

Postmodern Fiction as a Co-Creation: Indeterminate Endings in Mohsin Hamid's Fiction

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Abstract

The focus of the present research is to find out how the endings of Hamid's selected novels can be termed as indeterminants in accordance with Lyotard concept of postmodern fable. In this way the present research finds its way in qualitative research. The present research incorporates Lyotard's polemical essay Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism. The findings reveal that Mohsin Hamid's almost all the novels remain either indeterminate or unconventional regarding the endings as in conformity with Lyotard's view of paralogy. In accordance with Lyotard's idea, Hamid's novels let the reader superseded by something unimaginable. These endings neither verify nor falsify. Readers are free to invent, discover and recreate to supply the endings according to their own will. In this way it can be stated that in these novels the very boundary between reader and writer is blurred. These novels pose questions instead of providing answers. The readers are encouraged to consider the questions that the novels pose.

Key Words: postmodernism, Lyotard, Indeterminants, reader

1. Introduction

“In my writing, I have tried to advocate the blurring of boundaries: not just between civilizations or people of different groups but also between writer and the reader. Co-creation has been central to my fiction, the notion that a novel is made jointly by a writer and a reader. He stated that co-creation is central to my politics as well” (Hamid, 2015, p. 10).

Mohsin Hamid as a postmodern novelist shows skepticism towards the fixity of meanings in his literary works. He propagates that meanings are not only created by writers rather it is process of co-creation between the reader and writer. This process of co-creation in meanings and blurring the boundary between reader and writer is quite evident in his novels. He emerges in the literary cannon of South Asia, Pakistan. In 2000 Mohsin Hamid get his debut novel published, *Moth Smoke*. Mohsin Hamid has four more novels to his credit beyond *Moth Smoke* which are explorations of South Asian political, religious, social, sexual and economic and postcolonial issues with particular reference to Pakistan as a diverse country. The present research article is delimited to his first four novels. He has to his credit a non-fiction book of essays named *Discontent and its Civilization* (2014). Mohsin Hamid was born in Lahore, Pakistan and grew up in USA and studied in Princeton University and Harvard Law School.

The present research incorporates postmodern approach. Postmodernism as philosophical movement refers to skepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms. It favors pluralism and relativism and constructivism and disfavors essentialism, absolute truth and any certain belief. It is considered a part of anti-authoritarian philosophical tradition of skepticism. Modernism in literature ended with the emergence of new writers such as Irving Howe in the 1950's and Leslie Fiedler in 1960's. The literature produced in this period reduced the unity of style for pastiche and challenged to break down the very notion of the 'aesthetics'. There emerged a new generation of writers who embraced eclecticism, chaos and discontinuity, laughed at

alienation rather than lamenting on it. Mohsin Hamid is one among postmodern novelist. They have developed a critical form of art that mixed media, performance and discourse. The heroic distinction between high and low, fine and commercial art, the truth seeking modern avant-garde and the superficial, hedonistic marketplace was being superseded by an anti-heroic embrace of pop culture. Therefore, Lyotard develops his own version of postmodern thought which is in accordance with many postmodern theorists and that version cherishes fragmentation, plurality and uncertainty.

2. Literature Review

Mohsin Hamid is a topical Pakistani British author. Since the publication of his five novels a number of significant critical works have been conducted on these works at national and international level while using different theoretical frameworks presented by modern and postmodern theorists. A brief review of previous researches conducted on Hamid's novels is as follows.

Mohsin Hamid and Zulifqar Ghose's Pakistani English fiction has been examined in detail from the perspective of socio-political scenario. In this thesis the socio-political and economic problems of Pakistan have been analyzed from selected texts of the above-mentioned authors with the supporting ideas of social theorists such as Michael Foucault, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. The researcher has presented Mohsin Hamid as the most prominent novelist among the contemporary young voices of Pakistani postcolonial /post-independence English fiction in general.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist can be categorized as a political discourse. Iqbal, M. J, Mahmood, R and Mahmood, A. M (2011) have examined the presence of political discourse in their research. They have adopted a reflexive approach and placed the researcher and the text in context. The study shows that western countries have put the lives of the people in colonized countries in miserable conditions after the 9/11 tragedy.

It is observed that Mohsin Hamid's two novels *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *How to get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) make him a social science fictionist. King and Taylor (2016) have explored in their study that how his novels make him a social science fictionist. They have quoted examples from these said novels while applying theoretical framework presented by Rosenfield. Social science is "the scientific study of human society and social relationship" and fiction is based on imaginary events presented in the form of genres of literature.

