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Discerning Hyper Reality in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*: A Postmodernist Reading

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Abstract

Hyperreality is an important aspect of postmodernism. This article covers the sensitive issues, arising out of virtual situation. Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality will further help to investigate the issue. Mohsin Hamid's work, *Moth Smoke* exhibits a world suffering from hyperreal situation. The artificial environment causes insecurity and uneasiness and highlights the catastrophic desire of society to emulate and mimic. It shows how penetration of simulation has resulted in deterioration of meaning. The significance of this study would be the systematic study of prevailing situation in society of artificial reality which is the result of technological impacts. This research reveals the inner turbulences, makes an attempt to present the other side of reality. This article highlights in detail the hyper real relation created by technological impacts.

Keywords. Simulation, Simulacra, Hyper reality, Technology

Introduction

Moth Smoke by Mohsin Hamid highlights a frayed world of incompatible and divergent identities that inculcate a feeling of distress and agitation among the individual in any particular society. Born in 1971, Mohsin Hamid spent most of time abroad. He called himself a mongrel that means that he is born of two

opposite cultures and backgrounds. The novel portrays simulated world of deceptive and baffling identities, merging with the technological mediation of facts. Hamid's, *Moth Smoke* is about the decline of values, morality, identification of one's soul and self. In *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, Bauman (1997) explains, "None of us is able to build the world of significations and meanings from scratch; each of us enters a 'prefabricated' world, in which certain things are important and others are not" (p.8). The myriad world of hyperreal technological facts, seem to occupy the individuals. People like Darashikoh and Changez feel to be so assure of themselves and their destinies. In the end, they find it painful to accept that they are already caught in the web of confusing perspectives. In *POSTMODERNISM, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* it is stated that, "Each Thought is thus born an owner, and dies owned, transmitting whatever it realized as its Self to its own later proprietor" (Jameson, F, 1991, p.193).

Moth Smoke reverberates the story of the decline of Darashikoh and his insane struggle with the Baudrillardian world of simulation and mediation where he is in search of his identity. He is in continuous struggle with his fate. Here we can find a complete display of confusing signs that play a vital role in deciding a character's future prospects. In the very beginning of the novel the writer delineates this sharp contrast between these two friends. But here the difference in their social positions is not under discussion. Rather the outcome that technology brings with its wake and thus controls the characters, neglecting their individual personalities in a hyperreal society. "What lies at the origin of technology is the vision of a society in which machines replace man, in which humans are unnecessary. We see this vision coming true ..., which have no outside" (Clarke, Doel, Merrin and Smith, 2007, p.31).

Media, that is, TV, press and other sources are not directly under attack here. On the other hand the way the lives of these characters is affected by developing a hyped atmosphere, becomes the real invisible force that brings unrest and clashes among the characters.

Baudrillard tries to bring this point at home that modern society has lost its originality. Everything is fake and based on unreal and artificial scenario. Nothing is original, be it norms, values, relations, social and psychological behaviour and anything that is linked with the human actions and desires. He proclaimed that this artificial reality, that he called simulation, got such a strong hold that old meanings and explanations had vanished. Instead new meanings have emerged. For him sign, that was divided into signifier and signified, no longer held its duality. Signifiers were not in relation with the signifiers any longer, it meant the absence of reality with presence of a mixed and indivisible signifier that had no signified.

The first glance at the theory of Baudrillard indicates that it is another vantage point of Jaques Derrida's deconstruction. Derrida's signifier comprised of vast meanings. It has multiple meanings. As a result to know them is entirely impossible. But in Baudrillard's theory the main issue is that signifier holds no meaning whatsoever. This emptiness creates hollowness. That bewilders the vision. In this way in comparison with Derrida's deconstruction, where signifier became dubious due to its multiple reference, quite contrary to that Baudrillard's signifier is void of meaning or any reference. This emptiness and hollowness becomes the main issue and it brings with it the problems in personality. As media and its role pervades the whole world at present.

