

## Neo-Liberalism and Post-Feminist Fiction in Pakistan: A Globalized Critique

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### Abstract

*The Pakistani writers have been projecting women characters in their fiction in a traditional Pakistani social set up which supported a dominating position of the male figure. The oppressed portrayal of women underwent an upward mobility in the terminating quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century only because of the intervention stimulated by the Pakistani writer's interaction with the Diaspora. Postmodernism further helped pull the Pakistani writers away from the traditional set up, especially regarding the new feministic trends of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The neocolonial and neoliberal philosophies shattered the traditional feminist trends because the portrayals of women became more a success story rather than the story of an oppressed subject. This study delimits itself to the investigation of portrayals of women in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* by Mohsin Hamid under the lens of the neoliberalism. Hamid portrays the success story of "Pretty girl" who is ready to put aside the moral binding of the society to achieve her targets of success. The research further aims to determine the extent of deviation of such portrayal from the traditional feministic trends. The study employs the debate by Chandra Mohanty regarding the impact of neoliberal philosophy on fictional characters and reaches probable conclusion that the female portrayals are posing new challenges to the feminist scholarship of 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in the postcolonial states like Pakistan.*

**Key words:** Feminism, Women Portrayals, Neo-Liberalism, Pakistani Fiction, Ambition, Love.

### Introduction

Mohsin Hamid (2013) has attempted to dismantle the values of love and morality in his novels by claiming that love and pursuit for wealth share the same platform in the social structure of most of the postcolonial societies. This is the biggest blow to the erstwhile values of love, marriage, womanhood and feminism and hence the juxtaposition demands of equal rights for women and the struggle of women to achieve what they want to at every cost. He says, "Yes, the pursuit of love and pursuit of wealth have much in common. Both have the potential to inspire, motivate, uplift and kill" (Hamid, 2013, p. 38). The bolder statement exposes the reality that the pursuit of money and wealth by men and women in the world of novel has become as significant as it used to be for our pursuit of love. This is also because of the post-modern world portrayed by the novelist wherein the tradition is replaced by the non-entities and the same holds good for the feminism and so it seems to promote a situation wherein feminism seems seriously challenged and may find itself near the threshold of its own death.

There are two most important women characters in the novels besides many other women characters. One is the “pretty girl” and the other is “Mrs. Hero” [there are no names of the characters in the novel, so Mrs. Hero for the wife of the hero for the sake of convenience] Pretty girl is the most representative of the of the postmodern women whose aim of life is to focus more on money and status rather than the values of life that existed just a few years ago. Mrs. Hero is, similarly the woman who can have her will and can defy the life she does not like and can even make the man follow her dictates and the way of life. These two are in direct contrast to the women of 50 year ago who followed the dictates and wills of their husbands and always said “yes” without raising any eye brow and the feminist scholarship continued to raise debates and attempted to pave way for the solutions of women’s issues all around the world. Pretty girl and wife of the protagonist are the typical postmodern Pakistani women who would prefer their will to the will of anyone else and would always be ready to do away with any of their femininity or the feminine aspect for the sake of their will and ambition.

As such, the women characters developed by Hamid are in direct contrast to the women character developed in the Victorian novel (Hamid, 2000). For example, the heroines of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens and George Eliot depended on their men and always sought to become as good as possible for their men and attempted to be selected by the richest and powerful so that they may share the power and money of their men. The women characters portrayed in postcolonial literature too lamented about the loss of their rights because of their double colonization. However, women characters are infused with a change in their portrayals that they are not ready to accept the dictates of their men so willingly. For example, the women characters in the novel of Mumtaz Shahnawaz, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Kmaila Shamsie are such women as attempted their escape but within the moral limit set by the society. But the post 9/11 portrayals of women go one step ahead that they want to realize and establish their own life the way they want and are ready to violate any norms and ready to find out a way to exercise their will. For example, the woman character, Mumtaz in Hamid early novel is defiant and exercises her will through whatever means she had to. Same is the case with the women characters of Suleri, Hanif Mohammad, Bina Shah and Qaisra Shehraz. This radical shift in the portrayals of women in the south Asian fiction in general and in Pakistani fiction, especially, challenges the erstwhile existing norms and prompts for the renegotiation of new ways of looking at the women characters in the postmodern and post 9/11 fictions.

