical question as how the characterless ones are going to help build a sound character. At another place Hamid says that it is the place (most probably Pakistan), where one might prefer to become a meter reader to being a teacher mainly because there would be more chances of corruption and where people are ever-ready to steal electricity. In connection with the case of protagonist's success in running a fake business, the negative role of bureaucracy and politician in giving him the NOC is also satirized by the novelist. In order to meet the bureaucrat concerned he gave many bribes to the personnel of the office. During the course of his business, "permits denied, inspections failed, meters improperly read, audits initiated, all these scams and hassles you have over the years surmounted by greasing junior and mid-level palms" (p.141). The success in business would, therefore, largely depend on one's connections with bureaucracy and politicians.

iv. *Terrorism*

Terrorism is one of the lethal social problems Pakistan is facing of late and which has taken myriads of innocent lives. Bomb blasts, suicide attacks, target killings etc. have been the day-to-day occurrences. They have instilled a massive wave of terror and sense of insecurity among the people. Though Mohsin Hamid does not give a detailed account of the acts of terrorism but a clue to this prevailing menace clearly evinces that the locale of the novel is no other than contemporary Pakistan. He shows satirical approach in suggesting that the use of violence is one of the prerequisites for getting along well in business in this country. It is one of the many guidelines stated in the form of titles of chapters in the novel. When hero goes to meet the politician, the security situation at the latter's residence do show his apprehension of the prospective violence. Hamid writes, "Fears of terrorism have led the politician to take measures to secure his residence, erecting a razor wire topped boundary wall far in excess of permissible heights "(p. 144). He has also detailed a number of policemen for his security. The satire may be understood in a way that politician's life is more precious than thousands of laymen exposed to any kind of life-taking violence round the clock. In the novel, there is also another mention of bomb blast that took place in a hotel earlier some time. "The hotel is the city's most exclusive, its old wind temporarily closed and scaffolded

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since a massive truck bomb shattered windows and ignited fires inside…" (p.103).

III. Conclusion

The work selected for this research is Mohsin Hamid's novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. The study conducted has been based on the research question to which I have sought the answer. The research shows that the novel under-study tacitly satirizes the social institutions of the country it is set in. It has been found that it holds up the social wrongs of various institutions to ridicule more than the individual follies. The targets of the attack are social areas like health, education, bureaucracy, industry etc., so it can safely be termed as a social satire. As far the unnamed place is concerned, the textual evidences and analysis of secondary sources particularly regarding the level, nature and frequency of ills like corruption, nepotism, terrorism and insecurity corroborate that the novel is set in contemporary Pakistan. I am hopeful that this research would be a helpful study for the future researchers in analyzing the work from different angles. The study would really be a contribution towards literary criticism of Pakistani English fiction.

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