Mediation of images plays a vital role according to Baudrillard in making or building a perception of a thing, personality, or a society as a whole. As Baudrillard claims that meanings are without any reference and reality does not exist as genuine. All that is told by media is real in this concern. Media is responsible for making or unmaking of an image. This causes direct impact on individual perceptions. Even if we claim to say that we are not entangled in this mediation of meaning, it would be a blurred perception altogether. We are all, whether we accept it or not directly or indirectly affected. This rules our daily routine life's perceptions unknowingly. We think that we hold our own opinion, but in fact reality is told to us by other means. Reality is nothing but a fabricated tool, to channelize the priorities of individuals. The crux of the matter is when we think that we are free in our perception or identification of reality. Tiffin and Terashima (2001) state in *Hyperreality*:

The concept of HyperReality (HR), like the concepts of nanotechnology, cloning and artificial intelligence, is in principle very simple. It is nothing more than the technological capability to intermix virtual reality (VR) with physical reality (PR) and artificial intelligence (AI) with human intelligence (HI) in a way that appears seamless and allows interaction. (p. 4)

As soon as Daru entered the house of his old friend, he came across the simulated world that caught him there unawares. "Access obtained, I cruise down a driveway too short to serve as a landing strip for a getaway plane, perhaps, and pass not one but two lovely new Pajeros" (Hamid, 2000, p.11)

This example reveals the intention of the author that reader is to expect a clash of identities not on the basis of strength of character but due to the everywhere around present simulacrum and virtual reality. Even then it is the very initial stage of the Baudrillard's (1983) simulation where signs are not completely at odd with the

circumstances as "It is the reflection of a basic reality" (p.8). Despite that the lifestyle of his friend plays the first stage of simulation where signifier is free and he has the choice to find his own way. "It has been argued that today, as the pull of place and local status hierarchies diminish, the visibility of luxury in the media becomes a more potent reference point for people" (Featherstone, 2007: xx). Every ordinary detail is under the influence of the modern technology. He continues to say, "Certainly the lifestyles of the rich and upper-middle classes attract attention with television providing endless programmes which revolve around the improvement and furnishing of a stylish home, purchase of a second home, holiday planning, cars, fashion, celebrity events etc" (Featherstone, 2007: xx).

Drau becomes conscious about his house as compared to the house of his rich friend, whom he came to visit after a long time. Then the gradual list of signifiers, like 'a big house', 'Pajero', 'the impressive driveway', and last but not least in this list the influential father is also masking the reality of the signified as it is 'a good appearance' that discriminate him from his friend's life. "The programmes endeavour to strike a balance between the interest in the lifestyles of celebrities, the new rich and the upper-middle class, and the endeavours of 'ordinary people', who seek improvement and transformation on a tight budget" (Featherstone, 2007: xx).

Technology does not mean merely the use of media, internet, telephone, but all other aspects of society, that play a role in masking the reality and present a hyper real situation. People, values, and individual capabilities are very visibly at stake from the very outset. This leaves a direct impact on the mind of Daru. In the very beginning of the novel Daru is facing a trial in court. Murad Badshah, his 'partner in crime' a pseudo crime of accident, actually committed by his friend Aurangzeb but imposed upon him. Aurangzeb's wife and Daru's lover is also in the court. Daru considers them, "Three players in this trial of intimates, witnesses and liars all" (Hamid, 2000, p.7).

There are four stages of hyperreality according to Baudrillardian theory. "In the first case, the image is a *good* appearance – the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an *evil* appearance – of the order of malefic" (Baudrillard, 1983, p.9). The coming sequences of incidents in the text display the next three orders of Baudrillard's simulacra throughout the text. "In the third, it *plays at being* an appearance – it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation" (Baudrillard, 1983, p.9).