### **Literature Review**

In Paris in 1938, two scholars, Ludwig and Hayek introduced the term Neoliberalism, who had a good knowledge about different democracies available in the world and different developments that had taken in the process and evolution of democracy in the world. Monbiot tells us that Both exiles from Austria, they saw social democracy, exemplified by Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and the gradual development of Britain’s welfare state, as manifestations of a collectivism that occupied the same spectrum as nazism and communism (Monbiot, 2016).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her essay *Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neo-Liberalism and Radical Critique* Published in JSTOR (2015) suggests that the effects of neo-Liberalism have affected postmodern intellectual framings of transnational intersectional feminist theorizing and solidarity work. Mohanty's critique has mostly focused on decolonization of feminist scholarship and theory. Neo-liberalism has worked as a catalyst to this process of decolonization and so Postmodernists would suggest fluidities of identities. Mohanty further agrees with Mollen and opines,

This critique suggests that methodologies that entail institutional and systemic analyses of power, anchored in the experiences of subordination and resistance of the most marginalized communities of women, can be or are essentialist and reductionist. that they are not postmodernist and hence are modernist. (Mohanty, 2013, p. 969)

This critique definitely brings fluidity and questions the powers of established institutions in the colonized world especially. It is aided by the postmodernist tendencies which are skeptical of systematic analysis of such institution. Under such a situation the analysis of such institutions reaches a point at which discursive formations are transformed (Foucault (1969) and so the threshold level of disappearance of such scholarships begins. Mohanty while agreeing with the analysis of Cougan-Gehr suggests that "the emergence of the categories third world women and women of color in the 1980s displaced and marginalized the scholarship of African American women, thus marking a threshold of disappearance of feminist scholarship" (Mohanty, 2013, p. 270).

The world has gradually slid a little away from the established traditions of scholarship and has generated the concept of neo-liberalism under the influence of capitalism which has extended its reach on racialism as well as on feminism. Neo-liberalism has dominated the market economy where more emphasis is on the successful marketing rather than continuing the on the ever-increasing plurality of the traditional concepts. This new philosophy has turned all personal political and has further influenced the politics of representation. When this representation is disconnected from its traditional mooring is relatively not easier to digest. Murdock suggests that neo-liberal state of today begins to rely more on the non-governmental set ups and so the feminist theory becomes depoliticized. The whole process of this depoliticizing makes the state post-feminist even before it has achieved gender justice. Neoliberalism has been found working at the basis of human relation as well. A human relation has been affected by it and has given it a negative but a new and modern trend. It also redefines the customers that now these are defined as the buyers and the sellers which means that the value of a customer is based more on the fact as to how much he or she can buy or sell. This also determines the reward and punishment through its process of selling and buying. For example, Monbiot says, Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that "the market" delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning (Monbiot 2016).

### **Women Characters in Hamid's Novel**

The portrayal of women in the novel is specific to the overall theme and modernity of the novel, one woman is taken from the traditional and village landscape of the Northern areas of Pakistan and the second woman is more significant because she is the one who lives the whole novel. The reader is introduced to the pretty girl in the very teen age and then reader is provided a constant image of this woman till the end of the novel. Similarly, the other woman who stands in between the two extremes of modernity and tradition, yet totally brave and bold to assert herself without becoming meek or timid, exercises her will and never cares for the female traditional duties.

Pretty girl is the daughter of a drunk who earns nothing and thrives on the earnings of his wife and daughter. Pretty girl works in a saloon where the rich and the affluent come and try to become pretty. Pretty girl assists her seniors and serves drinks to the men waiting to carry their women from the beauty salon to their homes. This service brings her in contact with the men with the money. Though the hero does hanker after her and she too has a soft corner for him. But this soft corner has no values in stopping her from involving in any activity that may lead her to higher status of life.

Hamid says,

“But she has discovered, beyond their educational value that she actually enjoys films and even more surprisingly she actually enjoys talking to you. In you she has made a friend, a person who renders her life in the neighbourhood she hates more bearable” (Hamid, 2013, p. 51).

This girl is young and aspirant but falls a victim to the ills of the society that at that age she had started to drink herself and even invited the hero to drink. She is capable of securing wine and then she wills to meet the boy at her own terms and conditions. It is less for the love of the boy but for her own gratification. In the very first meeting with the boys she forgets all her strangeness with him and rather feels much more intimate with him. Hamid says,

“She opens her door when you knock, brings you inside and kisses you hard on the mouth” (Hamid, 2013, p. 111).

