

## A Postmodern Study of Science in Mohsin Hamid's Fiction

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### Abstract

*The purpose of the present research is to uncover the presence of mininarrative regarding science in Hamid's postmodern novels while challenging the metanarrative ideologies prevalent in postmodern societies. In this way the present study finds its way in qualitative research. To analyze the texts, the present study incorporates the theoretical stance presented by postmodern theorist, Jean Francois Lyotard particularly his notion of "incredulity towards metanarratives" and Juan Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. The analysis suggests that Hamid's novels seem to be in accordance with Lyotard shows skepticism in the advancement science regarding nuclear weapons which result in great disaster of human life and environment. Textual analysis reveals that development and science seem to be inclined to favor and benefit only those in power. These novels represent a world where technology permeates everywhere and characters as postmodern individuals are overwhelmed with technological inventions in the form of mobile phones, advance vehicle, Skype, internet, satellite, Ac's, beauty products. He shows skepticism to general explanations about science which proclaim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions or races. Postmodernism argues that these are relative and these focus on the relative truth of each person. Hamid's characters show skepticism towards the metanarrative ideology related to science that impact their lives. These novels bring to light the alternative voices and mininarratives, which seem to constitute the first step towards social change. The study can be a contribution to postmodern studies.*

**Key Words:** Metanarratives, Mininarratives, ideology, science.

### Introduction

The current project uses postmodern ideological perspective regarding metanarrative ideologies related to science to frame the analysis of Mohsin Hamid's fiction. As a postmodern thinker and post structuralist philosopher Lyotard particularly shows skepticism towards the metanarrative ideology related to science, all its supporting principles and scientific and materialistic advancements. His view of "incredulity towards metanarratives" regarding science dates back to the industrial revolution of 18<sup>th</sup> century with the beginning of enlightenment project. The Enlightenment project maintain that science, reason and rationalism promise to gratify all human requisites. Science aims to blend the whole aspects of life either individualistic or communal. The metanarrative ideology related to science is to provide a perfect world where order, unity, peace, justice and prosperity is restored. Moreover, in this age of enlightenment all the disciplines of knowledge such as history, philosophy, art and religion combine to explain the absolute truth. He further argues that in claiming the absolute truth: "Science seems more completely subordinated to the prevailing power" (Lyotard, 1984, p.8).

Because there occurs a great transformation occurs in postmodern society just after the WW11, People started to show skepticism towards modernity, traditions, nuclear weapons, environmental disaster and decrease in natural resources and advancement of cyber culture. As a result, metanarrative ideology of Enlightenment age regarding absolute progress and welfare of humanity has collapsed. In his theory of mininarratives, Lyotard challenges the modern metanarratives or ideological construct and he calls this phenomenon as postmodern condition. Where each end ever metanarrative loses its credibility no matter what sort of mode of unification it adopts. As a result, there remains no great idea so Lyotard offers mininarratives which are local, contingent,

temporary. According to him science is a man-made narrative that claims for objectivity and transparency. He propagates that a highly advanced system of knowledge production and dissemination exists in post-industrial societies. In modern enlightenment, science is the dominant notion which does not represent any reality rather it is based on human desire to rule. Postmodern authors reveal the phenomenon of mininarratives while questioning the metanarratives through the fictional representations. Jameson viewed postmodern fragmentation as a sign that human beings are lost in a world of global capitalism and mass communication without a “center” technology permeates everywhere and media is the king. In this postmodern age nothing is creative and pure rather we are hollow and stuffed men with just a stream of images. The master of the protagonist ‘you’ sells expired products. Daru drinks expired wine.

However, the researcher’s focus in picking out mininarratives in Hamid’s novels regarding science is not based on challenging the theories of natural science. Rather the focus of present research is to bring to light that how modern liberal societies are oppressive. These are oppressive not in overt way because these are justified through social sciences. So Lyotard argued for much more utilitarian attitude to political life and artistic expression that explicitly ignored the oppressive rules laid down by metanarratives. He shows skepticism to general explanations about science which proclaim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions or races. Postmodernism argues that these are relative and these focus on the relative truth of each person. Hamid’s characters show skepticism towards the metanarrative ideology related to science that impact their lives. These novels bring to light the alternative voices and mininarratives, which seem to constitute the first step towards social change.

