

GENDER ISSUES IN MOHSIN HAMID'S MOTH SMOKE: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED EXCERPTS

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Abstract

Gender refers to socio-cultural values and mores attributed to masculinity and femininity, as well as to the psycho-sexual differences between men and women, in a society. Consequent upon this, the present position paper explores and highlights the issues of gender discrimination in an upper middle class of the Pakistani society, concerning Mohsin Hamid's "Moth Smoke" (2000). This qualitative study invokes poststructuralist perspective for linguistic analysis of the literary text, in the light of Norman Fairclough's CDA (1989), which entails trio of analysis: that is, description, interpretation, and explanation. For that matter, the current paper concentrates on the linguistic analysis of selected passages from the novel under review. The principles and practices of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) have conspicuously significant implications on how transformational change(s) in a society can be introduced and implemented, subsequently. As a result, the paper imparts an input and insight (through the aforesaid linguistic analysis) into the struggle of a female character, Mumtaz, in an upper middle class of the Pakistani society, concerning the narrative under reference.

Keywords: Society, Gender, Stratification, Marginalization, Transformational Change

INTRODUCTION

The present study explores, to highlight the issues of gender in Mohsin Hamid's novel, the *Moth Smoke* (2000). Gender bigotry is defined as "the systematic, unfavourable treatment of individuals by their gender, which denies them rights, opportunities or resources" (Ravees& Baden, 2000, p. 7). Gender differences are multifaceted and are influenced by social, cultural, economic, political and religious trends and issues in society. By far, preconceived perception and understanding about gender delimit the way both men and women practice their lives. By and large, patriarchal society is dominated and led by male authority and tends to keep females restricted, mentally and physically, alike. Across the world, "women are treated unequally and less value is placed on their lives because of their gender" (Ravees& Baden, 2000, p. 7). Similarly, mainstream Pakistani society is patriarchal and wants women to observe limits and limitations in their thought and actions. It necessitates that women should behave like and act out as a chaste and submissive lady, faithful wife and a sacrificing mother.

Due to the rapidly growing influence and impact of print and electronic media, and multiplied using mass communication, fads and fashion, are continually changing in Pakistani society. Also, increased and accessible education opportunities are responsible for bringing awareness about gender-related roles and responsibilities among womenfolk. As a result, females are becoming conscious of their gender position; and, are now posing a challenge to the stereotypes associated with them. That, in turn, has played a significant role in destigmatisation and demarginalisation of womenfolk in Pakistani society.

In literature, notable and award-winning current-contemporary Pakistani fiction writers, like Mohsin Hamid, Kameela Shamshe, Uzma Aslam Khan and Nadeem Aslam, portray changing and challenging trends and issues in Pakistani society, about gender-oriented concerns. Displeased with and unsatisfied with their social roles and responsibilities, female characters are presented by the said writers, in such a patriarchal age where they are opting and striving for transformational change in their gender position. Mohsin Hamid is one such contemporary Pakistani fiction writer who concentrates on issues concerning womenfolk in the precipitously changing gender-world. His novel, *Moth Smoke* (2000), is about a character, named, Aurangzeb (Ozi), his wife, Mumtaz and his friend, Daru. Both husband and wife have returned from America with a son, Muaazam. Things begin to worsen, over

the course of time and clime, which deteriorate their matrimonial ties because of severe and increased misunderstandings between them. In a nutshell, the narrative deals with characters who are torn apart between their longing to live freely and the assumed societal expectations.

From reading and reviewing of the related and relevant literature, it becomes evident that the novel, *Moth Smoke* (2000), probes to explore class-consciousness and conflict, verbal and visual imagery, allegorical notions, themes and anxieties of urban life in/of Pakistan. Hence, the narrative does not touch upon the significant issue of gender bias that, in turn, shall be taken upon as focal discussion in the existing study. In this connection, the current analysis is delimited to the principal and pivotal character of Mumtaz, who is fully functional (in her societal role and responsibilities) to trigger off the storyline of the said narrative.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the relationship between gender and power in the novel, *Moth Smoke*?
2. How is social change suggested in the novel through the existing examination?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As a social institution, gender “constructs women to be subordinate to men as a group” (Lorber, 1994, p. 33). Historically, marginalisation of womenfolk is deep-rooted in both Western and Eastern societies that, despite the consistent efforts of socially motivated activists and politically stimulated organisations, has sparsely changed, over the course of time and clime. Females are more submissive and less critical of gender stratification while being the greater victim of this social evil (Kanel, 1998). Due to domestic, socio-economic, and power related dependency on males, women are under advantaged, and thus men are over advantaged (Eagly& Wood, 1991). Also, they fail to resist the gender bias and repression, because they perceive the trouble that if they resist or decline, they will lose the affiliation and affinity of male (present around them) in the shape of the father, brother, son and a husband. This social coercion and cultural bullying enforce the politics of representation of males and make females suffer from the dilemma of their due representation in society.

