

Discerning Effects of Cruel Optimism on lower-middle-class people in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Moth Smoke*

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Abstract

The socio-economic issues in capitalist societies due to class difference is a very dangerous dilemma for mankind. This paper is an attempt to explore Mohsin Hamid's debut novel "Moth Smoke" (2000) and its protagonist, Darashikoh Shehzad's condition by applying Lauren Berlant's concept of Cruel Optimism to conceptually investigate how class difference affects the psyche of lower-middle-class people of Third World country Pakistan. The class distinction disturbs them in a cruel optimistic way, and they build unattainable hopeful attachments with luxurious objects for a prosperous life in comparison to rich people. The reader can analyze how these objects of desire as a set of magnetizing promises like a good life or upward mobility conjure lower-class people to step into the world of crime in their crazy struggle to get equal social status like other elite classes. These promises threaten their well-being in the precarious socio-economic sphere and become difficult to obtain for them in capitalist societies.

Keywords: *Berlant, Cruel Optimism, Class difference, Desires, Attachments.*

Introduction

The novel "Moth Smoke" by Mohsin Hamid was written in 2000 in the context of the 1990s India and Pakistan conflict of nuclear war but depicts the division of societal class. As, Bose uses the "nuclear atom" as a symbol for class differences, which divides everything into two classes. The rich were viewed as liberals, and the poor were not even permitted to figure the same way as liberals (Bose, 2000; Judd, 2006). The uneven or unfair distribution of wealth and country resources produces serious socio-economic clashes where according to poor people rich believe that "Might is right," (Makhijani, 2023). In this situation, the fundamental job was money for people to get their things of desire which led to cruel optimism.

According to Scott (2020), "Optimism is a mental state marked by positivity, confidence, and hope for success and a bright future" (Scott, 2020, para.1). These optimistic attachments are not inherently cruel. It is only when the object of your attachment actively interferes with the purpose that brought you there in the first place that it can become cruel. This paper focuses on the analysis of characters of Mohsin Hamid's novel 'Moth Smoke' (2000) who become the victims of capitalism and face an inferiority complex due to class differences.

To argue this notion, Lauren Berlant's concept of Cruel Optimism has been applied to the male gender Daru, which is mostly found in the female gender but here the male member of society also builds cruel optimistic relations with luxurious objects. According to Berlant (2011), "cruel optimism," means "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility"

(p.24). Berlant coins the term 'cruel optimism' to portray a specific connection, short or seemingly perpetual, between the human subject and the social world they occupy. Set forth plainly, a relationship of cruel optimism includes circumstances of connection to expectations and desires in which not exclusively are the least prone to remain unfulfilled, yet the very supporting of the actual connection has negative, compelling impacts according to one's life and advancement (Berlant, 2011). Throughout the novel, Daru feels insecure and suffers from a complex of being inferior in comparison with his rich friend, Ozi. Daru is Ozi's friend, but because of their different social classes, they don't get along well. As Makhijani (2023) writes, Daru becomes upset and uncomfortable when he sees Ozi's lavish home. He becomes unhappy with his present condition and desires to bring a change in his life economically, socially, and psychologically (Makhijani, 2023).

Berlant uses cruel optimism as a way of understanding the attachments we have formed to fantasies of the good life that are no longer sustainable in the present (p.24). Daru yearns to get money by adopting criminal activities like drug dealing, drug addiction, dancing, and adultery to become a part of Lahore's elite class and believes to be truly happy he needs to have luxuries like the upper class. According to Perner, "It is the story of a man struggling to maintain a high-class lifestyle that leads him to commit crimes and ultimately land him in jail" (Perner, 2010). Hence, the research intends to present this concept of cruel optimism in Hamid's novel "Moth Smoke" (2000) and as this novel is in Pakistan, so, the focus will be on the cruel optimism faced by the lower classes people especially male members of Third World country like Pakistan due to effects of class differences on their minds in capitalist societies.