Since 2000 Pakistan English literature evolved into merging different genres which leads to experimentation. Bapsi Sidhwa’s *the Crow Eaters* marked the dawn of modern fiction in Pakistan (Shamsie, 1997). Hamid’s *Moth Smoke*, written in 2000 is a postmodern novel. It is a story about Daru against the backdrop of newly nuclear power possessing country, Pakistan. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is set in the historical context of 9/11. *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* tells the story of a protagonist with humble origin, his rise into a business tycoon in South Asia and his end in bankruptcy. *Exit West* tells the story of migration of Saeed and Nadia apparently from a South Asian country to the West in order to avoid civil war. The present research will uncover how metanarrative ideology related to science has been questioned in Hamid’s novels.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study of Mohsin Hamid’s novels uncovers how metanarratives have lost their power to convince as they are literally stories that are told in order to legitimize the various versions of truth in contrast to the existence of a postmodern multiplicity of theoretical standpoints. Mohsin Hamid’s four novels i.e. *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *How to get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West* will be used as primary text. The researcher will analyze the selected texts while applying the theoretical frame works offered by postmodern authors / theorists such as Jean François Lyotard, Juan Baudrillard and Foucault.

### **Research Question**

The overarching question of the present research is:

- How do Hamid’s novels deconstruct the metanarrative ideologies which make absolute universal and all-embracing claim to epistemology such as science?

### **Research Objectives**

The present research is based on two research objectives i.e.:

- To analyze Mohsin Hamid's four novels while keeping in mind postmodern approach towards science.
- To integrate theoretical framework presented by some postmodern theorists such as Jean Francois Lyotard, Baudrillard and Foucault with aim to develop the postmodern theoretical understandings of these novels.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The concept of metanarrative was brought into prominence by Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" and calls for an increasingly skeptical attitude to resist "the totalizing nature of metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984). "Meta" is Greek word for "beyond"; narrative is a story that is characterized by its telling. Metanarrative is a story, narrative, theory, any grand idea, reliable narrator or so-called universal narrative which claims to be true to all life. In postmodern approach and critical theory, a metanarrative is an abstract idea that is thought to be a comprehensive explanation of historical experience or knowledge. For Lyotard, 'Metanarrative' represents overarching modernist belief in order, unity and stability since they tend to explain all other 'little stories' and therefore make universal and totalizing claims about reality, knowledge or experience. "A metanarrative sets out the rules of narratives and language games" (Lyotard, 1984).

Modernism tends to highly value metanarratives and the social institutions which produce them. In the postmodern world, these grand narratives have lost their legitimacy. So Lyotard defines postmodernity as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' because these are ideologically constructed. Lyotard's skepticism towards 'grand narratives' in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) remains the most influential voice of Postmodern Philosophy. Lyotard is critical of metanarratives that claim to be able to explain everything. Lyotard asserted that there are two major reasons to question and reject the metanarratives. Firstly, these are seen to ignore context, origin and limitations by a particular context. Secondly, these are seen to be employed as a tool to buy their propagators to assert power.

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) a postmodern French structuralist argued the impact of media and technology in contemporary life and invented the concept of constructed reality or hyperreality or virtual reality (King, 1998). He challenged the domination of system of signs which substantially changed the contemporary rationality, thought and action. He terms this change as media intoxication and technological feudalism whose sole object is to propagate its own-perpetuation. Baudrillard provides a critique of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism which stress the search for hidden rationalities (Metanarratives in Lyotard's terms) rather than superficial realities (can be termed as mininarratives). He further asserts that every object is relational and culture is the product of simulacrum and all human beings are replicants. Simulacrum is likeness or similarity of something that lacks the quality or substance of something original. Postmodern society has replaced all reality and meanings with symbols and signs. Human experience in postmodern society becomes a simulation of reality rather than reality (Baudrillard, 1983). Lyotard claims that existing metanarratives are insufficient to describe reality and they need to be deconstructed (1984) and Baudrillard argued about the insufficiency of the existing epistemologies related to services, information, and the dynamics of contemporary life in general. He states that there exists a confusion of categories for the postmodern self. The values which were once fixed categories have lost their significance. Proliferation and uncertainty are the foundations of postmodern society. He proclaims that postmodern self tries to escape into a world of postmodern

systems of communication and information. The codes of political, sexual and genetic spheres are collapsed. A feeling of uncertainty prevails because of the exposure of all sides of image and information.

