Neoliberal Economy: Violence of Economic Deregulation in Mohsin Hamid’s 

*Moth Smoke*

*Abdullah M. Dagamsheh, David Downing*

**ABSTRACT**

This Study explores Mohsin Hamid’s “*Moth Smoke*” and reveals the relationship between economic deregulation and capital accumulation on the one hand and class-based violence and crime on the other. The narrative suggests that late capitalism creates the conditions for poverty and violence, all of which are intensified by class division and conflict, and further exacerbated by economic deregulation and privatization promoted by global neoliberal institutions. The novel aims to construct a vivid narrative representation of the conflicts between the material reality of violence and the imposition of repressive neoliberal policies on Lahore, and to suggest that violence masked as society’s destruction is central to the logic of global capitalism. Furthermore, the novel exposes the ideological contradictions between the utopian promises of neoliberalism promoted by the international financial institutions and the material inequities that it produces. Finally, Mohsin Hamid introduces a female resistant figure who is able to write and publish pieces about injustice and violence inherent in global economic processes and hence raising consciousness and mobilizing community to act collectively.

**Keywords:** Global Literature, World Bank Literature, Neoliberalism in Literature, Pakistan, Mohsin Hamid, *Moth Smoke*

**INTRODUCTION**

This article is part of a large project which contributes to the emerging category of “World Bank Literature” (WBL)(1) through a historicized, contextualized, and critical analysis of literary works by contemporary global fiction writers. It expands approaching and teaching literary texts that address the intersections among specific social, economic, and political contexts as they emerge within the historical frameworks of global neoliberalism. The reading of World Literature as WBL challenges “those regimes of knowledge that would keep literature and culture sealed from the issues of economics and activism” (Kumar, *World Bank* xix). Taking a cue from Kumar and other contributors to Kumar’s volume, *World Bank Literature*, I will use the term World Bank Literature not only as “provocation,” “a metaphor,” and “an agent,” (Kumar, *World Bank* xvii; xix) but also as an approach and a field.

As an approach, World Bank Literature serves not only to connect the historical, political, and economic forces and conditions surrounding the production of all literary narratives featured in this study, but also to treat literary narratives in this study as historical documents that represent the socio-economic and political consciousness of the Post-War era. This approach allows one to make a connection between ideologies and hegemonic discourses, and ongoing social struggles and economic crises experienced by the majority and embedded in socio-economic, political, historical, and cultural forces. This kind of approach informing my analysis of the literary narratives is close to what Paul

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(1) English Department, Yarmouk University, Jordan. Director of Graduate Studies in English, Indiana University, Pennsylvania, USA. Received on 3/2/2014 and Accepted for Publication on 17/2/2015.
Smith called “a logic of totality;” an “attempt to show the interrelations amongst the several realms of social life – the economic, cultural, and political” (2). Similarly, Terry Eagleton asserts that a literary work should be studied in a larger context of interrelated factors including aesthetic, socio-economic, and political forces. In this way, such an approach or criticism is considered to be what Eagleton called "revolutionary criticism" (xii). As a field, World Bank Literature serves to focus on how global literary narratives in this study reflect the critiques that social movements have made and exposed the ideological contradictions between the utopian promises of neoliberalism promoted by the international financial institutions (IFIs) and the material inequities that it produces. These narratives make us see the IFIs’ policies, in Bruce Robbins’s words, “as real as an airplane hitting a building” (298).

In this article, I will explore Mohsin Hamid’s novel, *Moth Smoke* (2000), as an example of World Bank Literature. Mohsin Hamid is a Pakistani author who grew up in Lahore and California where his father attended Stanford. He was educated mainly in the U.S., attending Princeton and Harvard Law School. He lives between Pakistan, the U.S. and the U.K. He has written two novels, *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and both of which deal with the effect of global corporate capitalism on the Pakistani economy and people. His first novel has been translated into various languages around the world, and it was the winner of a Betty Trask Award and a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Hamid writes non-fiction on politics, economics, and arts and such non-fiction writings appear in *Dawn, The Guardian,* and *New York Times.* In addition to his writings, Hamid has worked as a management consultant in Manhattan for Mckinsey and Co., a transnational consulting firm. This kind of global upbringing and education has given Hamid the credit to write about global processes operating in Pakistan and defining people’s identities. In the novel, Hamid chronicles the experiences of his characters whose lives are shaped, structured, and formed by the forces and policies of the IFIs and such very forces and policies offer ample opportunities and profits to some (the few) but dire poverty and suffering to others (the majority). I will argue that *Moth Smoke* reveals the relationship between economic deregulation and capital accumulation on the one hand and class-based violence and crime on the other. The narrative suggests that late capitalism creates the conditions of possibility for violence, crime, and poverty, all of which are intensified by class division and conflict, and further exacerbated by financial deregulation, privatization, and trade liberalization, adopted and promoted by global neoliberal institutions. The novel aims to construct a vivid narrative representation of the conflicts between the material reality of violence and crime and the imposition of violent neoliberal policies on Lahore, and to suggest that violence and crime masked as society’s destruction is central to the logic of global capitalism. Moreover, the novel demonstrates that the supposed modernity and development of Pakistan is radically undercut and undermined by the global economic and class system in which the characters participate and which deepens the growing socio-economic chasm between these characters. Thus, the novel portrays the effects of certain historical and economic events on subjects, and it makes visible people’s experience with inequality and injustice which have often been obscured in dominant historical texts and economic and political documents.