Literature, on the whole, reflects society and, that gender preference and representation takes place in linguistic and situational contexts of literary art and arena. Like William

Shakespeare, in his history plays and tragedies, portrays females as charming, sensitive, mild and submissive. In *Hamlet*, the female characters, Gertrude and Ophelia are, at the mercy of their male counterparts. Victorian literature, too, produced womenfolk as strictly dependent on men, at all levels. The confined woman was responsible for her microcosm, her small kingdom comprising of husband and children. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet is a braggart lady who remains concerned about the fortune of her daughters. Likewise, in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the moral and ethical standards associated with Tess are responsible for her painful doom and gloom. Similarly, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* portrays identity predicament in a female character owing to her lack of feminine charm.

To seek and solve gender-related issues in a society, one needs to identify them first. When the problem of gender is identified even then how gender is rooted in the individual, group, and community as well as in social institutions such as education, politics, and law can be challenged, and work can be done towards bringing transformation. Moreover, to set a new standard of gender equality, one should take a new start, with the deconstruction of the concept of masculinity in which the society is rooted.

Judith Butler (2004), a twentieth-century gender critic, and a feminist has deconstructed the concepts of gender. She differentiates performativity from the performance. She considers gender as a matter of performativity and not something static. Performance is a stable entity which is established, and needs are performed out fixedly, but performativity needs a subject, and it changes. The identities of male and female are constituted through the act of gender performativity. These identities are not fixed, but are in a state of "becoming". Hence, social standards and principles of masculinity and femininity can be challenged for reconstruction according to the emerging trends and issues.

Critical Discourse Analysis is one such theory and practice, that challenge and change the status quo, and represents the marginalised in society. It tends to empower the less powerful (or powerless) and suggests change through counter-discourse. The present research bases its concern on the issue of marginalised female character, Mumtaz, and her subsequent struggle for emancipation, in Mohsin Hamid's novel, *Moth Smoke* (2000). Thus, the current research challenges and changes the stereotyped woman portrayed in literature through counter-

discourse analysis. Thus, the current investigation excludes the unremitting struggle and constant endeavours of Mumtaz (for her due social rights) from the corpus of the select literary oeuvre.

METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is qualitative and is based on the linguistic investigation and analysis of the given primary text by juxtaposing it into its socio-cultural code and context. The research is carried out in the light of poststructuralist perspective and perception. According to poststructuralism, the primary text is the fundamental source of reading and review to arrive at a particular approach, and there is nothing outside of the text (Derrida, 1985). Thus, the text is not a combination of words and sentences, “releasing a single meaning”, as intended and conveyed by the writer, but a “multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, take place” (Barthes, 1977, p. 146).

According to Griffin (2005), we use language (as a means of instruction) not only to convey meaning and message but also to construct and regulate knowledge. Meaning-making is the outcome of the deconstruction of the text; or, more precisely, rendering the language of the text. Meaning-making is dependent on the code and context. Thus, it is unstable, and there is no absolute truth-value or truth-maker, and the implication of the meaning and import of words change with changing situations (Derrida, 1985). As there are multiple and complex contexts, hence meaning keep on changing and takes on multidimensional aspects; and, in turn, is “unending” which “prompts to no conclusion of the text” (Gnanasekaran, 2015, p. 212). The poststructuralist perspective (theorized and employed in the current context) allows the researchers to analyse the select passages of the text by placing it in its socio-cultural milieu. The conclusion drawn from the analysis (of the subject text) constructs a single version of meaning about the narrative under reference.

In the given study the researchers aim to highlight instances of discourse that challenge the marginalised status of womenfolk. For that matter, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Norman Fairclough (1989) is invoked for investigation of the text under reference and review. The description stage of CDA (1989) concentrates on the analysis of linguistic features by paying attention to vocabulary (in particular) of the text. The interpretation stage interprets the relationship between text and interaction, while the explanation stage explains the relationship between interaction and social context.