The first stage of 'good appearance' shows through Daru's inspiration with his friend's life style. From here on he starts getting involved and constantly till the

end, comparing himself with his friend, not on the basis of humanity but due to the presence of these simulated realities. There are no deep roots or original meaning remaining to give individuals a solid ground. Baudrillard (1983) states in *Simulations* “It is the end of a history in which, successively, God, Man, Progress and History itself die to profit the code,... in the vertiginous manipulation of social rapports” (p.81).

One more question arises as to the comparison of the Baudrillard with Marx’s theory of use value and exchange value. According to this concept ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’ influence one another. Baudrillard added one more variable to this, i.e ‘sign value’. This example clearly explains that in postmodern time Baudrillard included aspect to the Marxian concept. This means that sign has taken place of reality. Sign of being the son of a rich father, owning a big house and side by side aforementioned two, instead of one Pajero, absolutely masquerades the reality. Here we can say that Baudrillard did not altogether reject the political economy concept of Marx.

For Baudrillard, the system of political economy rationalizes objects and needs, producing a system of objects and a rationalized subject which reproduces the system of labour and consumption through satisfying its needs. Consequently, political economy is not merely a code for economic organization in any society whatsoever, but describes the particular order of the capitalist economy, of an economy organized around production, and thus is equivalent to modernity itself, read under the sign of Marx (production) and Weber (rationalization). (Best and Kellner, 1991, p.115)

Here the Pajero, or a big house is a ‘good’ sign of being rich and wealthy. “Vehicular and social mobility are semiotically linked; social categorization is signalled through mechanical performance and bodily appearance” (Perry, 2002, p.53). Now for Daru owning a big house and Pajero means that his friend Aurangzeb is rich as this is the view of reality available to him as well as to the reader. These signifying, empty meanings are not the development of the single person’s imagination. These meanings are already there mediated. It is also here worth mentioning that there is nothing wrong with Daru that he perceives these facts so naturally. In fact in Baudrillardian term all these meanings already exist and they simulate the reality. This indicates that complete subjectivity is inescapable. As a result the ‘good appearance’ of the first stage gradually turns into the ‘evil appearance’ of the second stage when Daru starts losing contact with reality and falls in love with his friend’s wife. Thus third stage of hyperreality ‘playing being appearance’ shows through the mad involvement of Daru in Mumtaz’s love and his

rejection of showroom job and acceptance of indulging in heroin business. This very fact leads to a meaninglessness of values, faith, societal rules and regulations. In the fourth stage he is to face a trial in court where all solid meanings of judgment are lost and only simulation of relationships remains behind as Daru already declared them in the beginning 'liars all'. All these impacts appear gradually as the story proceeds.

In *Moth Smoke* Daru is caught in the mediated consumerism of postmodern Baudrillardian phenomena. As Baudrillard (1998) states: "However, in modern society, the managed possession of consumer goods is individualizing and atomizing. It leads to distinction and differentiation, not to social solidarity" (pp.4-5).

Later, when Aurangzeb enters the room and Daru sees him after a long time, his appearance brings such thoughts in his mind that created a sense of comparison in him. Hamid (2000) says in *Moth Smoke*, "Time has ripened Ozi's face and peeled his hairline back from his temples with two smooth strokes of a fruit knife" (p.12). His present appearance belies his good physical looks in past. As a matter of fact Mumtaz, wife of Aurangzeb was unable to accept it, so later on following conversation went on among the characters. "Ozi claims he was a real heartthrob in his younger days," Ozi says, cracking the seal... "At our age, my hirsute chum, all women care about is cash. And my bank account is hairy enough for a harem" (Hamid, 2000: 13). This conversation between three main characters unveils the prevailing tense condition that is there due to the gap created due to technological simulacra. This very remark at the beginning showed a clear disillusionment of Aurangzeb regarding his own wife. The sign of 'cash' has dwindled the value and importance of the people around. In fact this remark of Aurangzeb clearly exhibits the impact of mediated simulation upon the concept of feminism. Instead of understanding the feelings of his wife, Aurangzeb believed in the general, given perception about women. This very fact has brought an unconscious gap and tension between them. It makes the situation clear from the very outset that there is going to be a widening gap between husband and wife, and Daru becomes involved into it unknowingly. "Mumtaz pulls an unopened bottle of Black Label out of a cabinet. My bootlegger tells me Blacks are going for four thousand apiece these days" (Hamid, 2000, p.13). She continues to say, "I stick to McDowell's, smuggled in from India and, at eight-fifty, priced for those of us who make an honest living. But Ozi can afford the good stuff, and Black Label is fine by me..." (Hamid, 2000, p.13).

