

# LITERARY PERSPECTIVES ON BEING RICH IN SOUTH ASIA

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## Abstract

*Economic conditions play a vital role in determining the behaviours of individuals, as well as communities. Marvin Harris and Henry Hazlitt are major theorists who have shown that. Their theory is highly applicable, especially to South Asian literature, which is a reflection of postcolonial as well as trans-cultural societies. This research paper is an investigation into the relationship between economics and social behaviour with reference to Pakistani novelists who have sketched the picture of the class difference in South Asia, especially in Pakistan. *Moth Smoke* (2000) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) by Mohsin Hamid and *The Unchosen* (2002) by Riaz Hassan vitally apply to all South Asian countries. The novels reflect gradual changes in human behaviour towards money. Money, especially lack of it, plays a vital role in shaping and reshaping the morality and ethics of different classes of society. The paper also studies the effects of 'alienation' on the economically under-privileged created by a capitalist system and how imaginary identification with exploitative and unnatural social and cultural practices perpetuates class divisions.*

## Introduction

Archaeologists maintain that man has had a thirst for power since the development of Mesopotamian civilization. For this purpose, humanity has passed through various phases.<sup>1</sup> Human beings have tried to get this power through war, invention, and colonisation.<sup>2</sup> The main aim

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was to dominate all others. Nevertheless, in the present age, there is an economic war across the world rather than physical war. Now money determines the superiority and inferiority and development and underdevelopment of nations. Since the invention and use of money, the wall dividing the rich and the poor is rising day-by-day. Money has become a decisive force in society.<sup>3</sup> One's worth in one's society is decided by the worth of the coins in one's pocket. Money and power are interrelated and are the nuclei of the existing political, economic, and social institutions of the global world, highly connected by super-fast means of communication. Every individual's worth is judged through the lens of these capital-oriented frames. So the real 'self' of every individual is either completely invisible or partially visible in society. The dominant trends keep human beings on their toes and cause a behavioural change at the individual and societal levels. At one time, chivalric and feudalistic traits were the order of the day and people modelled and remoulded themselves according to feudalism. The industrial revolution brought in excessive money and power shifted to the bourgeois class, which began to treat humans as a commodity.<sup>4</sup> This was the turning point that brought an ever-increasing gap between the bourgeois and the proletariat. Both classes have started a marathon race for money, which has no finishing line. The capitalists produce luxuries and accessories of life that need money. Lack of money causes frustration among individuals and their dependents.<sup>5</sup> So how can an individual remain immune to this reality? From dawn to dusk, money runs the wheel of life. If one does not keep pace with money, one's wheel of life is stuck or bursts in the form of escapism from life, resulting in typical South Asian mystical wonderings or worse, religious extremism.

Mohsin Hamid is a contemporary Pakistani novelist who has depicted the effects of money on the behaviour of his characters.<sup>6</sup> His characters belong to the well-off and poor classes in the cosmopolitan cities of Pakistan. He contends that everything is under the thumb of the rich, even the weather. Through the use of air conditioners, the rich enjoy the weather of Sweden in Lahore, while the poor sweat in the scorching heat in the same city.<sup>7</sup> The accessories/luxuries of life determine one's social class.<sup>8</sup> According to Hamid, money is one of the major factors that shape one's behaviour.<sup>9</sup> When people acquire money, their behaviour changes according to their social class. On the other hand, if someone

has fewer coins in their pocket, they will modify or adjust their thinking/aims/desires according to their purchase power. It is also a common observation that the social space of an individual in society is directly related to the person's financial status. Society weighs individuals in terms of financial power. The burden of earning money for securing a safe and sound position in society brings introverted as well as extroverted changes in human beings.<sup>10</sup> Riaz Hassan has also portrayed economic determinism in human behaviour in *The Unchosen*, where the youth joins the British army just for monetary gain. They fight even against their fathers just for economic reasons. Mohsin Hamid's third novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* connects South Asian society temporally from colonial to present times. It is also applicable to and a play on words for the Indian slogan of Rising India. Since Hamid does not specify its location, Rising Asia applies equally to most Asian metropolises, if not to all large cities in the developing world.