Literature Review

A novel can be interpreted in a variety of ways because it has multiple dimensions. *Moth Smoke* (2000) is also broken down in a variety of ways, each one focusing on a different aspect of the book. For instance, many researchers like Jay(2005), Worley(2007), Yaqoob(2010), Bryant Scott (2014), Moin(2015), Malik(2017), S Khatoon and N Fatima(2019) and Makhijani(2023) have analyzed different aspects of this novel and wrote about globalization and its consequences on individuals, crime and social control in Pakistani society, how unhealthy environment corrupt human emotion and reasoning, effects of globalization, postmodern aspects, social conflict between classes, idea of silence and aggression, and effects of marxism, respectively.

No doubt, many researchers have done work on class differences in Hamid's novel '*Moth Smoke*'(2000). However, as per the literature review, no researcher has explored this novel's aspect concerning Berlant's Cruel Optimism theory. In this paper, the researcher is going to analyze the effects of class differences on the minds of class people of Third World countries like Pakistan by applying Lauren Berlant's concept of Cruel Optimism how the unfair division of wealth and resources among classes becomes the cause of production of unattainable desires for good life in people of lower classes which becomes difficult to obtain for them in capitalist societies.

Research Methodology

The study drew its methodology from Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism which focuses on the various aspects of the collapse of optimistic scenarios and objects, which once provided a space for the fantasy of the good life. This is despite evidence that capitalist societies

can no longer offer individuals the opportunity to "make a difference" in their lives (Berlant, 2011). *Cruel Optimism*, the most recent book by Lauren Berlant, focuses on our desire for unhealthy things. She says, "when something you want is an obstacle to your flourishing," (p.1) which is cruel optimism. It's not just that something you want is out of reach; the fact that you want it makes it harder for you to get what you want. 'Why', Berlant asks, 'do individuals stay joined to regular great life dreams - say, of persevering through correspondence in couples, families, political frameworks, foundations, markets, and at work - when the proof of their shakiness, delicacy, and dear expenses proliferates?' (p.2). Even though they are cruel, these visions are also "profoundly confirming" (p.2).

The connection might include practically a wide range of things, and these sorts of hopeful relations are not intrinsically cruel. "Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing," Berlant reminds us, "the whole gamut from the sly neutrality of browsing the aisles to excitement at the prospect of "the change that's gonna come" (Berlant, 2011, p.2). Even though Freire's philosophy of hope was written at a different time and for a different kind of society, the central message is not out of date. For Freire, hope is a fundamental human quality that makes it possible to resist the neoliberal ideology's cynical discourses and "culture of silence" (Tiainen, Leiviska, & Brunila, 2019). However, from a Berlantian perspective, the false hope associated with unattainable objects to which people become emotionally attached but which are not realistically within their reach is the antithesis of hope in late-capitalist societies, even more than the hopelessness and despair that Freire observed among underprivileged citizens in the society of his time. However, because the capitalist system only provides goals that serve its reproduction, it is more meaningful for an individual to pursue those goals than to have none. The cruelty therefore stems from the individual's emotional attachment to these unattainable and meaningless goals and the illusion of their necessity, even though these objectives ultimately harm the individual's well-being (Tiainen, Leiviska, & Brunila, 2019).

Lauren Berlant (2011) has described the way neoliberal culture directs individual hopes and dreams toward goals that serve the neoliberal economy rather than collective political transformation through her concept of "cruel optimism." Berlant divides unrealistic ideals of the ideal life into four categories: promises of upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and long-term intimacy are the four things that liberal-capitalist societies say people need to have to make life worthwhile (p.3). However, opportunities for individuals to achieve such flourishing are no longer available in society. Berlant's essential request is into these dreams of the good life, and she spends a large part of the book trying to comprehend how and why people grip misleading commitment. She expresses that her "strategy is to peruse examples of change in unambiguous stylish and social settings to determine what's aggregate about unambiguous methods of exotic movement toward and beyond survival" (p.9). As far as her technique, Berlant unites a progression of close readings from a chronicle of "the stalemate or temporary second" that represents "praiseworthy instances of change by the loss of this fantasy" of the good life (p.11).

