

# 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 understudy 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.

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*Index terms*— understudy tacitly satirizes, social areas like health, education, bureaucracy, industry.

## 1 Introduction

Modern-day Pakistan is facing numerous socioeconomic 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 downtrodden 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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

### 3 C) REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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44 the pretty girl, who works at a beauty salon and is plotting her escape from her dysfunctional family. He falls  
45 in love with the pretty girl and installs her as the ideal woman in his heart, where she will remain ever after. He  
46 goes to a university and falls in with some sort of political organization that in exchange for membership offers  
47 him a monthly cash stipend, food and clothing, and a bed. His mother dies of cancer. Arifa Akbar writes in her  
48 review, "The death of the main character's mother from cancer -protracted because treatment is unaffordable -is  
49 quietly devastating" (Akbar, 2013). Learning the rules to being a business success as he goes along, he leaves  
50 his village and family behind, has an irregular, long-term, mostly distant relationship with the 'pretty girl'. He  
51 gets married and has a son, and maneuvers deftly through the poverty, crime and bizarre bureaucracy. I have  
52 incorporated the said novel in my study that will attempt to seek answer to the following question.

### 53 2 b) Purpose & Significance of the Study

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

### 59 3 c) Review of Literature

60 Theo Tait in the book-review refers to Rana Dasgupta's article about India's new rich in which he explained  
61 that India's economic growth had been quite explosive for the small English-speaking upper class to monopolize  
62 its profits. The old cosmopolitan elites, he maintained, are now crowded by private businessmen, estate agents,  
63 retailers and general wheel-dealers that are less well-versed in English but they are making enormous money  
64 and in fact, wielding more political power. They are not the higher degree-holders but are skilled in the  
65 field of opportunity and profit and "they are at home in the booming world of overloads, connections, bribes,  
66 political loopholes, sweeteners and occasional violence -that sends their Anglicized peers running for the nearest  
67 cappuccino" (Tait, 2013). Tait says that Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* follows the rise and fall  
68 of one of these wheeldealers. "The novel is set in Pakistan, not India, in a megalopolis that mostly resembles his  
69 hometown, Lahore" (Tait, 2013). The reviewer adds that the novel has certain complex moves, however, initially  
70 "it seems to be a satire powered by a cool, rational fury about the condition of life in Pakistan" (Tait, 2013).  
71 The protagonist of the novel, referred to as "you" dreams of becoming rich. He learns the ways of becoming  
72 filthy rich and uses them with great acumen. The business he founds is purely based on deception but he knows  
73 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  
74 water-business and the under-hand dealings with the bureaucrat and politician to gain success may rightly be  
75 understood as a pungent satire on Pakistani society and its standards. Michiko Kakutani writes, "From a job  
76 as "a non-expired-labeled expired-goods salesman" (which means exactly what it sounds like, selling old items  
77 that have been relabeled with new expiration dates) he sets himself up as a bottled-water tycoon" (Kakutani,  
78 2013). The reviewer adds that the hero's business is that of pouring boiled tap water into mineral-water bottles  
79 recovered from restaurants, which gradually evolves into a thriving big-time business, enabling him to ascend  
80 into the firmament of the wealthy with a big house, a driver and lots of security to protect him from the envious  
81 rabble. Lack of transparent check and balance and approval by the authorities of something that is unethical  
82 and substandard certainly show corruptible institutions. In this regard Parul Sehgal asserts that the depiction  
83 of various things in the novel suggests that we are in Pakistan. For instance, the growing concern for the bulk of  
84 the country's population being the non-availability of clean water hardly evades the novelist's attention. Hamid  
85 satirically points towards poor sewerage system of the country, where pipes of drinking water are in dilapidated  
86 condition; their cracks allow the gutter contents sneak in, "with the result that taps in locales rich and poor  
87 alike disgorge liquids that, while for the most part clear and odorless, reliably contain trace levels of feces and  
88 microorganisms capable of causing diarrhea, hepatitis, dysentery and typhoid" (Hamid, 2013, p.99). In addition  
89 to health issues, the novelist satirizes other ills like institutional corruption, terrorism, bribery and violence etc.  
90 which are interspersed in such a way that it corroborates Pakistan as the most probable venue. The reviewer  
91 writes about the novelist, "He's never merely telling a story, he's pitting his story against prevailing narratives  
92 about Pakistan, the roots of radicalization, the unevenness of economic growth" (Sehgal, 2013). Sehgal adds that  
93 Mohsin Hamid like Mohammed Hanif, the author of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, "creates characters who enact  
94 the life of the nation" (Sehgal, 2013). In the same vein does Alex Gilvarry call the novel a satiric commentary  
95 of today's Pakistan. The reviewer writes, "The city of *Rising Asia* remains nameless, but through the lens  
96 of Hamid's critical eye, we understand it to be a metropolis closely resembling Lahore, Pakistan. Drones fly  
97 overhead. Corruption, terrorism, and violence are everyday occurrences" (Gilvarry, 2013). Claire Chambers in  
98 the book-review juxtaposes the current social scenario of Pakistan with that of General Zia ul Haq's time. The  
99 aftermaths of Zia's Islamization are clearly perceptible in contemporary Pakistan which makes it most probable  
100 that the novel is set here. Chambers remarks, "The characters age and the plot spans at least six decades,  
101 but the social affairs, technologies and politics of Pakistan are pure twenty-first-century throughout, replete  
102 with mobile phones, bombings, drone attacks, bearded Islamists and covered women, even though Pakistan  
103 only began to Islamize during President Zia's despotic regime of 1977-88" (Chambers, 2013). Leslie N. Patino's