The pretty girl is a new woman who does not sit and weep for the attention of the male for the solution of her problems and would not cry for her rights. She is the woman who would rather stand up and find her own way, even if she has to use her body for this purpose. Her wish is not to become an ideal wife of a wealthy and powerful man but to become a successful woman and that is to escape from the circumstances in which she is found living. Hamid says, “The pretty girl, not surprisingly, is planning her escape from her family” (Hamid, 2013: 50). This is evident from the way she plans the finances of life. She knows very well that without money she cannot move in the society and cannot gain the desired status. So, she earns as much money as she can and keeps a certain amount of money for her future

plans. Though she gives her salary of the saloon to her parents, she continuously saves money she earns from the little low-budgeted photo shoots with the camera men who visit her saloon. The writer says, “The pretty girl has been saving without telling either or parents or the marketing manager believing that it represents her independence” (Hamid, 2013). She uses her body to secure this future and secure the support of the key men involved in this. She, therefore, buys the path of future rather than begging the people by going through rightful traditional ways because, in her mind, the wish to succeed is stronger than the wish to keep moral and become a good woman.

The pretty girl very soon takes the escape step and establishes herself as an independent young woman. She takes the charge of her life and begins to walk on the path of progress. Like any modern woman, the matter of love goes to sleep somewhere because the matter of money and status and being independent is more significant for her. The writer says,

“She earns enough to afford an apartment afford a modest but reliable car and live-in maid who can cook.” (Hamid, 2013, p. 64)

The relationship between the hero and the pretty girl is also not based on the love or for marriage sake. It is also based on sex and pleasure along with the companionship. After the pretty girl establishes a little, she met the hero in the same hotel where he was working, and she was supposed to walk the ramp. She invited him to her room and there she spent good time with him. This attitude reflected by the author is of the new woman who cares less for tradition and cares more for her personal gains, her status and her will. Such a woman does not seem to be desperate for the feministic support.

The pretty girl keeps on rising in her life and tries her hands-on different businesses. She delivers long lectures on cooking and helps the women in cooking delicious foods through the medium of television which is watched even by the wife of the hero. This thing is irritating for the hero, sometime, but he never lets his wife know about his and the pretty girl’s relationship.

She even establishes a boutique which is run by one of trusted employees. She earns a lot to the fulfillment of her desire to be independent. For a long time, there is no connection between the pretty girl and the hero. But very soon after getting estranged from his wife, he establishes connection with her through skype. They discuss a lot and some time he only watches her on the screen of the computer.

The hero while gradually growing old, has to face the corrupt and evil element of the society. He grows old and weak and ultimately begins to live with the pretty girl who is herself an old lady whose house is being run by two servants. The old hero spends time with her and sometime takes her care as well. They revive their relationship and spend time together in watching movies and listening to the songs. But old age tells its toll and so both of them fall ill. The illness of the old lady is now expressed by the writer in the following words,

“There is no point in admitting her in the hospital and so she spends her final weeks at home, cared for by a nurse, her factotum, and of course you, who tries to hunt down her favourite movies for her watch and ultimate time. Never fond of prolonged cuddling, she leans against you now, and allows you to stroke her spars white hair. Though whether she does this to comfort you, or to be comforted, you are not entirely sure.” (Hamid, 2013, p. 226)

The similar impact of the modern-day Pakistan has been indicated by the writer through the character of the wife of the hero. This is the woman who married this man not for love but for money and security. She was much younger in age and had good looks and so she thought she deserved more than the other and so after getting her demands accepted, she married this modern business man. The circumstances at her home were not that good as were present with this man. The marriage therefore proved to be good for her. But she could not escape the evil influence of the capitalistic trends of the Pakistani society. When she turned twenty, she started to realize that her husband had given her all because of love but because she deserved all this. Her beauty and youth enabled and qualified her for this. She is thinking, “Having recently turned 20 your wife is little less than half your age she believes she has merit well the difference in years notwithstanding your age being the same as dad between her parents she grew up in better circumstances then you did but not in circumstances as comfortable as she secretly enjoys. This, she feels was to be expected for she has always been regarded a beauty with pale skin ...” (Hamid, 2013, p. 125).