Another example from *Moth Smoke* further clarifies the situation. "I sit in the back of Ozi's Pajero. I have never been in a Pajero before. Costs more than my house and moves like a bull, powerful and single-minded...Pajero's engine grumbles with

disappointment and Ozi swears. “Stupid bastard” (Hamid, 2000, p.25). ‘Sign’ of ‘Pajero’ here in *Moth Smoke* does not merely indicate wealth or richness. Under such given meanings certain attitudes also hold its roots. In this regard Perry (2002) while describing in *Hyperreality and Global Culture* the real motive behind the making of BMW says, “These are goods whose value to their owners depends importantly upon the fact that most of the population does not have them” (p.53). Those who own such signs of wealth, expect for themselves certain glorifications regardless of the importance of the moral values, thus proving true Baudrillardian assumption of nothingness. This particular novel is rich with such examples. As before having a ride in his friend’s Pajero, Daru lost his job due to the very attitude that he observed in his friend. Novelist simulated the situation with the help of this ‘Pajero’ symbol, to manifest the hyperreal scenario prevailing in the society. It is quite ironical in such situations that the technological impacts completely negate the moral and social values and instead bring with it somewhat empty and rootless symbols, the result of which is nothing but the ultimate disappointment and dissatisfaction. Owning a ‘Pajero’ for Aurangzeb means that he ought to be honoured, respected and at the same time exempted from all sorts of rules and regulations. “Erica’s father had asked me how things were back home,..., when he said, “Economy is falling apart though, no? Corruption, dictatorship, the rich living like princess while everyone else suffers” (Hamid, 2007: 4). Admonishing more about Pakistani culture Erica’s Father says that, “Solid people, don’t get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But elite have raped the place well and good, right? And fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problem with fundamentalism” (Hamid, 2007: 4)

“Once I’ve paid Murad Badshah for the pot and I’m alone again, I open a bottle of Murree beer. I don’t like it when low-class types forget their place and try to become too frank with you” (Hamid, 2000: 42). In *Moth Smoke* Murad Badshah plays double role. One role is that of Daru’s house dealer and the other one of acting like his counsellor and friend. By profession he is an auto driver but he is monetarily in much better condition than Daru himself. Here comes to the surface the hollowness and emptiness of the soul of Daru when he remarks that he dislikes ‘low-class’ people coming closer to himself. He forgets, rather denies here the reality that he himself belongs to white collar strata of society. Almost every character that is introduced with the gradual progress of the story, shows the traces of distraction. Like the following remark of Murad Badshah. “He shakes his head, still seated. “You know me better than that, old boy. I want the pleasure of the afterlife. Charas is a grey area, but alcohol is explicitly forbidden” (Hamid, 2000, p.42). They perceive religion as a grey zone, and these characters are simply in confusing situation. Religion is not enough to satisfy these bewildered and split souls. It for them only is a copy of copy, no practical foundation or exhibition of practice is available to them. It

does not mean here that text is somewhat against the religious beliefs or practices. It very fairly enough exposes the hypocrisy or malpractices that have prevailed in every section of society due to hyperreal situation.

Soon after the departure of Murad Badshah, he starts watching TV to kill time and forgets about the culminating pressure of upcoming expenditures. In this way, he takes refuge in a hyper real world. Later on when Mumtaz calls him, his reaction is almost impulsive and simulated in the mist of uncertainty.