A brief literature review shows that none of them focus on the indeterminant endings of Mohsin Hamid's novels. Hence, the postmodern study of Hamid's novels while using theoretical framework presented by postmodern theorist Lyotard regarding endings would be quite unique.

3. Research Methodology

This qualitative research takes the postmodern approach in order to situate the research in a particular context of ideological stance to validate the findings of research. In this research Mohsin Hamid's novels i.e., *Moth Smoke*, *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West*, will be used as primary texts. The purpose of the research is only to examine the endings of these novels.

Research Questions

The overarching question of the present research is:

- How do Hamid's postmodern novels blur the line between readers and writer by showing skepticism towards the definitive rules of genre?

Research Objectives

- To evaluate how Mohsin Hamid's postmodern novels pose questions in their endings.
- To integrate Jean Francois Lyotard's essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism" for most comprehensive and intelligible analysis of the endings of the novels.

4. Theoretical Framework

Lyotard's Plea for Artistic Dissent in Postmodernism

In his polemical essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism" Lyotard asserted the need of consistent artistic dissent i.e., avant-garde. He states that if cultures cannot settle into complacency or, worse, terror then there emerge a strong plea for questioning the old form and experimenting with new forms. In other words, he reacted against the illusions of realism which let the people assume that they are able to behold reality, truth or way things really are. He further declares that cinematography, photography and media offered themselves as windows to reality or representing truths. But they do not do so rather they act as means for the completion of ordering visual space that began with Renaissance painting where painters tend to depict the world in accordance with the rules of fixed-point perspectives. Lyotard declares that literary realism depicts the world in a way which put the reader in a single position to view the world with preconceived touches of verisimilitude through which they made of their social relations. He provides example of a detective story which begins with an enigma, a murder develops to reveal the motive behind the murder or crime and ends with the identification of murderer. In the process, the story also reaffirms the proper human behavior what seems likely, 'realistic' along with the idea that wickedness is reprimanded at the end. Realism manipulates in a way that eliminates the doubt. By reinforcing the things depicted in fiction as real people are tended to confirm their status as knowing subjects. As a result, both things and human beings are represented in a way they were always supposed to be. Lyotard claims that the appropriate response to the problem in a society marked by the postmodern condition is "paralogy. In accordance with Lyotard concept of artistic dissent, Mohsin Hamid's postmodern novels also challenge the normative rules regarding the endings of any fictional work which have been discussed in section 5.

The Fantasy of Possessing Truth Ended in Terror

Lyotard affiliated the fantasy of possessing truth with terror. He explains that postmodern or avant-garde deviate from the pre-conceived rules of genre rather postmodern authors' work without rules in order to discover new forms. That is why Lyotard calls postmodern a phenomenon which is both too early and too late. Too early for the readers and viewers because it is new: and too late for the writers who are not sure about its outcome whether intelligible, pleasurable or absurd. At the time of its publication Ulysses was banned but now it is considered as one of the best novels of 20th century. The Independents once rejected Duchamp's Fountain but now its copies have become priceless. Avant-garde was deplored by both Stalinism and Nazism. Classicism was appreciated in National Socialism while debasing the modern art. The experimental forms which were originated just after the revolution have been replaced Socialist Realism in the hands of Stalin. Lyotard draws the conclusion that each system, institution or regime

tends to believe that it possessed the truth and the same conviction should be reinforced in fiction by constructing the so-called reality acceptable by the above-mentioned authorities. Thus, Lyotard strongly tend to relate the fantasy of possessing the truth with terror. And the question remains whether there is any possibility of the acceptance of unknown or not. Terror accompanies the possession of truth. So, avant-garde in postmodernism poses questions, undermines all certainties along with the certainty that 'you possess the truth— and are entitled to kill people in its name.

Lyotard has coined the concept of 'postmodern fable' which although has no rules in advance yet reappropriate the old form with new purposes. In his postmodern fable, Lyotard reinvest one of the oldest genres of all. In earlier eras fables used to be consoling or illuminative. These were didactic and etymological. These fables were fictitious because they fabulate but at the same time answers to real questions were being provided through these fables. But Lyotard suggested a postmodern genre which neither offer consolation nor answers rather it poses questions. It recreates the conclusions of modern science instead of fabulating. It begins at the end of story.

What a Human and his/her Brain – or rather the Brain and its Human - would resemble at the moment when they leave the planet forever before destruction that the story does not tell. So ends the fable we are about to hear. The sun is going to explode. Such sort of postmodern fable at the end poses the question whether human beings will survive or not after the explosion of sun. But a happy ending may well be constructed in a way to presuppose those human beings are capable to survive in circumstances which are quite different from the circumstances in which they were evolved.