*Moth Smoke* is set in Lahore, Pakistan, in the late 1990s. Set against a backdrop of nuclear confrontation between Pakistan and India, the dominance of development and modernity rhetoric, corruption, embezzlement, and cronyism dominating modern Pakistan, and violent global economic policies imposed on Pakistan, the novel traces the life of Darashikoh (Daru) Shezad, his fall into crime and burglary, and his relations with other characters, such as Aurangzeb (Ozi), Mumtaz, Murad and Manucci. Daru used to live on the fringes of the middle class by virtue of the financial
support of his friend’s father. Too poor to study abroad and to get a Ph.D., Daru works for a bank for modest pay, which does not cover his basic living expenses, such as his electric bill that “sucks a quarter of [his] paycheck into the air conditioner,” as Daru explains, complaining about the rising prices of electricity and the wage suppression (73). Significantly, the story of Daru’s socio-economic decline starts when he mishandles a transnational financial deal for a member of an elite class “with half a million U.S. in his account” (20) who arrogantly rebukes Daru for not clearing his international check. Reported to his branch manager at the bank, Daru is fired from his job and his Manager accuses him of having “a serious psychological problem” (23). Unable to locate any oppositional political identity, Daru has become so frustrated and angry and his world, as a result, devolves into aimless outrages, spiraling into drug abuse, depression, violence, and burglary. Meanwhile, Daru’s more fortunate childhood friend, Ozi, a son of an important, well-off, and corrupt money launderer (184), has just returned to Lahore from the U.S., with his wife and son. The friends are happily reunited at the beginning, but this happy reunion does not last long and the friends are soon pushed apart first by Daru’s social decline, then by Daru’s affair with Ozi’s wife, and finally by Ozi’s immunity from justice when he runs over a boy. Similarly, Daru’s relationship with his servant, Manucci, deteriorates as Daru tumbles into poverty and cannot pay him his monthly allowance. On the other hand, his relationship with Murad becomes stronger as both lose their jobs and end up robbing boutiques and dealing drugs to supplement their declining wages. By the end of the novel, we see that Daru ends up in prison waiting for his sentence, facing false charges for the hit-and-run death of a young boy whom Ozi has run over. At the same time, we see that Munktaz decides that she writes articles that tell “things from Daru’s perspective” and interviews “people who are willing to say … that a Pajero and not a Suzuki killed the boy,” hoping that “Daru will have some defenders” (243-44).

Hamid’s *Moth Smoke* reveals the contradictions between what is publicly and ideologically represented and promoted and what is materially practiced. The novel highlights and exposes the assumptions of free market ideologies that mask an entire realm of the economy, which, in reality, contributes to reproducing and exacerbating the material conditions of the less privileged and the economically oppressed and marginalized. Neoliberal ideology masks itself in the discourse of development, progress, modernity and democracy in order to hide the deep class division being reproduced and reinforced in the Pakistani society, in the spread of wage slavery in the interest of capital accumulation, in financial deregulation which empowers capital but impoverishes and weakens the wage laborers, and in the austerity measures of Structural Adjustment Programs being imposed on Pakistan since the 1980s. The novel exposes the destructive omissions and fissures of neoliberal global institutions’ representations when Hamid’s text refigures the hegemonic narrative of late capitalist development. This refuguration emerges through the novel’s main character, Daru, his social and economic transformation, and his social relations with other characters. To use Lukacs’s words in “Narrate or Describe?”, Hamid creates a central figure who is “the product of a particular social and political [and economic] environment” (141), that defines Daru’s identity and relations with other characters. Daru’s social transformation into desperate poverty is a result of the socio-economic and political environment of Lahore. In fact, Daru’s transformation has started even before he actually challenges his bank’s client and loses his job as a result. His real downfall starts when he cannot finish his Ph.D. in Economics. Daru grows up on the fringes of the middle class mainly by the financial support of Ozi’s father, but whose lack of strong social connections has ultimately brought him up against his ambitions and against his getting a Ph.D. In Lahore, having social connections and wealth is important as they define one’s identity and establish one’s relations with others so one
can survive the socio-economic system. This social connection is a class-based construct that is exacerbated by the global economic system that empowers the already rich and impoverishes the less economically privileged, like Daru. For example, even though Daru and Ozi grew up together and went to the same prestigious high school (with the help of Ozi’s father, Khurram, who “got him [Daru] in” one of the prestigious high schools [185-86]), Daru is left behind and excluded from getting a foreign degree while Ozi is able to study abroad and get a foreign degree simply because his father is “wealthy and well-connected” (184). Because education is expensive and Daru, as a result, cannot afford it, he ends up giving up on his degree and working at a local bank and again it’s Ozi’s father who got Daru “his precious bank job” (186) for modest pay, realizing that it “is impossible to make a living in academia” (37) and even in social life as “his girlfriend has left him for a textile baron’s son” (37).

This kind of socio-economic transformation is an indictment of both economic as well as cultural globalization that, first, prevents Daru from realizing his ambitions even though he is a well-qualified person according to his economics professor, and, secondly, celebrates one value of existence over all other values. For example, we learn from Daru’s former economics professor that Daru is a very smart student who “could have done some good work” and earned a Ph.D. However, Daru’s financial situation prevents him from earning a Ph.D. (36-37). Second, the fact that Daru’s being left by his girlfriend who chooses the son of a tycoon indicts cultural globalization which plays a role in defining people’s relations and sends a message that “there can be only one kind of value, market value; one kind of success, profit; one kind of existence, commodities; and one kind of social relationship, markets” (Grossberg 264). Thus, Daru’s failure in academia as well as in his relationship is part of a wider context of social and economic relations, manufactured by uneven and unjust global neoliberal policies, which lead to a failure of those who are economically oppressed and marginalized.