“Her mobile. How classy. I think quickly: What can be wrong in going with her? Ozi would want me to help her out...But my curiosity gets the better of me. “I’m coming,” I say” (Hamid, 2000: 43). Here in *Moth Smoke* the mediated world of technology plays a critical trick to entrap Daru in the web of simulated love snare. That instead of bringing solace in his life heightens his miseries. In these two examples the Murad Badsha, plays the role of signifier of low class, and Mumtaz with her elegant mobile gadget, signifies elegance, wealth, and with it comfort, which he is searching for. If these signifiers have had some solid signified background, the situation, might have come under control. But as these are mere empty symbols, merely superficial assumptions, enforced upon the self without any referent. Technology or mediated signs are more important than human beings. “Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects. Their daily dealings are ... manipulation of goods and messages” (Baudrillard, 1998:26).

As a result agitation and dissatisfaction bound to correlate with it. Since such a consumption and use-value oriented atmosphere gives no space for individuals to have their say.

“I was, I must confess, caught off balance ... But I did know that I was impress with Jim; he had . . . seen through me in a few minutes more clearly... now shaken by our encounter, began to recover” (Hamid, 2007: 1). It is something interesting to note that how starkly the simulated situation in both these novels resembles. In this example, the recovery of confidence and loss of it is quite ironical. The intelligent and efficient person is happy to be a recognized firm. He is also impressed by Jim in the same way. Daru is impressed by Mumtaz and her mobile phone. The strong signifiers like Jim, Mumtaz and mobile are full of myriad explanations. So one single meaning is not possible to attach with it. It is empty at core. It becomes almost impossible for the characters surrounded around such signifiers to clearly see through this misty haze of hollow signs. The characters are unable to disclose the fact these symbols have no solid background at its depth. These are mere shadows, hollow at core.

But status, as in any traditional, class-conscious society, declines more slowly than wealth. So we retain our Punjab Club membership. We continue to be invited to the functions and weddings and parties of the city's elite. And look with a mixture of disdain and envy upon the rising class of entrepreneurs — owners of business legal and illegal — who power through the streets in their BMW SUVs. Our situation is, perhaps, not so different from that of the old European aristocracy in the nineteenth century, confronted by the ascendance of the bourgeoisie. Except, of course, that we are part of a broader malaise afflicting not only the formerly rich but much of the formerly middle-class as well: a growing inability to purchase what we previously could. (Hamid, 2007:1)

There is a constant clash of the signifiers like Punjab Club membership, BMW, SUV and many things like these that are in continuous war with actually not the survival. Here this is something very important to mention that all this mess is not just a matter of survival, rather it's more a matter of keeping up with this hyperreal world. This keeping up with the society has imparted forced confused identical issues. When the characters involved in such conditions try to come out of it, they are utterly confused. They are unable to detect, from where the problem begins. Here in this particular example the text mentions, 'growing instability'. This instability is not only a physical phenomenon, but it also is mental problem. It inculcates in them an endless sense of agitation.

"We park near the farm house, big and low, with wide verandas, and I notice the difference in the sounds of slamming car doors: the deep thuds of the Pajero and Land Cruiser, the nervous cough of my Suzuki" (Hamid, 2000: 81). The high tech world of Daru is in continuous sense of antagonism instead of idealistic utopian parallelism in society. Comparison of Pajero and Land Cruiser is at its peak here. Here the subjective world of Daru is in direct conflict with the objective world of high form of technology. This technological simulacrum has completely neglected his individuality just because his own capabilities are no longer enough to provide him what actually he wants from life. As a result his subjective world is in contrast with the objective world. Baudrillard (1988) says in *Body Invaders*, "The universe is not dialectical: it moves towards the extremes. It is expressed in the cunning genius of the object, in the ecstatic form of the pure object, and in its victorious strategy over the subject" (p. 185).