### **Research Methodology/Theoretical Framework**

This research paper is a textual analysis of three novels: *Moth Smoke* (2000) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) authored by Mohsin Hamid and *The Unchosen* (2002) authored by Riaz Hassan. A qualitative research model is used for this research. Post-structural paradigm has been used to explore the relation of money and morality. The theoretical framework of cultural materialism is applied to the aforementioned text. Karl Marx and Henry Hazlitt are the main theorists. Karl Marx's *Economic and Political Manuscript* and Henry Hazlitt's *Economics and Ethics* provide the guideline for fixing the direct proportion between money and morality in this research.<sup>11</sup>

Cultural materialism is an anthropological term coined by Marvin Harris in his book *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. This term is derived from two words: culture (religion, law, language, politics, art, science, superstition, social structures, etc.) and materialism (materiality rather than spirituality or intellect is considered a fundamental reality).<sup>12</sup> Marvin Harris developed the term cultural materialism by borrowing from existing anthropological doctrine, especially Marx's materialism.<sup>13</sup>

Marxist historical materialism (influence of certain members of society through manipulation of material conditions and foundation of social institutions upon material conditions) and Marxist dialectical

materialism (ideologies and concepts as the outcome of economic or material conditions) are different from cultural materialism in a few ways or keys.<sup>14</sup> Cultural materialism presents that infrastructure always has an influence on the cultural structure of society, while cultural structure imposes very little influence on other institution of society.<sup>15</sup> Marxist Materialism presents that infrastructure and cultural structure influence each other. The class theory is another difference between cultural materialists and Marxists. Marxist materialists are of the view that social change is only beneficial for the ruling class (bourgeoisie) but cultural materialists say that social change is also beneficial for the working class (proletariat).<sup>16</sup>

### **Cultural Materialism: Its Ideology, Organisation, and Symbolism**

Cultural materialism explains ideologies, cultural organisation, and symbolism within the materialistic conditions and framework. Cultural materialists are of the view that societies develop on the basis of trial and error. If someone or something is not fruitful to societies' ability to produce or reproduce, or causes production or reproduction to unacceptable limits, it disappears from society. This is the reason that government, law, religion, social norms, family values, etc. must be beneficial for society. Otherwise, they will completely vanish from the face of society. Materialists pay more attention to the inner side of cultural presentation rather than the superficiality of the culture.

Proponents of other anthropological doctrines criticise cultural materialism for ignoring the societies' structural<sup>17</sup> influence upon infrastructures.<sup>18</sup> Poststructuralists are of the view that reliance on etic (the objective description of a culture) for the study of culture is not appropriate, because science is a function of culture. On the other hand, idealists also criticise cultural materialism because of ignoring variables such as genetics and are of the view that *emic* (description of the language and cultural elements in terms of their internal elements and function rather than existing external scheme) is more important and significant than cultural materialists allow. Moreover, it also seems that materialism is too simple. We also consider the spiritual and intellectual influences upon society, as we human beings are intelligent creatures with a spiritual inclination.

Raymond Williams, a left-wing author, is considered the founder and originator of cultural materialism in cultural studies and literary theory. The theory emerged in 1980 with the emergence of new historicism, which is considered an American approach towards early modern literature. It was used to describe the blending of Marxist analysis and leftist culturalism. Cultural materialism deals with elaboration and critical analysis of a historical movement.

There were changing usages of the term 'culture' between the immediate pre-Second World War and post-Second World War periods—the 1930s and the late 1940s. The word earlier meant a way of describing and claiming social superiority and as a word that encapsulated various forms of art (painting, writing, filmmaking, theatre, and the like). Two more meanings of the word are now identified. Culture is defined as a way of referring to the formation of some critical values (as in the study of literature). It is also defined in an anthropological sense of a 'way of life' (which is closer to the conceptualisation of society).

In the early 1970s, Williams had extended discussions on what Marxism and literature amounted to in an international context. The effort resulted in *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Williams's individual history was of some significance in relation to the development of Marxism and of thinking about Marxism in Britain during that period. None of these is exclusively a Marxist category, though Marxist thinking has contributed to them. Therefore, he took it upon himself to examine specifically Marxist uses of the concepts and was also concerned about locating them within more general developments. Thus, he was attempting to make Marxist thought interact with other forms of thinking.

The second part of the book discusses key concepts of Marxist cultural theory from which he develops a Marxist literary theory. Through his analysis and discussions, Williams develops a position that he has arrived at over the years and one that, at several key points, differs from the widely known Marxist theory. Williams has established that superstructures are more important.