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104 review on the book suggests that it is satiric commentary on a third world country. According to the reviewer,  
105 the story of unnamed protagonist told by an unsentimental narrator look "wholly believable in the third world  
106 where widespread poverty drains individuals and impacts almost every aspect of society including questions of  
107 morality" (Patino, 2013). In fact, the events and details of the mentioned facets of life reflect Pakistani society.  
108 Ron Charles, while commenting on the genre -self-help book says that Hamid "transformed it to tell the story of  
109 an ambitious man in the Third World" (Charles, 2013). It's, according to the reviewer, a melancholy reflection  
110 on modern life where "Rampant nepotism, bribes and corruption are the rule. Political parties are just rival  
111 gangs, assassins ride motorcycles down the crowded streets and terrorists' bombs randomly rip apart lives and  
112 homes without any particular reason" (Charles, 2013).

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

## 124 4 II.

### 125 5 Research Methodology a) Methodology and Plan of Research

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

### 133 6 b) Structure of the Study

134 The sequence of the steps to be followed during this research is as under: o To explain the term 'social satire' to  
135 set it as a benchmark against which the analysis can be carried out. o To find out the evidences from the text  
136 as to whether the said work falls in the category of satire. o To see if the novel is set in Pakistan, though the  
137 locality is unnamed. o Conclusion

### 138 7 c) Research Method and Procedure

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

### 143 8 d) Data Analysis

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

159 ii. Health and Education Both these sectors, without doubt, serve as backbone to a country's strength.  
160 Progress of a nation is largely dependent, among other things, on these two areas. If a country ensures its

## 9 RAMPANT CORRUPTION AND NEPOTISM

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161 citizens proper health and education facilities irrespective of their caste, class and creed, it sails smoothly on  
162 the track of progress and success. Illiterate and diseased majority is a drain on country's economy. It is quite  
163 ironical that in modern-day Pakistan, these two areas are ignored more than any other sector. As a result, many  
164 fatal diseases are spreading at an alarming rate at one hand and uneducated mindset getting dominant on the  
165 other. Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is basically the story of a poor rural boy who  
166 becomes a business tycoon by a dint of his understanding of the ways of getting rich. In the backdrop of his  
167 story, the novelist gets a chance to highlight the social degradation in several areas. The technique of not naming  
168 the characters and places is used to render the novel a wider sweep and generality. The village the young boy  
169 lives in gives the description of general rural landscaping of the country. The residents are compelled to drink  
170 water from the same places their cattle do and rainfall in monsoon leaves many pools of stagnant water which are  
171 feeding grounds for the germs causing various diseases. "The people of your village relive themselves downstream  
172 of where they wash their clothes, a place in turn downstream of where they drink. Farther upstream, the village  
173 before yours does the same" (Hamid, 2013, p.6). The fact that protagonist's sister died of dengue fever points  
174 towards the indifference of health authorities and lack of strategies on their part to combat the killing virus that  
175 has claimed the lives of many in Pakistan in the past few years. "Your sister is killed by dengue, her high fever  
176 relenting, and briefly offering false hope, before internal bleeding starves her organs and causes them to fail"  
177 (p.131). Besides, the miserable plight of governmental educational institutions and exam system are also brought  
178 into satirical focus. Corporeal punishment is still in practice in many educational institutes in Pakistan. "You"  
179 -the hero of the novel studies at a school where students are not allowed to ask questions. They have to give  
180 affirmative nod to what their teachers say. "You" makes the mistake of correcting his teacher's error for which  
181 he pays the penalty as Hamid points, "Today your teacher reaches into the pocket of his tunic, where he keeps a  
182 small amount of coarse sand, and grips you by the ear, the sand on his fingertips adding abrasion to the enormous  
183 pressure he applies, so that your earlobe is not only crushed but also made raw and slightly bloody" (p.23). Such  
184 practices are common in Pakistan where teacher-student relationship in most parts is considered as brute master  
185 and slave relationship. The novel also satirizes the state of affairs in the school and during exams. He writes,  
186 "There are fifty pupils in your class and stools for thirty. The others sit on the floor or stand" (p.21). Even  
187 worse is seen during exams. "A small payment and exam invigilators are willing to overlook neighborly cheating.  
188 More and someone else can be sat in your seat to write your paper. More still and no writing needed, blank  
189 exam books becoming, miraculously, a first-class result" (p.60). These things certainly don't look surprising to a  
190 Pakistani reader.