The novel exposes what is materially practiced by demonstrating how financial institutions have so much power that they can fire anybody once he/she challenges the rules of the game. Such power is reinforced by the global economic policies imposed on Pakistan in the form of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which open the country to unrestricted penetration by global capitalist investment, goods and services, and finance. The imposition of free market ideology produces capitalist relations that prioritize and empower private business over human relations. Here, one can link Marx’s nineteenth-century critique with contemporary material conditions in Pakistan in order to disrupt the global hegemonic narrative of development and progress. Marx described an earlier stage of capitalist relations:

Hence, the historical movement which changes the producers into wage laborers appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and it is this aspect of the movement that alone exists for our bourgeois historians. But, on the other hand, these newly freed men became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And this history, the history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire. (875)

Marx’s “letters of blood and fire” are the consequences of global economic policies in Pakistan which play a role in Daru’s downfall. Daru has been “robbed of all [his] own means of production,” first, by inability to complete his Ph.D. and to teach at a university, and, second, by losing his job in a financial institution, thus tumbling into poverty. He loses his job once he challenges an important bank’s client who arrogantly rebukes Daru for not clearing his international check. Even though Daru explains that “international
checks can take some time to be cleared,” Mr. Jiwan, “a rural landlord with half a million US in his account” (19-20), arrogantly tells Daru that he “can have [Daru] thrown in the street” (21). Working for a private financial institution where the interests of clients are prioritized over laborers’ rights and the individuals’ decisions of participants in the market are motivated by private interests alone, unconcerned by the common interests or general good, Daru realizes that he is “limited in [his] choice of responses to Mr. Jiwan’s attempt to impose feudal hierarchy on [his] office” (21). Here the idea of ‘feudal hierarchy’ allows us to see that neoliberalism as an historical era has strong continuities with older moments of repressive economic relations. “Capitalism at all times produces a network of hierarchal relations in which the wealth of some areas, groups or peoples are dependent on the transfer of economic surplus, and thence underdevelopment of other areas, groups and people” (Hoogvelt 160). Thus, the idea of “feudal hierarchy” demonstrates that class hierarchy existing in the past still exists in post-independence Pakistan, and it is even reinforced by neoliberal economic policies that prioritize elite class interests over the fate of middle and working class people. When Daru chooses his way to respond to Mr. Jiwan by telling him off: “you’re a client of this bank, and if you don’t like the service you receive here, you’re free to go elsewhere” (21), he is fired as he challenges the interests of a member of an elite class. This choice has cost Daru dearly: he loses his only means of production as he falls from a world of relative social and economic privilege promoted by the global economic system to a world of marginality and criminality, created by the same global system. The incident of firing Daru demonstrates the power of the financial institutions in the global economy. As neoliberal policies liberalize and deregulate finance, offer tax incentives to financial institutions and elite class members, but regulate wage-laborers by suppressing their unions and their wages, the bank where Daru works takes advantage of such neoliberal policies and get the power to fire any wage-laborer without any consideration to any regulations that might protect laborers from any abuse at the hands of financial institutions.

Hamid’s counternarrative reveals the context of violence that is enacted upon the economically oppressed and marginalized, but such context is buried in the hegemonic discourse. Hamid’s strategy to reveal the context of violence and the contradictions of global neoliberal policies is to thicken the socio-economic contexts of violence that shape and reproduce the characters who end up getting involved in violence and crime. The first act of violence enacted upon the economically oppressed is reproduced by the violent processes that exacerbate the class divisions operating in Pakistan. It is barely denied that class division did not exist in early Pakistan, but one can claim that global economic policies enforced by IFIs play a major role in maintaining, reproducing, and intensifying such a division. This powerfully contrasts with the language of these neoliberal institutions’ credos, namely, the neoliberal policies and reforms will maximize profits for everyone and “will make human development priority number one,” as the then Managing Director of the IMF, Michel Camdessus, claimed in a 1997 address. In the novel, for example, Murad Badshah, coming from a relative middle class family, works hard and gets a master’s degree in English to lead a decent life. Murad explains, “I received my MA in English twenty-some years later and was of course unable to find a job.” So he decides to start a rickshaw business: “In the short years since then, I acquired four more, and am now captain of a squadron of five little beauties” (61). However, the violent global economic processes, partially represented by economic deregulation and free market fundamentalism, deprive him of his means of production. In the novel, we come to know that the financial/capital deregulation has destroyed the local business conditions, hence materially thwarting and marginalizing the middle class and empowering the late capitalist class. Murad tumbles into poverty as financial and capital deregulation
allows big corporate business to unfairly compete with local businesses and hence devastate the latter and those who run local rickshaw businesses. “With the arrival of yellow cabs in Lahore, the rickshaw business took a bad turn” (62). This kind of ‘fierce’ competition is unjust as small local workers cannot compete with corporate business. Murad states, “profits became increasingly slim, and to say competition was fierce is an understatement of unusual proportions” (62). Furthermore, Muard makes it clear that economic regulations can help local business:

It was widely and correctly believed that I was the originator of the idea that the rickshaw’s salvation lay in erecting a little barrier to the entry of the yellow cab in our market. Entry barriers are common to all industries, and the spree of robberies of drivers of four-wheeled entrants by drivers of the established three-wheeled holders of market share was simply an example of laissez-faire market economics. (66)

What Murad and his class experience in reality is what David Harvey refers to as “uneven geographical developments” which “create a good business or investment climate for capitalistic projects and hence concentrating wealth at the hands of the few” (Space 70). Such violent and unjust economic processes force Murad to resort to violence and crime to substitute his deteriorating local business income, which has dried up as a consequence of the violent global neoliberal policies sweeping Lahore in the 1990s in the form of SAPs. For example, he starts to deal drugs and rob taxi drivers and boutiques: “The marauding yellow cabs had devastated the rickshaw industry, so I conducted a little redistribution of wealth on my own,” Muard states (63). Denied any oppositional political identity, Murad decides to take the initiative of redistributing wealth “on his own” by dealing drugs and by robbing “boutiques, and together we [Muard and Daru] formed a duo that would strike fear into the hearts of purveyors of fashionable clothing everywhere” (63). Finally, the fact that Murad is dispossessed of his own business, hence social safety and stability, denied any oppositional political identity, and forced to adopt violence to supplement his income, might be read as an indictment of harsh global neoliberal conditions that deprive characters of their sense of stability and of their means of production.