In explaining his postmodern fable, Lyotard argues that postmodern fable answers the question about the origin of Homo sapiens. It replies that Homo sapiens are an effect of accidental inflection of various forms of energy. There was a molecular composition of the Earth's surface with solar radiations which result in formation of living cells. It further developed into cell division, birth and death, reproduction, selection, grading and language. Thus, postmodern genre answers the etymological questions. The protagonist may not be understood as an effect of accident but energy itself. Lyotard science fiction /futuristic fable narrates that all the natural resources have been devoted to the benefits of Homo sapiens. Homo sapiens need to be replaced and reproduced in a way that its brain continues to work in various environments. Postmodern fable is self-reflexive and rejects realism. At the same time, it accepts verifiable data. But it is not science at all. Postmodern fable as a form of fiction involves an integration of language elements which in a particular complex state assume the form of energy. Fiction, science and technology all involve imagination. Fiction involves imagination at lower level but science and technology at higher level. At the end they evaluated on the criteria of truth. Their propositions are submitted to be testified for verification or falsification. Fables themselves do not verify or falsify. These involve readers to invent, discover, or recreate to supply the ending according to their own will. There remains an option of paralogy on the part of reader. And in the process readers are superseded by something unimaginable.

Lyotard argues that postmodern fable does not end in design of nature which will end for the benefits of Homo sapiens. On the contrary, postmodernism takes time as an intermittent state of energy and consider human being not as a motive but a momentary effect of the transitory condition of matter. It is bleak devoid of any certainty but at the same time it is not pessimistic as

it leaves the future open. It reveals that human beings are not at the mercy of a malignant force, any more than we are the creation of a benevolent designer. It is in the hands of human beings to become what they will become.

The ending of postmodern fable remains undecided to reinforce the idea of uncertainty. The ending rather poses the question in Lyotard's words 'not that it be believed, but that we reflect on it'. So, it can be concluded from Lyotard account of postmodernism and postmodern fable that postmodernism is at once skeptical about metanarratives and affirmative about future. It reinforces the idea to come forward and reflect on it. The endings of Mohsin Hamid's all novels are indeterminate (explained in section 4 of the article).

5. Exploring Indeterminants Endings in Mohsin Hamid's Selected Novels

Traditionally the novels end with some sort of endings so a positive moral of some sort consequently be established. Thomas Rhymer introduced the terms poetic justice in his book *The Tragedies of the Last Age* (1678) which means that literary work should depict a world in which virtue and vice are eventually rewarded and punished. Poetic justice gives emotional and satisfactory relief to the reader.

This metanarrative of poetic justice offers a perfect world commonly shared by all. The indeterminate ending of the novel, *Moth Smoke* deconstructs the metanarrative of poetic justice. In the very first page of the novel, the epigraph about Mughal emperors foreshadows the tussle of power in which innocents are killed and guilty rules the world. The epilogue of the novel reveals Aurangzeb after rule for almost half century repenting on what he had done in his war of succession in a letter to her daughter: "tell my sons not to fight as we did" (Hamid, 2000, p.246).

And it is mentioned in Urdu poetry that Darashikoh who was declared as apostate by his brother and hanged: "Called out to God as he died" (Hamid, 2000, p. 246).

Daru, the protagonist of the novel is punished for a crime he has not committed. He has not killed the boy for whom he has been punished. The boy was killed by Ozi. Ozi bribes the police and put the blame on Daru. This arbitrary justice happens in real world where guilty and rich people thrive and innocent poor people often suffer. It seems that Hamid deliberately violated the standard rules of crime fiction by punishing Daru for framed murder in order to remain pragmatic not realist. Muradbadshah, a murderer, drug dealer and robber remain unpunished. Aurangzeb, a money launderer, son of money launderer keeps up enjoying luxuries, prestige and remain untouched by law.

"I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bounded by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business card" (Hamid, 2007, p. 111).

The open ending of the novel demands the reader to partake in social act by using his/her own agency. When Changez says that "I detect a glint of metal" The tension increases and it seems that both are about to kill each other and reader as a judge comes into play. The novel ends as a thriller to determine the story in way it seems fit to us. The aphorism, focus on the fundamentals, is highlighted even further by the indeterminate ending and call into question the wisdom of story while inviting the reader to speculate whether or not the fully-bearded Changez has become another type of fundamentalist. The last two lines represent an abrupt ending. The possibility of glint of metal in the last line predicts a scene of violence which never happens. His frankness with American listener who is also a business card holder may be ironic as throughout his narration he brutally expresses his criticism of corporate culture. A conventional thriller would resolve the