Berlant contrasts the relational dynamic of striving against the structural feeling of optimism to comprehend how survival is possible. In this context, optimism is a form of attachment that enables one to invest in the plausible possibility of one's survival or the continuity of the world. Berlant doesn't require optimism to make you feel good, positive, or

even optimistic, which may seem counterintuitive. Although Freire's concept of false hope and Berlant's cruel optimism come from different theoretical traditions, we believe that both ideas shed light on the mechanisms by which neoliberal common sense harnesses subjectivities in the reproduction of the present and, as a result, causes political passivity and disengagement to rise (Tiainen, Leiviska, & Brunila, 2019). According to Berlant (2011), cruel optimism refers to the affective way individuals adapt to the prevalent neoliberal ethos and the fantasies of the good life that it entails, even though these fantasies remain profoundly unattainable and the promises they entail are never fulfilled.

As a result, cruel optimism suggests a relational dynamic in which individuals remain attached to "clusters of promises" or "compromised conditions of possibility" embedded in desired object ideas (Berlant, 2011, p. 23,24). These object ideas are significant to the individual because they provide a "continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" (p.24), making life bearable, and the individual becomes emotionally attached to pursuing them. However, as long as these objects remain out of reach, have negative and constricting effects on an individual's life and their persistent pursuit begins to pose a threat to the individual pursuing them (Moore & Clarke, 2016).

As a result, Berlant and Freire both hold the view that neoliberal common sense prevents individuals from pursuing alternative objectives by directing their efforts toward maintaining the status quo. As a result, a particularly damaging effect of cruel optimism or false hope is that it encourages adaptation to the current circumstances rather than intervention. Additionally, such hope or optimism conceals the underlying structures of power that largely determine an individual's opportunities and gives the impression that they are responsible for their success or failure in life. But Freire's philosophy of hope was highly criticized because neither did he provide a straightforward definition of the concept of hope, nor did he ever develop it systematically. All things being equal, Freire, and the custom of basic teaching method after him, have utilized the idea of desire to allude freely to different thoughts concerning a majority rules government, citizenship, and basic commitment to utopian struggles towards social change (Cho 2010; Glass 2001; Ellsworth 1989; Jackson 2007; Lather 1998; Weiler 1996, 2001). This type of utopianism is open-ended in the sense that it seeks a better world without predetermined blueprints (Levitas, 1990: 9).

According to Berlant, it's important to analyze why people today continue to ignore the deeply hurtful and destructive nature of attachment in favour of optimism. In her own words, she "will serve to pursue an emotional attachment to what we call the good life..." (p.27). She argues that this attachment is not "just a psychological state" but arises from the current normal state of life "that is the subject's state of exhaustion". In this sense, cruel optimism allows us to understand why people choose not to resist, but to 'ride the waves of their familiar attachment system' (p.28). It conceptually explores the question of how people maintain their commitment to lifestyles that threaten their well-being, and in doing so it reframes the object of desire not as an object (or even a relationship) but as a set of magnetizing promises. These intimate subjects promote scenarios of financial and intimate contingencies as well as commercial paradigms regarding the best way to live as it traces the emergence of a precarious public sphere.

Precarity is a state in which more values are associated with the precarious political and economic system because of the attachment to a particular type of expectation from an object. This gives a feeling of illusion to carry on with a decent life. According to Butler, it is

"coextensive with birth," because precariousness is an unavoidable aspect of human existence (Butler, 2015, p. 14). As they also write, it results "from our social existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance and who, as a result, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness, and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions" (Butler, 2015).

Cruel optimism is also a way to distinguish the past from the future and to live in the present in a state of constant crisis in which one is dependent on a subject for immediate satisfaction or security. This work of Berlant centres around the various parts of the breakdown of hopeful items/situations when held in a space open to the dream of an easy street, and follows the dramatizations of variation changing what appeared to be essential into the constrained hopeful connections we call "cruel". Cruel because they fail to deliver on what was promised to the subject: a kind of flourishing that is becoming more and more difficult to attain in the middle of socioeconomic conditions characterized by greater flexibility and vulnerability. This carries us to the primary subject of Berlant's idea of cruel hopefulness, which will hold any importance with a wide geological crowd: the way vulnerability works.