Other acts of violence follow directly from SAPs imposed on Pakistan in the late 1980s and the 1990s partly because of the debt service amassed by military expenditures and governments’ corruption. Significantly, the novel was set in the 1990s when excessive defense expenditure and sky-rocketing debt service cost Pakistan billions of dollars. Like most developing countries during the 1980s and 1990s, Pakistan experienced problems of deficits in the balance of payment, budget deficits, and inflation, so the IMF and the World Bank intervened in the Pakistani economy and imposed certain austerity measures as part of conditions for obtaining more loans to service the debts. In their different articles, Nina Gera and Tilat Anwar discussed the disastrous impacts of SAPs on poverty and inequality in Pakistan during the adjustment decade (1988-1999). According to Gera, “the design of SAP programmes [is] directed at the four ‘ations’ – stabilization, liberalization, deregulation, and privatization” (41). The SAPs forced Pakistan to cut subsidies and social expenditures, to reduce public employment, to freeze wages, to increase utility charges, to reduce tariff rates on imports, and to increase taxes on the less privileged classes (Gera and Anwar). Such neoliberal policies imposed on Pakistan have left the majority of Pakistanis with a bleak and adverse scenario that intensified inequality and class division: “the poor are burdened with not just higher prices of food items in general but with significantly higher price of wheat – the staple food. [and] the poor have suffered disproportionately from contraction … [and] reforms have exacerbated income inequalities.” (Gera 60-61).

Moreover, the high rate of unemployment and the deteriorating wages have both perpetuated poverty and inequality and exacerbated class division. “The combined
effect of public expenditure reduction and liberalization resulted in an increase in the urban unemployment form 4.58 percent in 1987-88 to 8.19 percent in 1990 to 91” (Anwar 918) and thus “in 1987-88, about of 24 percent of the population was in a state of poverty. In 1998-99, this percentage of the population went up to 30. Thus over the decade, about 14 million people fell into a state of poverty” (Gera 44). Finally, such SAPs were determined by the interests of the elite class and by “the bureaucracy and a political elite which more often than not is not in touch with the needs of the citizens” who are deprived of basic needs such as education, health care, and other vital services (Gera 49). This is the global economic system that plays a role in producing the class system to which Daru, Murad, and Ozi belong.

For example, the fact that Daru cannot complete his Ph.D. due to expensive education should be read as part of a wider context of social and economic system that allows those who are like Ozi, who are already well-off and well-connected, to travel abroad and get foreign degrees and to get a highly-paid job at home while Daru cannot even get a degree simply because he lives on the fringes of the middle class. This is part of the socio-economic system that dominates Pakistan and its educational system partly because of Pakistan being integrated in the global neoliberal economy and swallowing the IMF’s bitter neoliberal pills. SAPs dry up any funds to public education, which has been made to seem it has no real material value in Pakistan compared to the foreign degrees Ozi and other elite members get. For example, Daru is denied job interviews partly because he does not “have a foreign degree or an MBA” (53). Moreover, Daru gives up on the socially progressive nature of his research (“development. Microcredit, specifically. Small loans to low-income groups, guaranteed by the community. The Grameen Bank model and variations. Explaining low default rates, analyzing claims of Paternalism, social critiques, that sort of things” [36]). These losses might indicate the failure of development projects and the rhetoric of international loans to alleviate poverty and improve the quality of life for the majority in Pakistan. This failure reveals the false, empty rhetoric used by advocates of neoliberalism, such as Thomas Friedman, who in 1999 claimed that free market ideologies and neoliberal development projects are the only alternatives that contribute to a higher standard of living and a more liberal government structure (86-87). In this neoliberal rhetoric, which the novel exposes and critiques, there is no alternative to the free market ideologies and other neoliberal policies imposed on Pakistan and carried out by the elite class there. Thus, the failure of Daru’s “development” project might be read as a metonymy of the failure of development projects and narratives of modernity and prosperity that neoliberal discourse promotes and celebrates.

The class system that limits Daru’s ambitions and narrows down his options is part of a wider context of social and economic situations reproduced and exacerbated by the uneven and unjust global neoliberal policies that narrow down Daru’s options and limit his ambitions and principles. Professor Julius Superb offers a critical view on the class division in Lahore, in terms of a particular commodity that defines an elite class:

There are two social classes in Pakistan … The first group large and sweaty, contains those referred to as the masses. The second group is much smaller, but its members exercise vastly greater control over their immediate environment and are collectively termed the elite. The distinction between members of these two groups is made on the basis of control of an important resource: air-conditioning. You see, the elite have managed to re-create for themselves the living standards of say, Sweden, without leaving the dusty plains of the subcontinent. They’re a mixed lot – Punjabis and Pathans, Sindhis and Baluchis, smugglers, mullahs, soldiers, industrialists – united by their residence in an artificially cooled world. They wake up in air-conditioned houses, drive air-conditioned cars to air-conditioned
offices, grab lunch in air-conditioned restaurants … and at the end of the day go home to their air-conditioned lounges to relax in front of their wide-screen TVs. (102-03)

This analysis of class division based on access to a global commodity available only for the elite class in Pakistan demonstrates how global neoliberalism creates class division and ‘homogenization.’ In this regard, Paul Jay states that

Access to air-conditioning measures the degree to which ‘elites’ are plugged into a global economy characterized by class division and homogenization. Wealth means access to sameness; the ‘elites’ share air-conditioned space which is the same no matter where they go. Money buys conform, distance from the masses working at the margins of the global economy, and the prestige that comes from triumphing over local conditions. (59).

The long period of unemployment makes Daru lose part of his middle class identity because it deprives him of his income, his air conditioning, and his servant, Manucci. For example, the electric company shuts off his electric, thus preventing him from access to the air conditioner as he no longer pays his bill. Here Paul Jay states that “Daru’s fall from the lower rungs of the international banking sector in Lahore to the margins of its criminal economy highlights the new class structure in Lahore and connects it to the whims of an emergent global economy” (59). Similarly, Harvey states that “the restoration or formation of class power occurs, as always, at the expense of labour” (Brief History 76), when he highlights “the disparity between the declared public aims of neoliberalism – the well-being of all – and its actual consequences – the restoration of class power” (79).