## **The Three Novels Under Review**

### ***Moth Smoke***

*Moth Smoke* is a story of a character named Darashikoh, who falls from a life of riches to a life of poverty after losing his lucrative job. On top of that, he is accused of killing a child in a road accident that he is witness to and is actually a crime committed by his elite class friend from his old days named Aurangzeb. Darashikoh, or Daru, as he is referred to in several places in the novel, continues to hang out with his elite class friends, including Aurangzeb. He develops an affair with Aurangzeb's wife Mumtaz but she is not as idealistic as Daru to leave the rich Aurangzeb for him. Therefore, the affair goes nowhere and Daru continues to live a disastrous life of an outcast among his elite class friends.

### ***How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia***

*How to get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is a different kind of a novel in a sense that it refers to the protagonist as 'you' under the narration of an unseen narrator. Every chapter provides teaching and advice about life. The unseen narrator advises that if you want to become filthy rich, you must move towards a big city because your hometown is a great hurdle in your bright future. The narrator tells the protagonist that falling in love will destroy his future. The protagonist, under the guidance of the unseen narrator, becomes a stonehearted profiteer who makes money out of selling bottled water and uses all sorts of means to fight competition. The protagonist becomes a municipal contractor, builds relationships with government officials, enjoys a rich lifestyle in a palatial house with security guards, and sends his son to the US for studies. Over time, however, the distance between him and his wife grows, business starts to decline, friends turn against him, relatives steal money from his company, he suffers two heart attacks, tries to reconnect with his beloved but she dies of cancer, and he joins her in heaven.

### ***The Unchosen***

The story of *The Unchosen* revolves around the colonial experiences of South Asian natives. The protagonist Hakim first fights against his uncle Murad Khan to avenge his father's murder but ends up joining him against the *Ferenghis* (the British colonisers). While fighting

against the British, he is impressed by their weaponry and tries to start his own factory but fails. On the other hand, his son and nephews join the British army. While Hakim's uncle Murad dies at the hands of the British, their next generation is fighting for them to earn a relatively better living. Hakim is unable to reconcile with the cultural shock and falls ill. He continues to fight against the colonisers till the end.

### **Analysis**

The world is in a state of transition all the time. One thing which is impossible today will be possible tomorrow. The same thing is happening in the world of theories and ideologies, which are replacing each other with the passage of time, according to the requirements of the inhabitants of the global world. After Marxism, the theory of economic determinism is not only prevailing in cultural studies but literary studies as well. This school of thought is of the view that not only is the ruling class deriving benefits from social change but poor and middle classes are also beneficiaries of the social change.

### ***Moth Smoke***

Mohsin Hamid's novel *Moth Smoke* is the best example of the class difference, but at the same time, it also conveys cultural materialism where classes are not ready to accept each other because of the economic difference and social and cultural values. But on the other hand, the protagonist of the second novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) lifts himself up from poverty through hard work and changes his class. The influence of the infrastructure<sup>19</sup> and structure is very important in Pakistani society, one way or another.

*Moth Smoke* is a reflection of the social and cultural frame of Pakistani society, especially the Lahori way of life. The central character of the novel is Darashikoh who is brought up as an upper-class person. But his lack of connection and misfortune lead him to a bitter life instead of better. He finds a wide gap between the haves and have-nots. He wants all the luxuries of life but it is not possible on his income. His real decline starts when he loses his job. He is deprived of the company of the elite because he has no money. The writer of the novel constructs the real picture of the Pakistani community where class matters more rather than relations. The writer wants to convey the idea that rich people desire the company of the rich. Those who go through any crisis or

become poor are no longer welcome among the rich. The same happens with the character of Daru in the novel. The economy determines relations in Pakistani society.

Hamid portrays that money plays a vital role in the development of personality and attaining a good status in society. Money changes the behaviour of individuals automatically. The mouthpiece of the novelist is extraordinarily brilliant but he does not have a good job. He narrates that money brings good jobs and opportunities. Money always has an upper hand over merit.

Post-modernity is constructing the notion that money determines love because man is going away from nature day-by-day. Mechanicality is promoting superficiality in the life of individuals. Daru has a complicated and rocky affair with Aurangzeb's or Ozi's wife but she does not ditch her rich husband for him. It is a representation of capitalists' society. The novel portrays that money is considered power in the jungle of humanity.