Berlant anchors the concept in its unequal distribution of resources, which leads to social conflict, even though practitioners of "development" must construct a self-referential critique of the practice of labelling other populations as "other" and potentially "vulnerable." As in her well-known work on precarity, Judith Butler (2010) argues that what makes life precarious (i.e., vulnerable) is not just that it depends on certain inputs and needs—specific external conditions that determine whether life flourishes or withers—but also that those inputs and needs are ones that no living being can guarantee. As she states, 'there are no circumstances that can completely "solve" the issue of... bodies... they are subject to incursions and to diseases that risk the probability of enduring by any stretch of the imagination' (Butler, 2010, p.29). Precariousness is, in such a manner, a sacred component of every single material being to sustain themselves, bodies rely on something beyond themselves to the point where "to live is always to live a life that is at risk" and is susceptible to non-sustaining (p.30).

The selected novel has been carefully read for this study. Papers and books with related reviews and comments have been taken into consideration. Additionally, video versions of the selected novel have been viewed for a deeper comprehension of the author's ideas. In light of the nature of the work, the descriptive/qualitative research method was used in this study. Hence, this study focuses on the novel *Moth Smoke* (2000) which will be analyzed with the help of Berlant's concept of Cruel Optimism about the socio-economic crisis in capitalist societies which marginalized lower classes and its effects on people's minds like the character of Darashikoh aka Daru. He suffers from an inferiority complex and shows persistence to achieve the normative promises of capital like the fantasy of a good life and upward mobility in competition with his friend, Aurangzeb by adopting illegal activities and drug smuggling to get equal social status like Ozi by hook and crook. The attachments with unattainable desires lead Daru towards vulnerability and the socio-political precarious system provides him with a sense of illusion of living a good life and creates an ongoing crisis that leads him to destruction. For Bonger (1916) the competitive and individualistic tendencies of capitalism foster egotism and therefore fostering criminality is likely to flourish (Bonger, 1916).

Discussion And Analysis

Moshin Hamid's debut novel 'Moth Smoke'(2000) was written in the context of socio-economic crises due to the Indo-Pakistan nuclear war in 1998, which became the cause of class division in capitalist societies. The novel traces the life of a lower-middle-class young man, Darashikoh Shehzad, a disturbed, restless, cruel optimistic building relation to the object of desire, "actually obstacle to flourishing" (Berlant, 2011: 1) like drug-selling, drug-addiction, robbery, and adultery which take him to self-destructive or "threatens the well-being"(24). According to Berlant, cruel optimism is "the state of keeping a connection to an essentially hazardous object"(24). At the beginning of the novel, he loses his job and fame due to his aggressive behaviour during a minor interaction with a member of the elite class, Mr. Jiwan a country landowner with a portion of 1,000,000 U.S. in his record', thus a resource for the bank (Hamid, 2000, p.22).

After that Daru, faces socio-economic crises and "encountered a spot of difficulty finding a position" (p.85) despite his intelligence and education expertise because he lacked influential connections necessary for a successful career and improved social life, whereas his classmates like Ozi, a typical student, live lavishly due to his wealth, power, and foreign degree. In capitalist societies, the unequal distribution of resources among upper and lower classes gives no longer opportunities to lower-middle-class individuals "to make a difference" in their lives (Berlant, 2011). As Hamid demonstrates through Daru, this is due to his (Ozi) father's connections and ability to conceal his wealth; "I kept hearing about him, that he had built a mansion in Gulberg, that the Accountability Commission was looking into him" (p.87). He became aware of the unfair nature of communal and material life for the first time as a result of this class difference, and he began to become enraged at the wealthy and resourceful groups which became the cause of marginalization of lower-middle classes' people, which disturbed him in a cruel optimistic way.