driving question of the novel in revealing the identity of an American listener as a CIA agent to assassin Changez as a suspected terrorist. Or Changez as an unreliable narrator may be a liar. It can be termed as open-ended novel. The indeterminate ending of that novel puts the reader adrift from the comforting identification with the protagonist. Deviating from the standard rules of genre, the climax occurs in concluding pages rather than occurring somewhere in the middle. The tension between American listener and Changez is at its peak in the concluding pages of the novel. Surprisingly, the novel abruptly ends with a pause while leaving the reader at the brink with a sense of uncertainty whether the listener is an American CIA agent sent to kill Changez or he himself is under the threat of death because he seems suspicious of his bearded tablemate. Such sort of indeterminate ending eschews the reader in becoming the passive recipient of the traumatic event of 9/11 and make them active participant in creating new meaning to supply their own interpretation to the ending. The readers are suspended in the realm of possibility through the novel's refusal of closure and reconnected to resist the normative effects of terror from internal and external forces. Terror is not associated solely with the traumatic event of 9/11 rather it can be seen through the glass of temporal continuities and predictive, teleological patterns of an unreliable narrator. Terror is not particularly associated with the terrorist but with the inability to see the end, the randomness, uncertainty, anonymity and unpredictability of the acts of terrorism. There are no clear statements about Erica's suicide. Another thing which remains unclear in the novel is that whether Changez becomes an extremist or not.

The third book under consideration is *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* which is modeled as a self-help-guide. According to Rosenfield self-help-guide is a genre which puts the reader into a particularly social reading. The ending of this novel is not in accordance with the ending of a self-help genre. It does not end with a solution to the problem to end poverty rather it ends with a question. The readers are asked to confront their deepest fear of death and mortality of everything around. The readers are encouraged to challenge the value of all the things they hold dear. For instance, the very basic quest of self-help genre ends in skepticism. Because being filthy rich is not the answer rather it poses a question. Although the protagonist prospers from a humble origin becomes a business tycoon yet he ends with old, weak and poor circumstances. At that time, he realizes that most important thing in his life was not becoming rich for which he has devoted his whole life because he was always on the grind. The most important thing to him was his relationship with the pretty girl for whom he has no time. The books contain twelve steps to be followed to become rich. But the novel ends with inviting readers to reconsider their strongest wish for becoming rich. The novel ends with a sense of catharsis which is again a phenomenon associated with the viewer or reader. The self-help book ends while leaving the readers to confront the deepest fear of their mortal existence and finiteness of everything which let them to be skeptic of the worth of everything precious or dear. This sort of catharsis and self-transformation to reconsider the worth of becoming rich in rising Asia because becoming rich ends one at the deterioration sense of honor, becoming old, weak, frail, unhealthy and quite poor. In the process of following the twelve steps to become rich, it is realized that most important thing in life was the relationship with his dear ones for which he has no time during the grinding time of making money.

In *Exit West* Saeed and Nadia meet each other fifty years later again in their own native city where peace has been restored. The appearance of both is same as fifty before. Nadia wears black robe and Saeed has stubble. The novel starts with a sense of uncertainty and ends with the same.

Both of them have deliberately used the neutral word 'different' to represent their life which neither apply neither sorrow nor regret. Saeed said that how different their life would be if they have sex without marriage. And Nadia said that how different their life would be if they married. Fifty years before, Saeed was unwilling to have sex without marriage and Nadia was not ready to get marry. At Saeed's offer they both muse to spend an evening to see stars in Chile. But novel ends with a sense of uncertainty in the following words: "And, they rose and embraced and parted and didn't know, then, if that evening would ever come" (Hamid, 2017, p.229). Ending remains indeterminate in a sense involves reader to interpret it in their own way.

6. Conclusion

The endings of Hamid's above mentioned novels represent an enduring love for the second person narration. In *Moth Smoke*, the trial of the protagonist Daru is headed by Judge who is addressed as 'you' in the text. The readers are positioned as a judge to declare Daru's fate either as guilty or innocent. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* involves the reader at the place of American interlocutor throughout Changez's dramatic monologue. Hamid's third novel positions the reader as the protagonist 'you' in the self-help book while conflating the reader with the tragic hero. In *Exit West* Saeed and Nadia meet after fifty years but uncertainty still exist in their lives. It can be submitted that the endings of all the novels of Mohsin Hamid remain either indeterminate or unconventional as in conformity with Lyotard's view of paralogy. Just like Lyotard, Hamid's novels let the reader superseded by something unimaginable. These endings neither verify nor falsify. Readers are free to invent, discover and recreate to supply the endings according to their own will. In this way it can be stated that in these novels the very boundary between reader and writer is blurred. These novels pose questions instead of providing answers. The readers are encouraged to consider the question that the novel poses.

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