The above passage does reflect the changing trends in case of marriage which is just equal to cashing in on the beauty of the woman in order to gain comfort. This like trends might have been available in some past as well but thinking like deserving is the new one and claiming to possess more beauty means more and extra comforts. The woman, therefore, grew beauty conscious and wanted to use it to deserve more. With the passage of time, the woman begins to dislike her husband and avoid him as well. She falls ill and after her recovery she leaves the company of her husband’s bed. He tries for many times to bring her to his bed and share her love and body but she refuses to do so.

This woman establishes her own non-profit organization and begins to live independently. This woman’s wish to be independent is stronger as compared to her wish to live with her husband as a loving family. She remains busy more in her meetings and gatherings and even tries her maximum not to get any money from her husband. She pays her bills out of the money she earns. The significant thing in this matter is that the husband is neither able to persuade her nor able to coerce her for the company. She lives at her husband home only till the time her son is not mature enough and as soon as he gets mature, she leaves his home. The writer tells us about this condition in the following words,

“It is common knowledge of your guards and other household employees that the split between you and your wife extends beyond the floor plan of your house encompassing domains sexual and financial as well. Your wife invariably sleeps alone and insist on

paying her bills herself which she does out of the modest salary she draws from her a non-profit. She has been overheard by her cleaning girl saying that she will cohabit with you only until your child reaches adulthood, a situation just a couple of years off..."(Hamid, 2013, p. 167)

The quote shows that the women in Pakistan in rising Asia have gradually shifted away from their traditional roles and so the demands they used to make in order to fight for their rights has changed and now they only stress and get their demands fulfilled. If not all, at least, a few are capable of doing so who would surely work as a role model for the others. Hamid portrays another woman in the novel by giving the name of Matriarch which is exactly opposite of the patriarch but denotes the power and authority in the same way. For example, a matriarch is capable of using her authority to control the decision making in her family and mostly she is supposed to have the money and resources under her control; resembling exactly her representation of a female figure having bunch of keys attached to her apron strings. Such a matriarch has not only a different role but asserts herself by refusing to go beyond certain limits. Hamid introduces the matriarch at the time when the mother of the hero is ill, and hero's family is in dire need of money to get the mother operated upon and the help comes from the matriarch at whose home the father of the hero has been working. But when more money is required the matriarch refuses bluntly for extending any more helping hand and the mother of the hero dies. The matriarch is found saying,

"... that life is a long series of illnesses, that she has intervened to save his life, successfully and at great expense, but cannot be asked to keep intervening, again and again, for where would it stop, she is not made up of money, and in the end, ..." (Hamid, 2013, p. 70)

Besides the matriarch, another woman becomes a significant part of the story. This woman is hero's mother. She is portrayed very simple village woman who only purpose of life is the happiness of her children and her husband. She obeys her husband with a silence and never raises an eyebrow even at that time when she has to leave village and shift to the city rather is happy because she would be able to see the city life and her children might get good life as well. This is different woman as compared to the other women in the novel. This contrast serves the pattern of shift from simple village dweller to the aspiring women of the cities where richness is rising, and money becomes the sole value of life. If she is starting point of the journey to the independence, the other women reflect the modern women of rising Pakistan to achieve a level of quality life.

### **Conclusion**

The above discussion makes a point that in this novel ambition over rules love and morality. This affects the traditionally morality as well. The women in this novel desire to see their ambitions fulfilled rather than making their lives through love. Feminism desired and struggled to give money and control of resources in the hands of women or at least it wished that she should have equal share in these aspects

of human life. But the modern way of life developed with the help of neoliberalism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century has made it redundant. Now, the women are ruling the roost at many places. This may not be significant but the change in the psychologies of women is significant because it has lent them a power of decision making about their lives. For example, the pretty girl does not fall in love with anyone, rather uses her sexuality to achieve her ambitions. And similarly, she falls in love with hero, but this love does not hinder her path of progress. She disappears for a long time from the life of the hero in order to make her future. She remains only in occasional contact with him, till the time the wealth begins to flow to the hero as well and she returns when her ambition is fulfilled. This story predicts that the neoliberal forces combined with materialism has made the 'profit' more significant than the women's relations with the society and the individuals. This loss of traditional female values has started to knock at the doors of feminist scholarship that many of the goals have reached the levels of fulfillment.

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