Referring to and applying the given theoretical framework to the novel, passages from the novel related to suppression of Mumtaz are analysed, interpreted and explained, simultaneously. For that to do, the theoretical framework of CDAs is delimited to the following questions:

1. What is the need and importance of over wording of content words; and, of negative sentences in the narrative?
2. What relational value do pronouns, like *I* and *he*, have?
3. How has Mumtaz in the novel shown the resistance to the patriarchal order of society?

DATA ANALYSIS

Mumtaz understands the challenges associated with marriage and discords of domestic life, after getting married. In chapter ten of the text, she recalls her concerns and confusions about the idea to marry in the following words:

I had no idea what marriage really meant, and I did not know myself yet. Because of the other wrong reasons, because of what every aunt, sister, cousin, friend, every woman from home I had ever known had always told me : that unspeakable future awaits girls who don't wind up marrying, and marrying well". (Hamid, 2000, p. 148)

In the given text the interlocutor, Mumtaz, singles out in sharp contrast with other females in Pakistani society. The repeated use of the subject position “*I*” represents her as an independent woman with individualistic and personal thoughts. The sentence “*I had no idea what marriage really meant*” questions the notions of economic, psychological and social security generally linked with the marital life in Pakistani society. Unlike the majority of females who fail to analyse the challenges consorted with marriage, Mumtaz was curious to explore the reality, before taking any decision. Moreover, the sentence “*I did not know myself yet*” suggests Mumtaz’s inquisitive disposition and introspective interest in self-analysis. She wanted to analyse the pros and cons associated with the marriage in the light of her socio-cultural priorities and future plans. To explore both realities, she needed time to

ponder over what to decide in the best interest of her future. However, living in a patriarchal society, other female characters around had denied her the right to decide for herself and had forced her to marry as per the will of her family.

The following passage expresses feelings of Mumtaz regarding her wrong decision to marry just a few months after her marriage. She expresses her feeling of rebuff and snubs whatever had happened as follows:

I had never been ashamed of anything I had done in my life. But this was not something I had done. This was me. Not an act but identity. I disappointed me, shamed me. So I hid my secret as well as I could. And to do that, I had to hide it from myself. (2000, p. 154)

In the given paragraph (and in the overall text), the declarative sentences are significant for giving information about the autonomy of her decisions and exposing the reality of her marital life. Mumtaz articulates her bitter experience of wedded life in the passage. Mumtaz uses the subject position “I” seven times for emphasising her sufferings as a wife. It gives an impression as if she had high opinions of her individuality and independence before marriage, but after marriage, she feels helpless and disappointed. It also voices a sense of pathetic loneliness in her fight against female suppression in a given context. The employment of “I” also acts as a cultural metaphor for all suppressed females in a patriarchal society, who are forced to act against their consent.

The above passage contains over-wording in the form of verbs with negative meaning, like ashamed, disappointed, shamed, hid and hide. Mumtaz employs one word after the other giving an impression as if each word is insufficient to express her emotional unease and mental agony. The text is also significant as Mumtaz is blaming herself for toeing the line when she was not ready for it. “This was me. Not an act but identity”. Her husband had denied her the right to decide for herself that led Mumtaz to lose her identity. She is everything, but not Mumtaz. Another assertion here that, “I hid my secret” is also crucial in the context for two reasons. First, the society demands her to keep her feelings of disappointment and act of shame as clandestine. Second, despite being an educated lady, she had failed to explore the reality of a patriarchal society. That she expresses as: “I felt

neglected, resentful at being the one left at home when I hadn't wanted to..." (p. 152). Mumtaz is a dynamic character who is discontented with her static life as a housewife. She associates the birth of her child to her further confinement as a mother. She feels "hurt from inside", "neglected" and "resentful" for having given no time to decide for herself as to choose her priorities.

What all this leads to is a filial-familial disaster. She extrapolates in later in chapter ten while referring to what sentiments she had for her son: "I felt nothing for him. I started to get bored and then I started to get frightened because I did not feel anything for him. No wonder, No, joy, and no happiness. My head was full of crazy silence" (p. 152). The expression of such pungent remarks towards her son is the outcome of her antipathy for what she had decided for herself. The assertion, too, reflects her annoyance for the patriarchal society, at large.