As Berlant said, cruel optimism is a "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility" (24). The imbalance conjures Daru to step into the world of crime to earn money to satisfy his unattainable desires in capitalist societies, because "under capitalism, money is power" (42). He suffers from an inferiority complex and starts comparing himself to his rich friend, Ozi to maintain his luxurious status which attracts him as "liberal-capitalist social orders say people to make life worthwhile"(3) as a relational dynamic in which, he attaches to "clusters of promises " embed in desired object-thoughts(23).

Daru starts his comparison when notices how different his house is from his wealthy friend, Ozi, whom he came to visit after a long time. Daru found himself in the fantasy world as soon as he entered the house of his old friend, which caught him off guard, "filling in as a runway for an escape plane, maybe, and pass not one however two exquisite new Pajeros" (p.10). When Daru first rides in a Pajero, similar emotions are displayed in the following lines: "The Pajero has never been my vehicle before. Costs more than my house and moves like a bull, strong and determined"(p.28) which emotionally attaches him and provide a "sense to look forward to being in the world" by pursuing it (24). Daru considers that a Pajero 'costs more than [his] house' and circumspectly sees the 'distinction in the hints of pummeling vehicle entryways', the qualification and trust in the 'profound crashes of the Pajero and Land Cruiser' and the shame and aversion in 'the anxious hack' of his Suzuki (p. 28 & 96). Daru, riding his Suzuki, "struggling to keep pace" as he follows Ozi's Pajero (p.94), "like another propensity that vows to induce in you an improved way of being (1).

With the good appearance of things like a big house, Pajeros discriminates against him from his friend and incites him to have compassion for "self-undermining-cruel-desires"(171). Hamid shows Daru's financial decline by demonstrating that he does not have access to high-priced goods in his life and he starts suffering from an inferiority complex and feels insecure. But now for Daru owning the big house and Pajeros means the symbols of being rich and wealthy which is not possible without money. These luxurious objects attract Daru and compel him to go after them at any expense, even though "there are no guarantees that the life he intends can or will be built" (192).

Daru felt fortunate to unite with his friend Ozi, and he began attending high-society parties to indulge in the things he couldn't afford on his own. According to Berlant, when we talk about the object of our desire, we mean a "collection of promises" that we want "someone or something to fulfil for us" (23). As a result, he attaches himself to Ozi to improve his life, but the more he interacts with them, the more he realizes his class distinction due to capitalist societies because "the promise of good life no longer masks the living precarity"(196). Ozi nonchalantly insults Daru for being jobless, 'I would be wise to push off. You know, some of us have to work' (p.110) and emphasizes that Daru doesn't like parties because 'he can't afford them' (p.100). In his book "History and Class Consciousness (1923)," George Luckas says that the characteristics of one class can only be observed in the presence of other classes (Luckas, 1923).

Horney (1950) examined a masochist side of Daru's case explicitly and for every individual experiencing because of this class struggle issue by and large. He thinks that when people feel helpless and have no choice but to rise in society, they become hopefully attached to those who are living their dreams (Horney, 1950). Daru has a touch of mock "superiority" (inferiority complex) due to his lower-middle-class upbringing. Regardless of constant degradation, Daru admires Ozi's life and is intuitively drawn to all that is related to Ozi, even his wife, Mumtaz, and thinks Ozi is a 'lucky bastard' to be married to her (p.11). Daru realizes that Mumtaz isn't his extremely durable future organization but still, he has attachments with her to look like an upper-class person because she has a better profile, personality, and position than his Daru. So, the personality of Daru unfolds a mindset that is battling to rise higher than where it is. Daru endured a prolonged period of socioeconomic deprivation, which also affected him psychologically (Rizvi, 2004).