Law is for the poor and the rich are born to make and break the law. Ozi manages to get his friend Daru imprisoned for his crime. The police and the judiciary give favours to the rich and Daru's blemished history (fired from a bank job, selling narcotics, keeping unlicensed arms) is used unjustly against him to the benefit of Ozi and Daru is sent to jail. Daru, jailed for a crime not committed, wins readers' favour to some extent because he stands innocent in the case and also because Ozi's wife Mumtaz still stands on his side with her endeavours to bring the truth to light. She also writes the story of Daru under a pseudonym in her paper and publishes interviews of his professor who affirms that Daru was a brilliant and talented student. She manages access to the family of the killed boy and makes them understand that the boy was run over by an SUV (Ozi's) and not by a small car (Daru's). Mumtaz's writings under a pseudonym in the media keep the readers engaged until Daru is proved innocent in a court of law.

At the end of the novel the following lines are quite striking:

"It is the story of my innocence. A half story."<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the day, everything seems connected: class, politics, culture, and identities. "I'm a political animal," Moshin Hamid



once said in an interview. Moreover, he said that one should learn how the pack hunts, shares its food and tends its wounded. Hamid wants his readers to learn about the ways of the exploitative elite and its intricate network of cronyism.

***How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia***

*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* directly deals with the problems and challenges of modern society and especially the developing world. In particular, the novel is focused on South Asia and could be read about “rising India,” a catchy slogan of the Indian Government. Most of the South Asian countries have created such business structures where one cannot become wealthy without corruption and bribery. *Rising Asia* is very symbolic because a communist country is rising but South Asian countries are making progress in corruption. The novel conveys that ‘global city’ is not only a function of globalisation but also of urban capitalism and industrialisation. The text signifies economic determinism and change in human behaviour along with economic prosperity. Except for economic interests, the characters have few relationships.

This world is materially obsessed. Changing the class is not easy in any community of the world, especially in developing countries like Pakistan. Becoming filthy rich demands sacrifices and one must be ready for them to compete in the capitalist system prevailing across the world. The novel suggests that individual development and progress requires hypocrisy and corruption. Government and most of its institution favour corruption because of the favourable environment, especially in an urban culture as compared to the rural environment.

“In the history of the evolution of the family, you and the millions of other migrants like you represent an ongoing proliferation of the nuclear. It is an explosive transformation, the supportive, stifling, stabilizing bonds of extended relationships weakening and giving way, leaving in their wake insecurity, anxiety, productivity, and potential.”<sup>21</sup>

For the sake of his bright future the protagonist travels towards the bright lights of the city. He sits on the roof of an overloaded bus and passes not only through metaphysical but also through the physical

space. The family of the protagonist has different emotions and ideological feelings. The rising city around the protagonist bombards him with lights, advertisements, buildings, and bustles, which desensitises him. As Hamid has sketched the picture “a few hours on a bus from rural remoteness to urban centrality [can] appear to span millennia.”<sup>22</sup>

The protagonist sacrifices his emotional feelings as well as love just for his economic interests. He represents a common country boy who travels to the city in search of prosperity. He even knows the importance of money in love that is why he wants a T-shirt “with a psychedelic hawk” to impress his beloved who lives near his neighbourhood.<sup>23</sup> He believes that she will notice him when he has money to buy or purchase a shirt. The author tries to portray here that relations and love are measured through financial status. With the passage of time, the protagonist of the novel gives more importance to money-making than love.

“She sees how you diminish her solitude, and, more meaningfully, she sees you seeing, which sparks in her that oddest of desires an I can have for a you, the desire that you be less lonely.”<sup>24</sup>

The protagonist of the novel establishes his business and leaves his love for the sake of his future. The girl he loves becomes a model and he remains busy in his business because he belongs to a poor family where money is more important than anything else. Marriage is a business, not love.

Even education is shown as a means to the end of prosperity in the novel. The second chapter of the novel deals with education, which the protagonist gets from institutions and from the streets of the city. Learning from the street shows the worth of experience. The novelist gives more importance to experience rather than the bookish education from institutions.

The novelist has presented the story of every individual who moves from the village to the city to get an education. It could be a story about Mumbai, Dhaka, Colombo, Shanghai, Karachi in our region. It could also be about Lagos in Africa or any metropolis in the developing world. He indirectly wants to convey that he has only one option for development, which is education. Through education, he or she can develop himself or herself.