191 iii.

## 9 Rampant Corruption and Nepotism

192 The analysis of the novel shows that corruption pervades even the most sacred of professions like teaching and  
193 schooling. Hamid's satiric fingers do expose it in the novel. He asserts that there are many incidents where the  
194 inductions of teachers are done through bribery and nepotism. "A bribe", he writes, "equivalent to sixty percent  
195 of one year's prospective salary, and a good low-level connection in the education bureaucracy in the form of a  
196 cousin, secured only the post he (teacher) currently occupies" (Hamid, 2013, p.23). It is quite ironical that the  
197 people who are supposed to be the stakeholders in the esteemed enterprise of nation and character building get a  
198 place not on merit but through unfair means. It is a big satirical question as how the characterless ones are going  
199 to help build a sound character. At another place Hamid says that it is the place (most probably Pakistan),  
200 where one might prefer to become a meter reader to being a teacher mainly because there would be more chances  
201 of corruption and where people are ever-ready to steal electricity. In connection with the case of protagonist's  
202 success in running a fake business, the negative role of bureaucracy and politician in giving him the NOC is also  
203 satirized by the novelist. In order to meet the bureaucrat concerned he gave many bribes to the personnel of  
204 the office. During the course of his business, "permits denied, inspections failed, meters improperly read, audits  
205 initiated, all these scams and hassles you have over the years surmounted by greasing junior and midlevel palms"  
206 (p.141). The success in business would, therefore, largely depend on one's connections with bureaucracy and  
207 politicians. iv. Terrorism Terrorism is one of the lethal social problems Pakistan is facing of late and which  
208 has taken myriads of innocent lives. Bomb blasts, suicide attacks, target killings etc. have been the day-to-day  
209 occurrences. They have instilled a massive wave of terror and sense of insecurity among the people. Though  
210 Mohsin Hamid does not give a detailed account of the acts of terrorism but a clue to this prevailing menace  
211 clearly evinces that the locale of the novel is no other than contemporary Pakistan. He shows satirical approach  
212 in suggesting that the use of violence is one of the prerequisites for getting along well in business in this country.  
213 It is one of the many guidelines stated in the form of titles of chapters in the novel. When hero goes to meet the  
214 politician, the security situation at the latter's residence do show his apprehension of the prospective violence.  
215 Hamid writes, "Fears of terrorism have led the politician to take measures to secure his residence, erecting a  
216 razor wire topped boundary wall far in excess of permissible heights" (p. 144). He has also detailed a number  
217 of policemen for his security. The satire may be understood in a way that politician's life is more precious than  
218 thousands of laymen exposed to any kind of lifetaking violence round the clock. In the novel, there is also another  
219 mention of bomb blast that took place in a hotel earlier some time. "The hotel is the city's most exclusive, its old  
220 wind temporarily closed and scaffolded since a massive truck bomb shattered windows and ignited fires inside?"  
221 (p.103).

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223 10 III.

224 11 Conclusion

225 The work selected for this research is Mohsin Hamid's novel How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia. The study  
226 conducted has been based on the research question to which I have sought the answer. The research shows that  
227 the novel under-study tacitly satirizes the social institutions of the country it is set in. It has been found that it  
228 holds up the social wrongs of various institutions to ridicule more than the individual follies. The targets of the  
229 attack are social areas like health, education, bureaucracy, industry etc., so it can safely be termed as a social  
230 satire. As far the unnamed place is concerned, the textual evidences and analysis of secondary sources particularly  
231 regarding the level, nature and frequency of ills like corruption, nepotism, terrorism and insecurity corroborate  
232 that the novel is set in contemporary Pakistan. I am hopeful that this research would be a helpful study for the  
233 future researchers in analyzing the work from different angles. The study would really be a contribution towards  
literary criticism of Pakistani English fiction. <sup>1</sup>



Figure 1:

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<sup>1</sup>© 2016 Global Journals Inc. (US) How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia by Mohsin Hamid: A Social Satire on Contemporary Pakistan



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