"There are two social classes in Pakistan," Professor Superb said to his unsuspecting audience, gripping the podium with both hands as he spoke. "The first group, large and sweaty, contains those referred to as masses. The second group is much smaller, but its members exercise

vastly greater control over their immediate environment and are collectively termed the elite. The distinction between members of these two groups is made on the basis of control of an important resource: air-conditioning. You see, the elite have managed to re-create for themselves the living standards of say, Sweden, without leaving the dusty plains of the subcontinent. (Hamid, 2000: 102)

The focus of attention here is the signs and codes. These symbols are hidden underneath the use of this technology that determines certain roles and predilections under such sorts of circumstances.

In a society of simulations, the models or codes structure experience and erode distinctions between the model and the real. Using McLuhan's concept of implosion, Baudrillard claims that in the postmodern world the boundary between image or simulation and reality implodes, and with it the very experience and the ground of 'the real' disappears. (Best and Kellner, 1991: 119)

When the foundation of reality comes under the shadow of extra real signs, there develops in the people a sense of dissatisfaction, agitation, meaninglessness, and arrogance, rejection of reality and mad pursuit of artificial high tech facilities. One thing that is more important to mention here is the fact these symbols and signs are mere empty codes. They have no meaning at their back according to Baudrillard. Their meaninglessness creates a void in the society in the form of utter nihilism. Social differences are not only cause of this issue. The absence of any reference, the signified is the real matter that concerns the mediated technological Baudrillard suggestion. The signifier of air-conditioner has no concrete meaning at its back. What the text reveals here is that as this signifier brings with it no solid signified, ultimately it leads towards a misleading winding paths. These winding paths bring under its influence, the characters that are entangled into it. Even here it is interesting to note that these victims of subjective world of split personality have no idea whether they are the victims or exploiters. They keep on enrolling with these winding paths of uncertainty. Leaving behind them nothing, but utter confusion and tragic downfalls!

All codes, symbols and signs are at war in this text. Mumtaz is unable to accept the sign of air-conditioner that has over cooled her. She was in search of a solution; the solution that she found in the form of Daru. Daru, on the contrary, was struggling to come up to the level of his friend, if not that at least he should be able enough to afford an air-conditioner. This gives birth to unstable and unhealthy mental and social problems. The absence of referents marks the absence of

meaning that finally leads towards meaninglessness. This example also shows, Baudrillardian concept of implosion of boundaries. Only a hyperreal world exists instead of social theories, faith, values, and solid meanings. There are sequential traces of the effect of technological or media based influences on individuality. Even Daru takes a direct notice of it when he starts selling hash, “I wonder whether sixteen’s too young to be smoking hash. Then I decide it isn’t. I wasn’t much older than that when I started, and kids today are doing everything earlier than we did. It’s MTV effect” (Hamid, 2000: 177).

Conclusion

The whole novel is replete with such recurrences of the influence of technological based devices . It creates such a hyperreal situation that it becomes almost inevitable and inescapable to be safe of its snares. No matters how resilient or how strong a person is. This misty maze of bewildering simulation finally heaves such a web around the vigilant and efficient person like Daru, that it leaves no room for him to take such steps in life that completely changes his plight opposite to his capabilities. It ultimately turns out to be a kind of a war between man and machine. In such a war machine seems to be always winning over man in the postmodern world of emptiness and hollowness. Jameson (1991) says in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: “The exposition will take up in turn the following constitutive features of the postmodern: a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary "theory" and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum;...” (p.5).

Ultimately the focus of attention in this article remained completely on the fact that machines rule over the lives of the individuals. They turn out to be finally strong mediated symbols that simply haunt the lives of the persona. These symbols are so strong that no escape is possible for them. Daru remained helpless to evade any such snare. The realization of the fact that his life is unwittingly circumscribed round this fact of mediated signs is blurred for Daru, Mumtaz, and Aurangzeb. The free play of hyperreal technological codes seemed to dominate the whole schema of the persons. The domination of the technological signs and symbols is so strong that they even don’t understand its presence around them. They seem to whirl way in this blind current of mediated technological hollow signs.

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