“Writers and readers seek a solution to the problem that time passes, that those who have gone are gone and those who will go, which is to say every one of us, will go. For there was a moment when anything was possible. And there will be a moment when nothing is possible. But in between we can create.”<sup>25</sup>

### ***The Unchosen***

*The Unchosen* portrays that natives become loyal to colonisers and serve in the British army just to fulfil their basic needs. The writer wants to convey that money plays a vital role in changing the loyalty of individuals. The natives forget their culture and social norms and traditions. They adopt the colonisers’ lifestyle and start thinking that they are superior from other natives. The soldiers are helpless at the hands of colonisers because their families are dependent on a salary that they get from the colonisers. In exchange for their services, they get clothes, money, and other facilities from the colonisers. The coloniser knows that money is the weakness of the natives. But in exchange, they get good food, clean clothes, an orderly life, and a regular supply of widely valued Ferenghis-Indian money to send to their families.<sup>26</sup>

The author portrays how the promise of a little amount of money can change things. The sons become enemies of their fathers. They not only raise their voice against their fathers but also raise weapons. The youth joins the British army and fights against their own people. Moreover, they project a Western agenda. The old generation works for the protection of their culture but the young generation destroys it just for the sake of money.

Slowly and gradually, the urge for money changes the psychology and behaviour of the natives. They start thinking that they should get educated in Ferenghis’ schools if they want to make progress in science and technology. Even some of the elders think that competition with colonisers is impossible until the development of a modern weapon system. They are of the view that the natives must adopt science and technology.

The development of the culture is based on the development of its natives in the field of science and technology. It is also a fact that people adopt the education system of the developed nations. The wife of Abdul Hakim joins the Ferenghis’ school for education. There she finds

students of different sects and races. She seems misfit with other traditional women of the region. She is portrayed as a symbol of hybridity. Fatima can speak only a few words of English. She knows the challenges of the modern age and is very conscious about the useless struggle of her husband against the colonisers.

## Conclusion

All the characters in the novels are desperate to realise their dreams. All these dreams grow and flow in the capitalist system. The behaviours of people change for making economic progress to fulfil their dreams. A poor class person wants to enter the middle class and the same is the case with the middle class, which has a dream to move to the upper class. Each class has its own code of conduct, behaviour, and social norms and traditions. It is always assumed that everyone should be treated on an equal basis, which is impossible in a capitalist system because this is a self-interest based system.<sup>27</sup> The three novels under examination show the behavioural as well as social change to get a higher position.

*Moth Smoke* presents the social and economic injustices in a developing country like Pakistan, where institutions are puppets in the hands of corrupt politicians. Ozi commits murder but Daru is a victim of that murder because he is poor. The government puts him behind the bars in place of Ozi. Real life examples of such fictional characters are abundant in South Asian societies. *Moth Smoke* is a reflection of an autocratic system, where there are dual standards for the rich and the poor.

Unlike *Moth Smoke*, the protagonist of the *How to Get Rich in Rising Asia* gets a higher position through sacrificing his love and emotions, also joining the corrupt system of a developing country. This novel not only represents the national economic and political system but also the international economic and political system. It also deals with the global problems and challenges of a city in the developing world. The novel looks at the 'global city' not only as a function of globalisation but as a function of urban capitalism and industrialisation. The novel also raises issues such as corruption, population growth, increasing isolation, as well as covering all aspects of human life issues, which must be

raised in order to move forward more morally or perhaps simply less in a devastating way.

*The Unchosen* also presents a picture of economic determinism in human behaviour. The behavioural change can be seen among colonisers as well. The natives' character seems inspired by the colonisers just because of their prosperity. They are also inspired by the scientific and technological developments of the colonisers.

The protagonist, 'You', is representative of businessmen and politicians of the developing nations who build their businesses along with their politics. They use unfair resources to increase their wealth and power. First, the protagonist of the novel gets an education, then he goes for the business. The protagonist goes to the university, sells water, and meets the bureaucracy, which demands bribery. Not only that the novel's generalities refer to simulation the pluralistic reality, but it seems to be taken from the Hollywood action model film, complete with murder, corruption, and bombings.

The analysis shows that Pakistan, South Asia, and the developing world in general, are amalgamations of so many theories that work at one and the same time but the economy and materialism has an upper hand over all these theories. Deep analysis of the theories from spiritualism to postmodernism shows those material elements were/are present in every society and in every age in various periods of time.

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- <sup>17</sup> Structure -- pattern of organization (government, education, production regulation, etc.)
- <sup>18</sup> *Infrastructure*—population, basic biological need, and resources (labor, equipment, technology, etc.).
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