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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### LESSONS FROM THE PAST IN MOHSIN HAMID'S MOTH SMOKE

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#### Abstract

The events in the novel *Moth smoke*, by Mohsin Hamid are based in Lahore, Pakistan. The writer takes us back in time to the Lahore of the Mughal era. He highlights a turbulent period in Mughal history when the ageing Monarch, Shah Jahan was distressed over the question of succession to the throne. A Sufi saint had predicted that his younger son Aurangzeb would become the king. The writer discusses the political tension of the times. The drive for succession involved a series of diplomatic moves and strategies which the four Mughal Princes adopted to survive the political storm that was generated by the conflicts related to the war of succession. The novel focuses on the late 90's in Lahore. Mohsin Hamid draws a parallel between the political disturbance in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Lahore of present times. The Lahore of the late 90's is in the grip of serious political and social crises. The hostility gripping the two countries of the subcontinent, India and Pakistan is portrayed through the nuclear tests conducted first by India and immediately afterwards by Pakistan in 1998. He focuses on the disintegration of the country and highlights the rampant corruption, drugs, and class wars. The intrigues and conspiracies hatched in the court and harems of Emperor Shah Jahan bordered on the lust for power or supremacy. The novel highlights the impulses, dreams and ambitions which motivate the actions of the characters in the two different time zones and how they finally lead to defeat and death.

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#### Introduction:-

The events in the novel *Moth smoke* are based in Lahore, Pakistan. Mohsin Hamid in his unusually lucid style and Non-linear narrative takes us back in time to the Lahore of the Mughal era. He highlights a turbulent period in Mughal history when the ageing Monarch, Shah Jahan was distressed over the question of succession to the throne. A Sufi saint had predicted that his younger son Aurangzeb would become the king. The writer discusses the political tension of the times. The great Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan was blessed with four sons who entered into war for the throne. The eldest was Darashikoh, the second Shuja, then Aurangzeb and the youngest MuradBaksh. The war of succession finally led to the defeat and death of Darashikoh at the hands of Aurangzeb who succeeded his father to the throne. It also involved a series of diplomatic moves and strategies which the four princes adopted to survive the political storm that was generated by the conflicts related to the war of succession.

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The novel also focuses on the late 90's in Lahore. Mohsin Hamid draws a parallel between the political disturbance in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Lahore of present times. The Lahore of the late 90's is in the grip of serious political and social crises. The hostility gripping the two countries of the subcontinent, India and Pakistan is portrayed through the nuclear tests conducted first by India and immediately afterwards by Pakistan in 1998. He focuses on the disintegration of the country and highlights the rampant corruption, drugs, and class wars. The writer's allusion to the conflict generated in the wake of the war of succession for the throne and its relevance to the events of the present in the novel establishes the continuity between the past and the present. As Carr says,

"history is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past (13)

The intrigues and conspiracies hatched in the court and harems of Emperor Shah Jahan bordered on the lust for power or supremacy. The same impulses, dreams and ambitions motivate the actions of all the characters in the novel. The time zones may differ but what remains the same is the greed and ambitions that finally lead to defeat and death. Carr's comment is relevant here:

"the past which a historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present" (22).

Mohsin Hamid focuses on the political rivalry between Aurangzeb and Darashikoh, the war of succession, the confrontation of the two brothers in the battle and the death of Darashikoh. The novel focuses the lives of the two young men, Aurangzeb i.e. Ozi and Darashikoh i.e. Daru whose lives are intertwined right since birth. It depicts the close ties of love and friendship between Ozi and Daru and finally their dreams, passions and ambitions that bring defeat. The novel centres around the relationship between Ozi, Mumtaz and Daru. It is the love of these two men for Mumtaz that finally brings destruction.

Ozi is an elite. Born to Khurram Shah, a former civil servant, highly corrupt with important connections in Lahore. As Ozi says,

"Lahore is a tough place if you are not an important person" (Hamid 184)

Ozi has led an affluent life, driving Pajero cars and attending parties. He is ambitious. On his return to Lahore he gets into money laundering. He returns to Lahore and understands the problems of survival in Lahore and the importance of securing one's position in a city given to corruption. He believes,

"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" (Hamid 185).

Ozi's ambition and strong desire for money turns him into typical elite who wield power over the state and its agents to forward their own selfish interests. He belongs to a class of people who can make people scapegoats with the power of money and force them to achieve their vested interests when the need arises. Daru has been able to take education due to the special favours he had received from Ozi's father, who was a close friend of Daru's father. Ozi had got the opportunity to go abroad to the States to study law while Daru had stayed behind in Lahore for his further education.