Another aspect of Daru’s being declassed is his loss of his servant, Manucci, who no longer wants to serve Daru who becomes economically and physically violent with him. For example, besides depriving Manucci of his monthly allowance, Daru becomes physically violent towards him. The economic violence Daru experiences gets magnified and played out in physical and verbal violence Daru uses to suppress his servant. This kind of violence should be read as part of the economic conditions brought on by the global economic policies that play a role in intensifying and exacerbating such class divisions in Pakistan.

Not only have the global economic processes financially devastated the less privileged class, but also they have declasse and destabilized them. That is to say, deprived of their means of production due to free market ideologies and financial deregulation, and denied any oppositional political identity, Murad and Daru are forced to look for other ways to intervene in the social and economic situations in Lahore. Their worlds evolve into aimless outrages, desperation, frustrations, and drug abuse. As a result, they start dealing drugs and robbing fancy boutiques so they can supplement their incomes.

One possible reading of the novel’s title, Moth Smoke, is that it might allude to Daru’s heroin addiction and this drug abuse should be situated in a wider context of the militarization of Pakistan as a proxy in the U.S.-Soviet Cold War when drug and arms deals were rampant. Moreover, Murad insists that in a country where wealth is unequally distributed and development projects are geographically uneven, robbing the rich is not only fair but also a right. Murad, who is “a firm believer in the need for a large scale redistribution of wealth” (104), rationalizes what they are doing (supplementing their dispossessed incomes) by stating that:

it is my passionately held belief that the right to possess property is at best a contingent one. When disparities become too great, a superior right, that to life, outweighs the right to property. Ergo, the very poor have the right to steal from the very rich. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the poor have a duty to do so, for history has
shown that the inaction of the working class classes perpetuates their subjugation. (64).

Similarly, Daru laments the death of his mother who had to sleep on the house roof due to a lack of an air conditioner in her house. A lack of a global commodity, a sign of wealth the global economy brings in Pakistan, and the fact that the majority do not have access to this commodity, the fact that Daru feels insecure, and that Daru (and Murad) decide to resort to ‘criminal’ activities cannot be understood outside the context of the recent history of neoliberalization of Pakistan. In this regard, Daru complains about some violent aspects of neoliberalism: suppression of wages, financial deregulation, profit-oriented projects, and privatization (73), all of which contribute to the impoverishment of the majority, exacerbate class division and social insecurity. This wave of privatization, financial deregulation, and market liberalization started to dominate Pakistan in the 1990s, when

the international financial institutions increasingly pressured Pakistan to divest its more crucial assets, primarily because of poor economic performance and an accompanying decrease in the bargaining power of the state. Even so, the speed with which major state assets have been slated for privatization … speaks volumes about the ideological commitment of the present [and previous Pakistani] government[s] to neoliberal orthodoxy. (Akhtar 27)

Thus, Murad and Daru expose the violence inherent in the economic and political system which violently devastates their lives and which forces them to get engaged with a variety of criminal activities. This is the only option the economic and political system offers for Muad and Daru: the option of crime and violence. The more neoliberal policies imposed on Lahore, the more violent people become. “People are fed up with subsisting on the droppings of the rich. The time is ripe for a revolution. The rich use Klashinkovs to persuade tenant farmers and factory laborers and the rest of us to stay in line” (213), Murad tells Daru to justify their moral interventions and their criminal activities. Thus, Hamid astutely redeploys neoliberal rhetorics of development, progress and modernity as he reveals how such rhetorics contradict the exploitative and violent nature of the neoliberal policies and ideologies.

The technique of juxtaposition is used to highlight the stark contrast between the elite class enriched by the global economy and the marginalized class impoverished by the same global system. For example, the extravagance displayed in parties held by wealthy people is contrasted with the conditions of the people living in Main Market and Model Town areas in Lahore where Daru and Mumtaz visit with AllimaMooltanim, a palm reader. While such parties are held in mansions “with marble floors and twenty-foot ceilings” (27) whose owners get richer by the very process of economic globalization which allows those who are already well-off to travel and get foreign degrees and to establish business anywhere in the world, the other part of the city is full of ‘beggars’ who beg for money when Mumtaz and Daru visit the area. “Most of them are genuinely crippled, or hooked on heroin, or insane, or too old to work, or dying from some debilitating disease, and I’d give them a rupee or two if it weren’t for the few strong ones, perfectly healthy, waiting to take their cut when night falls” (125). This kind of juxtaposition exposes the terrible consequences of development promoted by global institutions that exclude the majority, who, paradoxically, have to pay back for the development loans through SAPs. This technique of juxtaposition serves to redeploy neoliberal rhetorics of development, progress, and modernity as such rhetorics contradict the exploitative, unjust, and violent nature of the neoliberal policies and ideologies that exclude the majority.

Ironically, the system that impoverishes and declasses the economically oppressed and marginalized is the same system that enriches and empowers the economically and
socially elite. Similarly, whether the system is involved in impoverishing Daru and Murad or it is involved in enriching Ozi or his father, it often does so through corruption and other illicit means. For example, Ozi’s gain of wealth comes through corruption inherited from his father, Khurram, and it comes from illicit trade related to global flows of capital: “he [Khurram] slipped into the civil service, specializing … in overpaying foreign companies for equipment and pocketing their kickbacks” (74). Ozi states, “Some say my dad’s corrupt and I’m his money launderer. Well, it’s true enough” (185). Thus, he is able to “create lots of little shell companies, and open dollar accounts on sunny islands far, far away” (185) by the virtue of economic deregulation and corruption dominating Lahore. In addition, his gain of wealth contributes to the poverty of Daru who is no longer needed to work in banks in Lahore which has a lot of desirable foreign MBA holders, who, at the same time, “have connections worth more than their salaries” and are offered jobs “in exchange for their families’ business” (53). Similarly, Murad and Daru have been marginalized by the global neoliberal economy, but, at the same, they thrive on it through selling drugs to the kids of ultra-wealthy people, through burgling fancy shops and boutiques flourished as a result of the global economy and robbing taxi businesses – devastating the local rickshaw business – introduced into Pakistan a consequence of free market ideologies. Thus, the novel makes visible the violent global economic system that is tied to uneven development and corruption.