Foucault's criticism of rationality is based on his views regarding the manipulation of rational arguments to favor or disfavor a particular political view. Foucault argues that such sort of manipulation of rationality is nothing but merely another attempt to exercise arbitrary power over others. Consequently, he eliminated any idea regarding rational norms or political reforms. His one objective was to debilitate the ideology of emerging liberalism of late 18th century and its institutions i.e., individual rights and democracy. He argues that modern liberal societies are oppressive but not in an overt way because these are justified through the rational arguments of social sciences. Foucault named this process as 'normalization' a label associated with social sciences which seem to present a form of rational, objective and normal behavior which attains society's legitimation through continuous practice. And the behavior which alienates from society's legitimation is perceived as irrational, illegitimate, abnormal and a legitimate object of discipline and coercion. Foucault perceived bureaucratic institutions nothing but sources of exercising power of one group over the other. He questions the power of established institutions and political status quo and favors resistance. So, Foucault's ideas pave the way towards 1970's and 1980's postmodernism which is based on broad skepticism to epistemology, rationality and ideology as the sources of manipulating political and economic power. So Lyotard announces: "Metanarrative has lost its credibility" (Lyotard, 1984, p.37).

### **Debunking the Metanarrative Ideology of Science in Mohsin Hamid's Fiction**

The analysis of Hamid's novel debunks the metanarrative ideology related to science as an objective entity in modern age which was supposed to ensure welfare and progress of humanity. The analysis suggests that Hamid's novels seem to be in accordance with Lyotard shows skepticism in the advancement science regarding nuclear weapons which result in great disaster of human life and environment. Textual analysis reveals that development and science seem to be inclined to favor and benefit only those in power. These novels represent a world where technology permeates everywhere and characters as postmodern individuals are overwhelmed with technological inventions in the form of mobile phones, advance vehicle, Skype, internet, satellite, AC's, beauty products. The texts even represent elements of science fiction in the form of black doors. Their lives without them seem to stuck like the suspended pendulum of clock. The text seems to represent both the sides of science but seems to focus more on its drastic impacts. These technologies radically change our ways of living but are neither all good nor all bad. Moth Smoke deconstructs metanarrative ideologies related to atom bomb, AC's, Pajero and mobile phone. The novel represents an era of 1998's when Pakistan celebrates its triumph in becoming the first Islamic state with nuclear power. But the novel debunks mininarratives in the form of its impact on the lives of common people and their opposite views which are excluded from the metanarrative ideology of nuclear power with the sole aim of strengthening the defensive power of country. Murad Badshah shows skepticism to the phenomenon of nuclear bomb blast while comparing it with the odoriferous harbinger i.e. farting. A paradoxical silence and shame is associated with the emission of farting. Nuclear bomb blast by Pakistan results in hotness in climate, load shedding, unemployment, inflation and chaos in the society. Rich like Ozi celebrate their country's victory while poor suffer in hell like environment with all the evils of poverty. Daru observed that monsoon which used to be a season of greenery and rebirth has been perished because of



nuclearization. The ghost of atomic bomb holds the center stage in the novel *Moth Smoke*. It comes dramatically as an apparition and brings troubles for the poor wretched people. For example, after the nuclear explosion a storm comes and sweeps the electricity posts, thus causes prolonged power breakdown across the new nuclear power. So, our hero, Daru is left miserable and powerless against the moth flocks around the wax candles only to be destroyed. His paranoid anxieties are quite evident here. He states:

All my life the arrival of the monsoon has been a happy occasion, ending the heat of high summer and making Lahore green again. But this year I see it as a time of festering, not rebirth. Without air-conditioning, temperatures are still high enough for me to sweat as I lie on my bed trying to sleep, but now the sweat doesn't evaporate. Instead, it coagulates like blood into peeled scabs of dampness that cover my itching body. Unrefrigerated, the food in my house spoils overnight, consumed by colored molds that spread like cancer (2000, p.211).