While depicting the personal agony of Daru, the writer also offers us a glimpse into national crises, the hostility between the two countries, the nuclear tests being carried out by Pakistan and the threat of inflation and other problems that it would bring in its wake. MuradBaksh says,

"This nuclear race is no joke. Poor people are in trouble."

"and when prices go up, and schools shut down, and hospitals run out of medicine, then?"

"We will eat grass" (Hamid 134)

Daru is a banker and he is out of the job due to his attitude of pride. He has to suffer power cuts at home, and with no money left for himself, Daru soon starts selling hash and becomes an accomplice in crime with MuradBaksh and together they start robbing boutiques.

Daru's search for a new job and his failure to secure it also throws light upon the job situation in the country in the late 90's. There is a hiring freeze. The owner of a bank, a big business baron tells Daru,

"there isn't that much work these days. We have more people than we need right now" (Hamid 53)

This kind of situation generated a financial crunch and the late 90's in Lahore is down with increase of crime and other evils like drugs and thefts. It is brought out through Daru's personal struggle- the loss of job, his sexual relationship with Mumtaz, Ozi's wife and his involvement in selling drugs, in committing thefts and even murder. From what Daru tells Mumtaz, it is clear that the country is on the verge of financial ruin.

"the economy is completely dead right now, with the rupee skyrocketing on the black market and bank accounts frozen" (Hamid 166).

The novel also highlights the class war and the unequal distribution of wealth, the most deadly of all maladies affecting nations across the world. It is brilliantly brought out in the novel by the Theory of air conditioning developed by Julius Superb, the economics professor. The theory explains the division between the two social classes in Pakistan, by focussing on the privileges enjoyed by the rich i. e the "cooled" and the woes of the under privileged i. e the "uncooled."

"For air conditioning can be divisive not only in the realm of the political but in the realm of the personal as well"(Hamid 105).

This cooling machine clearly distinguishes the haves from the have not. It not only defines the status but also the temperaments of its users and those deprived of it. Aurangzeb had a passion for AC, and liked it cool. Mumtaz hated it. MuradBaksh is the owner of a huge rickshaw fleet but the yellow cabs had thrown his business out of gear. He disliked the AC because he thought it to be unnatural and since the yellow cabs in Lahore had caused heavy loss of business, he robbed the yellow cab owners and justified his piracy campaign because of the loss that rickshaw business suffered and also because the cabs were air conditioned.

For Daru the AC was important because it took away his mother from him. It was hot on that tragic night and she decided to sleep upstairs on the terrace. Unfortunately somebody had fired a bullet in the air that night and it had claimed her life. The availability of the AC at home would have helped avert the accident that caused his mother's death, therefore is extremely for Daru. After the loss of job, his financial difficulties increased so his power supply was cut and he had to bear the heat at home.

"he felt an insecurity, a disease that gnawed at him day and night. Perhaps he feared something more profound and less easily explained. He needed money to have his power and air-conditioning and security restored, and he swore nothing would stand in his way" (Hamid 109).

This explains Daru's anxiety over the loss of his livelihood, his desperation to improve his status and finally his headlong entry into the world of drugs and crime. He wants to climb higher on the social ladder and aspires to a life of riches and parties and his frustrations take him deeper and deeper into crime, into a situation from which escape seems impossible. This is also a sad reflection of Lahore's deteriorating economy that left many people jobless and was to a great extent responsible for their foray into the world of crime. Daru represents the frustrations that were born out of a situation like this whereas Ozi stands for the corrupt, snobbish, elite class who could manipulate situations to suit his interests.

A frustrated Mumtaz on whom the burden of motherhood and the role of playing the perfect wife weighs heavily, goes on to become a journalist, by secretly writing under the name ZulfikarManto. She embarks on a journey of adultery by having a relationship with her husband's best friend, Daru.

The manoeuvres of Daru, Mumtaz and the final blow dealt by Ozi remind one of a game. The player has to make the correct moves on which depends his fate, his success and failure, and to get to the top he has to constantly defend and shelter himself from falling into traps laid by the opponents that could crush him completely. This reminds us of the political machinations involved in the game of politics in the Mughal times that finally led to the victory of Aurangzeb as he defended himself from his own brothers.