The recurrent use of the subject position "I" is suggestive and noteworthy in the present context. Although it underlines a sense of possession and authoritative underpinning, however, ironically the subject is subjugated. Moreover, the nouns, verbs, and adjectives in the above passage, that is, "felt nothing", "get bored", "get frightened", "did not feel anything", "no wonder", "no joy", "no happiness", and "crazy silence", all have a negative connotation. Conscientiously, Mumtaz is aware of the fact that the existence of the woman is more than a subject to patrilineal influence and authority.

Mumtaz alludes to and conveys the demands of her son in chapter 11 in the words as follows: "Muazzam wanted me to read him a story and I came here instead because do not want to. That is the problem. I don't want to" (p. 173). As explained previously, in the subject sentences, "I don't want to, that is the problem. I don't want to", too, render a depressing picture of the mental health of Mumtaz as a mother. She had not decided to marry; she had not decided to have a child; and, she had not decided to confine herself. She is overwhelmed and shocked to have one bitter experience after the other in her life.

In chapter ten when her son is six months old, Mumtaz again musters up her courage to explore herself. She is ready to go out to work, to become independent and for this, she needs the support of her husband. Stating her emancipative plan (of the job) to her husband, "Ozi was shocked. He said Muaazam was too young"...I "said if he felt so strongly he could ask

for paternity leave. But “he” won the argument. He won it with a low blow” (p. 152). The use of paternity leave is uncommon, and it goes unnoticed in the majority of cases. In Pakistani society, it is taken for granted that taking care of children is the only responsibility of mothers. Thereby, Mumtaz is considered as a social rebel and a domestic failure in the given case.

LANGUAGE, POWER, AND RESISTANCE

In the current scenario, there are two societal processes at play in the discourse about gender, that is, struggle between women and men, and struggle between the upper class and lower class. Class-oppression is of the sort that is based on economic inequality while “[gender; or, more precisely,] women oppression” refers to the oppression of women by men in a patriarchal society is based on the uneven distribution of duties and privileges. “The subjugation of women is above the subjugation of class”, as in all classes, from elite to poor, females are made to suffer, but economic conditions of one class can be better than other class in a society. “Not all women are poor, and not all poor people are women, but all women suffer from discrimination” (Kabeer, 1996, p. 20). Women are not as “free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men” (Kramarae, 1981).

The passages from the select text are related to the tussle between demands of societal standards (based on patriarchal principles) on the one hand, and aspirations of females to follow their longing to live a happy life, on the other hand. Mumtaz raises voice for the females who are suppressed by patriarchy in Pakistani society and, hence becomes their mouthpiece. The stark experiences of her married life tend to make her a strong character who not only exposes her grievances but of the overall womenfolk in the country. She attempts to challenge the set social standards of womanhood by questioning the responsibilities and duties imposed on her against her will. She reconstructs the identity of women by introducing the discourse of female emancipation in Pakistani society, concerning the novel under study.

Mumtaz belongs to an upper class of the society and happens to have better opportunities for formal education and social awareness. She can fight for her rights in a better way as

compared to the females from the lower stratum of the society who either remain ignorant about their rights or, they are not allowed to speak for themselves, independently. Mumtaz's ideology concerning the roles of females has also been shaped by the experiences of the author, Mohsin Hamid. As a writer, he has come under the influence of Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison who crystallised his views of females to a great extent. He wrote the first draft of *Moth Smoke* for a fiction workshop which Morrison supervised. Mohsin Hamid completed the final draft of the novel after returning to Pakistan. He was conscious of the sufferings of females and wanted to be a voice for them.

CONCLUSION

The first question of the study is concerned with the nature of the relationship between gender and power in the novel, *Moth Smoke*. The study focuses on and underpins the character of the female protagonist, Mumtaz. The patriarchal authority denies her the due right to explore herself and forces her to marry without her consent. After marriage, she experiences bitter realities of life as a wife and a mother. She asks her husband to observe paternity leave to take care of his son, allowing her to hire a job. She comes into conflict with the more powerful (husband) to empower herself. As Mumtaz seems to believe that if women cease to be muted, men will no longer maintain their position of dominance in society (Griffin, 2009).

The second question is concerned with the nature of social change in the novel under study. Since consciousness is the first step towards transformational change, thereby Mumtaz is well aware of her worth as an individual. She struggles to probe and polish her mental faculties to face the challenges of society led by laid down patriarchal principles. She is never ready to give up under any circumstance whatsoever. She seems to believe that if women like her are granted the opportunity to step out of their houses, they will introduce substantial changes around her because domestic subjugation is the contributing cause of keeping their physical as well as mental faculties outmoded and stale.

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