The kind of wealth Ozi amasses under global economic processes demonstrates the consequences of the neoliberal economy that exacerbates class division and forces people to adopt criminal activities (in case of Daru and Murad) and illicit activities (in case of Ozi and his elite class members) to keep surviving the socio-economic and political system in Pakistan. For example, Ozi, trying to justify what he and his father do to accumulate wealth, explains that in a country where corruption is the norm and infrastructure is collapsing and “people are pulling their pieces out of the pie … you’d better take your piece now, while there is still some left” (185). Moreover, Ozi claims that it is the economic system that helps his father to “create lots of little shell companies, and open dollar accounts on sunny islands, far, far away” (185). This system, which Ozi claims that he “can’t change,” creates the ideal environment for Ozi and those who are more economically empowered to become wealthier by policies of financial deregulation, trade liberalization, and privatization. Therefore, Ozi insists that their activities be no different from other rich people in the world who make money legally. In other words, Ozi’s and his father’s activities of money laundering and other illicit activities are part of the global economic system dominating Lahore as well as other parts of the world. Ozi asks:

What about the guys who give out the Nobel Prize? What are they? They’re money launderers. They take the fortunes made out of dynamite, out of blowing people into bits, and make the family name of Nobel noble. The Rhodes Scholarship folks? They do the same thing: dry-clean our memories of one of the great white colonialists, of the men who didn’t let niggers like us into their clubs or their parliaments, who gunned us down in gardens, when we tried to protest … And what about the bankers of the world? What about family fortunes held in accounts that make more in interest than the income of every villager in the Punjab put together? Where did all that money come from? (186-87)

This is another indictment of immoral features of economic globalization as Ozi and his other elite class members thrive on the illicit and immoral trade and finance adopted and promoted by global institutions.

Then, Ozi asks “what is the alternative?” to point out that the whole system is corrupt and to justify why people are forced to practice corruption:

The roads are falling apart, so you need a
Pajero or a land cruiser. The phone lines are erratic, so you need a mobile. The colleges are overrun with Fundos who have no interest in getting an education, so you have to go abroad. And that’s ten lakhs a year, mind you. Thanks to electricity theft there will always be shortages, so you have to have a generator. The police are corrupt and ineffective, so you need private security guards. It goes on and on. People are pulling their pieces out of the pie, and the pie is getting smaller, so if you love your family, you’d better take your piece now, while there’s still some left. That’s what I’m doing. And if anyone isn’t doing it, it’s because they’re locked out of the kitchen. (184-85)

Here, Ozi, a late capitalist subject, is allegorically paralleled with a fundamentalist who believes that if there is any alternative to the dominant socio-political and economic system, it should be an extremist alternative that violently deprives and impoverishes others. This is why Hamid provides a historical context at the outset of the novel (and is reinforced at the end) where he establishes a relationship between the main characters (Daru and Ozi) and the sons (Dara and Aurangzeb) of the last Mughal Emperors, Shah Jahan. In the historical story, Aurangzeb is the fundamentalist who usurps the throne, by imprisoning his father and obtaining fatwa “against his defeated brother, charging DaraShikoh with apostasy and sentencing him to death” (4). This formal framing device is used to reveal the historical relationship between late capitalist economy, allegorically represented by Ozi (Aurangzeb), and fundamentalism and violence, which locks Daru (Dara) “out of the kitchen” and even kills him.

The question that remains to be addressed in this chapter is how the narrative offers some resistance to global neoliberal narratives. Even though the novel makes it clear that the passivity and criminality of Daru is due to the global neoliberal policies, the novel depicts Daru as a failure as he is unable to challenge the devastating processes of global economy. Not only does he fail to change his desperate situation, Daru ends up in a prison, “a place that is neither home nor workplace; it is neither the parlour nor the street; it is a no-place that can only be described as dead limbo” (Kumar “The Chronicle of the Air-Conditioned Class” n.pag.). Daru fails to imagine a better future for himself and for Pakistan just as Ozi who claims that there is no alternative but be part of the corrupt global economy dominating Pakistan. Daru’s not knowing where he belongs might be read as a failure of Daru’s inability to identify with any oppositional political identity. Realizing that nothing can be done to change the situation (in case of Ozi), and the falling into corruption, poverty, and crime can be read as a failure of the political and economic system that creates and manufactures the situation of corruption, and limits characters’ options to effect political and economic change. However, Hamid presents Mumtaz as a potential resistant figure or as a figure who might protest against the corruption and poverty and crime, mainly committed against women, who doubly suffer, first by the patriarchal society and second by the oppressive new global economic processes.

Besides exposing the contradiction between what is publicly and ideologically represented (development, progress, modernity, and eradication of poverty) and promoted, and what is materially practiced (exacerbating class divisions, igniting violence, and depriving the majority of their means of production), Hamid introduces a female resistance figure who, unlike Daru, passively tumbling into poverty and criminal activities, is able to write and publish pieces about the injustice of global economy, so she raises consciousness and mobilizes community to collectively act. She is able to expose the ugly reality of women’s suffering in Lahore. Kumar states that Hamid “introduces a strong female character into his narrative. Mumtaz Shah represents the most resilient and progressive face of the otherwise crumbling Pakistani bourgeoisie. Her departures from its norms are a muffled protest against what she – and many other women around her, belonging to classes other than her
own – experience as denial, if not also death” (“The Chronicle of the Air-Conditioned Class” n. pag.). Mumtaz’s writing about prostitution and other socio-economic problems Pakistanis, especially those facing women, should be read as an act of resistance as it is an act of empowerment without which women, and their suffering, and other socio-economic problems, would be invisible. Moreover, agency is created through Mumtaz’s writings which record and make visible the day-to-day violence the women and the marginalized experience. Mumtaz becomes the spokesperson for the women who are left behind by the so-called development projects and modernity. Her pen-name is Zulfikar Manto(5). Daru and Mumtaz have a conversation about the name:

“Why Zulfikar Manto,” I ask her.
“Manto was my favorite short-story writer.”
“And?”
“And he wrote about prostitutes, alcohol, sex, Lahore, underbelly.”
“Zulfikar?”
“That you should have guessed. Manto’s pen was his sword. So: Zulfikar.” (129)

This conversation is important as it reveals the essential role of writers in exposing the other reality of neoliberal economy, development and modernity and challenging injustice and inequality intensified and brought on by late capitalist economy. Their weapons are pens and writings. In Lahore where alternatives would be violence, Hamid’s novel suggests that Manto, a writer, might serve as a resistance figure, protesting the mainstream discourse. According to Kumar, in the moral economy of the novel,

At one point in the novel, in response to a question whether there are many Communists in Pakistan, we hear the following response: “Not anymore. The unshaven boys are the new populists….Most of them have become experts at couching their beliefs in religiously acceptable terms … In this absence, Manto might serve as a less unconventional but nevertheless effective comrade in the act of protest. The ‘fundos’ would prefer to kill prostitutes, or at least, ignore them. (“The Chronicle” n.pag.)

In the novel, Zulfikar Manto serves as an alternative to the passive figures who resort to violence to resist global economic processes and to bourgeois figures who think that there is no alternative except more corruption and abuse the system. In fact, her articles might become a catalyst for already intensified struggles the less privileged face, further intensifying these struggles toward changes on the political terrain. For example, she tells Daru that

“The prostitution article came out today.”
“And? I haven’t been reading the papers.”
“Big response. I spoke with the editor, and he said he’s been swamped with calls.”
“Good?”
“Mostly furious. Which is good. It means people read it. One even threw a rock through the paper’s window.” (80)

Such articles contribute to outraging people, to collectivity, and to activism, which might lead to change in the political terrain by mobilizing the people to act. Moreover, Mumtaz refuses to use the air conditioner which is a sign of belonging to an elite class. She tells Ozi that they “have to conserve electricity … the entire country suffers because of wastefulness of a privileged few … I really do feel that we have a duty to use electricity responsibly” (106). This refusal to use the global commodity might be read as a sign of resistance to the whole global economy which reproduces and strengthens the elite class in Pakistan. Thus, Mumtaz becomes the symbol of a resistant figure: challenging the idea of “There Is No Alternative” and asserting that another way is not only possible but necessary to contribute to possibly effecting change.

In conclusion, one can assert that the novel
demonstrates that late capitalism creates the conditions of possibility for ruthless, violent economic enclosures of the less economically and socially privileged class. Moreover, the enclosures of the less privileged and economically oppressed has been a systemic and inherent feature of late capitalism, which intensifies class division and conflict by its violent economic policies such as financial deregulation, privatization, free market, and reduction in, or elimination of, state social programs that benefit working and middle classes. Moreover, the novel makes a connection between late capitalist subjects and fundamentalists; hence violence masked as society’s destruction is central to the logic of late capitalism which has been promoted as a modernity project. Furthermore, Hamid exposes what Bourdieu has described as “doxa” – simply “an evidence not debated and undebatable” (Baudrillard 99) – when the narratives establish a link between neoliberal reform represented in SAPs and the descent into more chaos, violence, and corruption, as we see in the transformation of the main characters and this connection belies the existing credos of neoliberalism, namely, the belief in the inescapability of free market ideology and the belief that adopting neoliberal policies will maximize profits and benefits for the majority.

Finally, establishing a connection between “feudal hierarchy” and neoliberal policies, which reinforce and strengthen such a hierarchy, the novel allows us to see that neoliberalism as an historical era has strong continuities with older moments of repressive economic relations: the world historical process of free market capitalism was, according to the dominant mythology, supposed to free us from repression. The truth is quite otherwise made visible in Hamid’s novel.

Likewise, the novel introduces a female resistant figure who offers an alternative to passivity and fundamentalism characterizing our late capitalist era as it is depicted in the novel. Unlike Daru, who passively tumbles into poverty and aimless outrages, and unlike Ozi, who, like a fundamentalist, believes that if there is any alternative to the dominant socio-economic and political system, it should be an extremist alternative that violently deprives others, Zulfikar Manto, or Mumtaz, becomes a resistant figure and a spokesperson for the women who are left behind by the so-called development projects and modernity. Her articles might contribute to raising consciousness, outraging people, collectivity, and activism.

NOTES

(1) There are so many committed writers who are involved in exposing hegemonic and repressive narratives that dominate their cultures. For example, Charles Dickens was able to reveal and critique violent processes of industrialization of Britain back in the Victorian age. This current study is involved in highlighting contemporary committed writers who are engaged in exposing violent processes and policies of what are promoted to be institutions for development, progress, and freedom. This current study is important because oppression adapts to existing systems of production. In other words, my study is different from previous studies, especially the ones dealing with socio-economic critique of modes of production, as it is involved in a critique of contemporary institutions that are marketed as liberal ones promoting ‘freedom,’ ‘development,’ and ‘modernity’.

(2) Even though some works of literary criticism (see Paul Jay, Munazza Yaqoob, and Claudia Perner) analyze Moth Smoke as a critique of globalization, very few of such works of literary criticism have explored the relationship between the literary narratives (here Moth Smoke) of what is called World Bank Literature (WBL) and the network of international financial institutions (IFIs) represented by the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO and their
policies or programs and their draconian structural adjustment programs (SAPs).