Aurangzeb, the Mughal king was brave, diplomatic and blessed with invincible moral courage. His personal ambitions to succeed to the throne were actuated by the desire to thwart the plans of Darashikoh and Shuja to become rulers because he considered them to be heretics and infidels. He was only doing his duty as a true Muslim to drive them away from the throne. Ozi, i.e., Aurangzeb in the novel resembles the Mughal king who shows courage in the face of a very shocking situation that would drive the wits away of any other person in his place. He says about himself,

“I m Aurangzeb...i m really not that bad.A victim of jealousy from time to time. But definitely no hypocrite” (Hamid 185).

About Darashikoh, the Mughal Prince Bernier, the physician of the two princes in succession, says,

“Darashikoh was not wanting in good qualities,..but he was inordinately conceited and self-satisfied, very proud of his intellectual gifts, and extremely intolerant of advice and contradiction, which easily roused his imperious and violent Mughal temper” (Hamid 22).

It clearly emerges that the two Mughal princes were different in terms of their temperament and ambitions. Aurangzeb was blessed with moral courage and had the nerve of steel, while Darashikoh was haughty, violent and intolerant. It was out of political necessity that the two brothers turned hostile and which led to the death of Darashikoh at the hands of Aurangzeb.

Ozi and Daru had also always lived as brothers. Thus the constant allusions to the past, whether it is the rivalry between the Mughal princes, Aurangzeb and Darashikoh or the conflict between Cain and Abel narrated in the Bible, the writer takes it up to reinforce the conflict between brothers that often leads to tragedy, the story that Ozi narrates about Ro and Lain, the one hero and the other villain shows how the love of these friends had turned them enemies. The two had always been the best friends. It allegorises the story of Ozi and Daru where Daru turns out to be the villain. They have spent each moment of their childhood together, sharing their joys and sorrows, growing up with moments of fights and patch-ups. But Ro’s status had been a cause of jealousy for Lain after they grew up into young men. Daru had always nursed a feeling of jealousy for Ozi , his privileged position, his affluence, his social circle and lavish parties.

“But Ro is jealous of Lain. His resentment, dormant since childhood, has begun to rumble. Lain can see it, but he knows Ro well and trusts him completely” (Hamid 191–92).

And finally, Ozi was left shattered when he gets to know of the love affair of Mumtaz and Daru. But Daru’s life is made equally miserable. His financial difficulties, addiction to drugs, his involvement in drug peddling, his loneliness, frustration, and obsession with Mumtaz, all push him towards an inevitable fall. The pain and humiliation that Daru suffers is too much. And it is at this moment that Daru is arrested by the police for a crime not committed by him but by Ozi. In fact he had performed an act of kindness. He had seen Ozi’s Pajero car knocking a small boy crossing the road and Daru had carried the boy to the hospital, who unfortunately had died in the accident. But he had not told Ozi’s name to the police.

The trial is in progress and Mumtaz tries to defend Daru but her efforts fail. Through ZulfikarManto, she tries to do justice but the innocence of Daru is dwarfed by the enormity of the criminal act which Ozi has performed. Daru is a victim of the class war. Like the real Darashikoh, his defeat is inevitable because truth or moral law should prevail. The prince Darashukoh was killed by Aurangzeb, his younger brother in the war to protect the national, religious and moral interests. It was in the interest of the state that Darashikoh be kept away from achieving political supremacy.

“The emperor, therefore, out of necessity to protect the Holy Law, and also for reasons of state, considered it unlawful to allow him to remain alive” (Hamid 4).

As Daru sits in his dark cell waiting for trial, one is reminded of the agony of Shah Jahan, who was pained to see his sons fighting for political power. The death of Darashikoh had left him brooding about a past that was filled with memories of his sons playing together in Lahore as children and becoming bitter rivals as they grew up.

“when the uncertain future becomes the past, the past in turn becomes uncertain” (Hamid 4).

The personal ambitions of Daru and Ozi lead them away from each other. Their passion and ambitions had made them victims of forces that bring defeat. For Ozi the infidelity of Mumtaz and Daru is a great personal setback. Daru is helpless before the power of the state. His defeat is similar to that of prince Darashikoh who was helpless before the meticulous planning and bravery of Aurangzeb. Daru is a victim of statecraft from which escape seems impossible. The fate of the two friends is like that of the two brothers, the Mughal princes, where death of one at the hands of the other was inevitable. The novel connects the past with the present and establishes its relevance as he highlights the disastrous consequences of over ambitiousness and the trap of the vicious circle of politics. The future awaiting Daru, Mumtaz and Ozi is bleak. Their ambitions had alienated them from each other, had snapped the bonds of marriage and friendship signalling the possibility of new alliances. But the prospects of the success of those alliances were as bleak and uncertain as was the future of the Mughal Empire whose sons were fighting for the crown.

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