He becomes entangled with Ozi and Mumtaz to maintain his place among the wealthy in society and, as a result, to obtain the fictitious satisfaction of "being high" in society. But the more he spends time around them, the more deeply depressed and hopeless he becomes due to his cruel optimistic approach to keeping hopeful attachments with them because he doesn't continue to meet the standards of the rich social elite in his place. As Berlant said "under such conditions of relentless and all-pervading social and economic insecurity", his social existence becomes reduced to the "craft of day-to-day survival"(187) and "Keeping an attachment to a problematic object is cruel optimism"(2). The problem, however, is that he is unable to accept his lower social status due to his psychological inability to adjust to his actual level.

Daru engages in drug smuggling and other illegal activities to earn money and attain the same standard of living as the upper class. Hamid criticizes the capitalist system of Pakistan as it does not help the lower classes of people to lead a prosperous life. According to Karl Thompson in 'The Marxist Perspective on Crime' (2016), "Capitalism is Criminogenic because it encourages people to want things they don't need and can't afford" (Thompson, 2016). Daru is the victim of a

morally decaying society and a precarious economic system which provide him a sense of illusion that money is more important than anything else to live a luxurious life, where "to live is always a life at risk" and non-sustaining for him (Butler, 2010: 30). Because it is beyond the realm of possibilities for him to get enough money for good live during socio-economic crisis and "ride the wave of the system of attachment he used to" even when system fails him (28).

As Lopa Patel (2012) said "We witness Daru's degradation from being a well-educated middle-class professional to being a common criminal"(Patel, 2012). He allows himself to live a life of cruel optimism that becomes the cause of an unavoidable psychological upheaval in his life and is destroyed at the end of the novel as he pursues his various fatal inclinations. As Rizvi (2004) observed, "It reflects an expression of self-destruction fatal for him like that of a moth"(Rizvi, 2004). Daru appears prepared to go to any lengths to realize his "better good life available to sustain his optimism"(263). As a result, the character continues to engage in conflicts despite the cruel optimism and other factors that are present around him and "finds himself bound to a situation of profound threat" (2) in the world of fantasy where he is looking for flourishing. According to Ashcroft (2007), Daru's miserable existence is a despicable scene from the underworld; he lives in scorching darkness (Ashcroft, 2007).

Trying to make a high trip with little wings has prevented him from flying low too because he is disappointed all the time. Berlant claimed that people have remained attached to unachievable fantasies of the good life, including its promises of upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lasting intimacy (Berlant, 2011: 3). Daru's cruel optimistic thinking guesses that money and Mumtaz could free him from stresses of the material world. His terrible fate is due to his faulty perception of the good life. Daru took refuge in drugs and sought pleasure under the influence of chained mishaps and misconceptions, motivating him to continue this malpractice. Despite evidence that capitalist societies can no longer be relied upon to provide opportunities for individuals to make their lives "add up to something"(2). Daru's journey through the Ozi family, his involvement in elite relationships, his fall into drug and crime, and his subsequent exit from the rich circles all hurt his character, making it impossible for him to return to the banking industry and these powerful attachments "work against the flourishing of being [Daru]"(13). As Berlant (2011) said, sometimes "when you get what you want, you can't have what you want" (266).

Conclusion

The research paper analyzed the cruel optimism of lower classes' people in Third World country, Pakistan by exploring the novel *Moth Smoke's* protagonist Darashikoh, and how he builds a hopeful connection to luxurious objects during socio-economic crises for capital promises - like the dream of good life or of up portability which become hindrance to their prosperity. The novel discussed in this paper brings attention to the imbalance of resources and opportunities that become the cause of class difference and have negative impacts on the minds of lower-class people which produces in them the complex of being inferior. This paper will give insight to readers to apply Lauren Berlant's cruel optimistic point of view on every literary work written in the context of class difference which becomes the cause of socio-economic clashes in capitalist societies which leads people to live eutopic lives. Further, the novel "*Moth Smoke*" can analyze how socio-economic issues due to class distinction and its impacts on the minds of people which them towards cruel optimism by conjuring them into the world of fantasy for luxurious objects with the help of Frier's philosophy of false hope and Judith Butler theory of precarity.

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