The event of nuclear bomb has not only affected the environment but also the everyday lives of the people. The drastic impacts of nuclear bomb bring to light the mininarrative that any progress which is made on the basis of natural or human destruction can never be justified. Although nuclear bomb strengthens the defensive power of its country but it also results in the destruction of natural environment and common people's lives. Technological advancement in the form of AC's, mobile phones and Pajero is in conformity with Lyotard's idea of "Science seems more completely subordinated to the prevailing power" (Lyotard, 1984, p.8). The capitalist has conquered atmosphere with the invention of AC's. Ozi represents the elite class of society which cherishes coldness in the hotness of summer while rest of the poor population suffers not only because of load shedding and natural heat of summer. But hotness is doubled for them because of the heat emitted by AC's. Ozi sleeps while covering himself with blanket in the middle of summer to avoid shivering and naked in winter to avoid the heat produced by AC's. He asserted that only person without senses will remain uncooled without AC's in summer. One of the reasons of Ozi's chill relation with his wife was their views on AC's. She was overcooled through AC's. Mannuci was considered a crazy boy because he muses that AC's emit hot air in the lanes. Muradbadshah considered AC's as unnatural and dangerous because they get pores out of shape. The reliance on AC's ends one's control on one's own body. That's why he enjoys load shedding because it creates great uneasiness for the rich who are not able to use AC's. Mumtaz contends that elite class has conquered the weather through the use of AC's while the rest of the people in Pakistan are facing load-shedding because of their extravagancy.

The textual analysis further reveals that Ozi's Pajero, a form of technological advanced vehicle provides him the privileged position of being considered above law. Daru as a drunkard in his Suzuki was accosted by police and they let him go after taking bribe, but when he and Ozi were in the same condition in Pajero no one among police men stops them. Even their mobile represents their class.

The army, drones, USA satellite and computer program play an important in the narration of Hamid's third novel while keeping the second person at a distance. And the section of the novel about these indicates an entirely different point of view which is the perspective of manmade surveillance technology. Another deliberate strategy employed by author is the constant nature of

technology. For example, the main character in his teen earns money by selling DVDs of pirated films. We see him visiting internet café to place video call to his son in his old age. This is a didactic work of fiction which challenges the presence of purity where it is harmful and conflict genic.

The world in *Exit West* is closely affected by the advancement in technology and communication through media such as by using mobile phones, computers, internet, and film that spread pop culture all over the world. The binaries of presence and absence are collapsed at many places in Hamid's novels. At Nadia's apartment Saeed and Nadia started to listen an album sung by a long dead singer. But her voice was so alive that it mingles in their voices just like a third partner (Hamid, 2017, p.25). In accordance with Baudrillard's simulation it is made possible that the long dead entities can be present among the living beings as they are alive. One of the wonders of science is that it can change the absence into presence. Saeed's phone has the potential to let him access to Nadia while walking, bathing, eating laughing and even getting her skin burn with arousal. So, in Nadia's life: "he became present without presence" (Hamid, 2017, p.37).

And she is playing the same role in Saeed's life. In Baudrillard's terms hyperreality in the form of the virtual world offers more excitement and safety than the real world of the city. The text states the role of social media in triggering the development of war. The textual analysis reveals that the social media spread the news of mass operation in London against the refugees. This spread of news accumulate the nativist extremists whom authorities supported in tactic way. The electricity was cut off from the occupied areas of London. Moreover, this occupied area was thronged with warriors and tanks. There were drones and helicopters which were circling above. Saeed and Nadia along with other refugees are entangled inside. They are facing the same war which they have faced in their native country.

### Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that Hamid's novels represent a hyperreal world in Baudrillard's terms where postmodern fragmentation works as a sign where human beings as postmodern individuals are lost in a world of mass communication and world has become smaller than a global village as the presence of black doors, drones and social media suggest. Technology permeates everywhere and social media is a powerful king.

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