(3) The official development and modernity narrative is further elaborated on in my introduction. Nevertheless, it would be a good idea to mention that the official and dominant discourse represented by the World Bank and IMF neoliberal rhetoric plays a role in co-opting the interests of the economically oppressed and marginalized. For example, the then Managing Director of the IMF claimed in a 1997 address that “in all too many countries in the world, poor governance and inefficient use of public resources perpetuate poverty and impede human development” (n.pag.). Here Michel Camdessus blames the victims for impeding development and progress, not the economic policies adopted by his institution. In the same address, Camdessus associates IMF policies with development, growth, and wealth distribution, and equality — such policies and reforms promoted by the IMF “will make human development priority number one, and that will ensure that growth benefits are widely shared …” (n.pag.). Although these reforms involved massive socio-economic restructuring in most developing nations, Camdessus, in another address in 1999, continues to claim that

Social policies are central elements of government budgets, of donors’ aid program, and of international communiqués … For many years IMF-supported programs have explicitly incorporated social policies. … We know the ingredients: a stable macroeconomic environment; an open, efficient market economy, a framework that fosters private investment; and, yes, transparency, financial sector soundness, and robust economic institutions. (n.pag.)

Similarly, in Accelerating Economic Growth and Reducing Poverty: The Road Ahead published by the government of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, it is suggested that development projects and SAPs can alleviate poverty by various strategies followed or implemented by the government:

The government launched stabilization and a broad based structural adjustment program … to address severe macroeconomic imbalances manifested in an unsustainable and growing debt and looming Balance of Payments crisis … The structural reforms included reforms in the tax system and tax administration with a view to broadening the tax base, improving the tax compliance and minimizing tax evasion; trade reform and non-tariff barriers, bringing the maximum and average tariff at lower levels and liberalizing Pakistan’s trade regime. … These reforms have helped in transforming the Pakistani economy from a highly regulated to a more open, market-oriented economy. (20-21)

Thus, according to the official and dominant discourse, development, reform, and progress can be achieved through free-market fundamentalism and financial deregulation. Moreover, such policies are necessary conditions for development even though they mask massive exploitation and misery the less privileged experience in Pakistan as the narratives of Moth Smoke highlight

(4) The Proxy war in Afghanistan attracted international military and economic assistance to Zia-ul-Haq regime, especially from the U.S. and U.S.-led IFIs: “by 1985, Pakistan had become the fourth largest recipient of U.S. bilateral military assistance … with the approval of the 7.4 billion (1982-90) military and economic aid package, Pakistan emerged as the second largest recipient of US aid” (Hilali, “Costs and Benefits of Afghan War for Pakistan” 5). As a consequence of such a large amount of foreign aid and loans mostly spent on militarization, “Pakistan ended the Zia period with a publicly guaranteed long-term debt of over $16 billion” (Hilali, US-Pakistan Relationship: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan 217) but, at the same time there was no sufficient improvement in social, educational, and health development.

Debt servicing was more than one-sixth value of exports of goods and services.
Average interests carried by outstanding debt increased nearly two-fold, from 2.3 to 5.8 percent a year … Between 1982-88 the share of expenditure on education and health fell from 2.1% of GNP to 1.5. During the Zia era, the scale of financial corruption exacerbated Pakistan’s economic shortcomings, which forced its dependence on external sources of economic assistance and funds. (Hilali, US-Pakistan Relationship: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan 217-18)

Similarly, Tariq Ali states that “by 2001, debt and defense amounted to two-thirds of public spending – 257bn rupees ($4.2bn) and 149.4bn rupees ($2.5bn) respectively, compared to total tax revenues of 414.2n rupees ($6.9bn)” (11).

Along with A.Z. Hilali’s U.S.-Pakistan Relationship, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, Christina Lamb’s Waiting for Allah: Pakistan’s struggle for democracy (1991) and G. W. Choudhury’s Transition from Military to Civilian Rule (1988) are excellent sources for more information on the Proxy War in Afghanistan and the aid and loans to Pakistan

(5) Zulfikar refers to the sword of one of the closest cousins to Prophet Muhammad and one of the Caliphs who was known for his courage, knowledge, and honesty.

REFERENCES

التحرير الاقتصادي: العنف الطبقي والجريمة في رواية محسن حامد
"دخان العثة"

عبدالله محمد الدقامسة، ديفد داوننق

ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث رواية محسن حامد "دخان العثة" والتي تكشف عن العلاقة بين التحرر الاقتصادي وترامك رأس المال من جهة، والعنف الطبقي والجريمة من جهة أخرى. تشير الرواية إلى أن الرأسمالية (النيوليبرالية) تخلق ظروف الفقر والعف الذي تتعصف بالمجتمع الباكستاني، وهذا الهيب الانقسام والصراع الطبقي حيث أن الخصخصة والتحرير الاقتصادي الذي تبنته وروجته المؤسسات النبايرالية العالمية فاقد الانقسام والصراع الطبقي. تهدف الرواية لبناء تمثل سريي حيث يصبح النزاع بين الواقع الفاعل للعنف والجريمة وفرض السياسات النبايرالية الفاعلة على لاهور (الباكستان) وتشير إلى أن العنف المتفنن بدمار المجتمع هو ركن أساسي في منطق الرأسمالية العالمية. علاوة على ذلك، تفضح الرواية التناقضات الأيديولوجية بين الوعود النيوليبرالية الطوباوية التي تروج لها المؤسسات المالية العالمية، وبين عدم المساءلة المالية التي قد تتركب عليها، وأخيرا، يعدد محسن حامد في روايته أمواج مقاومة لتنبؤ وتشير مقالات عن الظلم والعنف المتواصل النظام الاقتصادي العالمي وبالتالي ساهمت هذه المقالات في زيادة الوعي وتعبئة المجتمع للعمل بشكل جماعي.

الكلمات الدالة: الأدب العالمي، أدب البنك الدولي، النبايرالية في الادب، باكستان، محسن حامد، رواية "دخان العثة".

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* قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة اليرموك، الأردن؛ جامعة إنديانا، بنسفانيا، الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. تاريخ استلام البحث: 3/2/2014، وتاريخ قبوله: 3/2/2015.