

BECOMING RICH, AND STAYING RICH – A STUDY OF MODERN AMBITION IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *HOWTO GET FILTHY RICH IN RISING ASIA*

Ms. Joanna D'Vaz

Assistant Professor of English
Holy Cross College (Autonomous)
Trichy 620002

Email: joannadvaz90@gmail.com

Abstract

Mohsin Hamid's third novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* studies modern society's obsession with carving out a niche for one's own self. He combines the style of a self help book and a novel. He has structured his story in such a manner that each chapter represents a particular stage in a person's journey towards self fulfilment. This paper studies how people in the present day world are obsessed with the idea of becoming self-made individuals, who are independent, artful, ambitious and willing to do anything to achieve the dreams that they have for themselves. It examines the lengths to which people are willing to go to become rich, and stay rich throughout their lives. Different methods are presented using different characters, from the protagonist, his lover, his school teacher, his former employer, to name a few. But the trajectory of the two main characters especially shows that despite becoming rich and gaining fame and money, they do not find happiness. The novel ends with both characters finding each other after many years after finally realising that love is an important component of human life.

Keywords: Mohsin Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Modern Society, Immorality

Mohsin Hamid was born in 1971 in Lahore, Pakistan. His life is divided between Lahore and California. His first novel was *Moth Smoke* (2000), and tells the story of an ex-banker and heroin addict living in a modern Pakistani society. Hamid's second novel is perhaps his most famous one – *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) in which he brings out how young Muslims have gone on to the West to earn better opportunities and have as a result forgotten their roots. The book also details the hate and racist attitudes that Muslims were forced to endure immediately following the 9/11 attacks. His most recent novel is *Exit West* (2017) in which he brings out the struggle for survival and the search for home in a modern world whose many wars have resulted in an increase in the number of refugees with nowhere to go.

Hamid's writing is often compared to that of Vladimir Nabokov with its emphasis on emotions of the characters and its socio-historical leanings. Hamid's writing evokes an imaginary world that is simultaneously real and which addresses the reader directly. His themes are usually very contemporary and sometimes controversial and sensitive. The novel being studied is *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Hamid's third novel published in 2013.

This novel studies modern society's obsession with carving out a niche for one's own self. He combines the style of a self help book and a novel while structuring his story so that each chapter represents a particular stage in a person's journey towards self fulfillment. The novel also features an interesting stylistic choice where Hamid does not refer to the characters by their names but rather as 'You' for the protagonist and all the others as mere pronouns 'he', or 'she'. This choice makes the characters and their stories feel very personal, almost as if Hamid is talking to the reader, describing their actions and more importantly, the emotions they feel and their thought process as they make their choices and decide the course of their lives.

At first glance the title of the novel might appear to seem ironical or condemning, but that would be furthest from the truth. Hamid is trying to explain how man's search to make something of himself leads him across various paths, both good and bad. In the title, being 'rich' does not just mean being monetarily sound, but rather also being able to experience love, trust, loyalty and emotional satisfaction. In this work, he brings out how the 'seekers' and the 'doers' are always ready to do whatever they must to survive, to flourish and to maintain their standing in society.

The novel portrays how both men and women across generations respond to the trials of surviving in a world that is rapidly changing. The first character we are introduced to is the protagonist, who we see at his lowest point, suffering from a sickness and unsure of survival. Ironically it is this sickness that directly decides the future course of the story. The promise of a better life lures them away from their village, and towards a future that proves fateful to the older generation, and fruitful to the younger one.

The father had moved away to the city because he finds village life wanting. Living in the city had also changed him a great deal. He no longer possessed an appreciation of nature, only rather looked at nature's produce as a means to an end. "He sees instead units of backbreaking toil. He sees hours and days and weeks and years. He sees labour by which a farmer exchanges his allocation of time in this world for an allocation of time in this world. Here in the heady bouquet of nature's pantry, your father sniffs mortality" (Hamid 11).

The mother on the other hand is locked within the confines of a village and family and isn't able to move as her husband does. Despite these constrained circumstances however, she stamps her authority and showcases her talents in her management of the home and family, in the absence of her husband. She is forced to perform two duties, not just her own as a woman but even those of her husband, such as taking care of the fields, animals and so on. All these actions

define a modern woman capable of reaching above her means and going beyond the comfortable. Such an attitude leads to her being ostracised in her village.

The movement of the family to the city causes a number of problems which emotionally impact them. "It is an explosive transformation, the supportive, stifling, stabilizing bonds of extended relationships weakening and giving way, leaving in their wake insecurity, anxiety, productivity and potential" (Hamid 18). Each character deals with their situation differently. The demands of the city disrupt the lives of the children - the daughter has to leave school and get a job, and is eventually married off to an older man. The elder son is forced to work amidst horrible conditions as a painter's apprentice. It is only the protagonist who is allowed to go to school.

In school we are introduced to another kind of ambitious man- an entitled one who is not afraid to use his family connections and get the job of his choice through bribery and violence. However, this man lives constantly in a state of fear of being outed for his mechanizations. This character stands in stark contrast to the protagonist who has had to fight for every position that he has ever wanted, or even deserved. So too it is with the PrettyGirl.

In chapter three, Hamid introduces the idea that 'love can be an impediment' to getting rich. But in the course of the story 'love' proves to be a double edged sword. In this chapter we are introduced to a character that has a lasting impact on the protagonist. The PrettyGirl acts as a foil to the protagonist in throughout the novel. The paths of both the characters start off at different points and take up widely varying routes, but they still manage to intersect at different periods of their lives. Where the protagonist is careful in making decisions and building things slowly as they come to him, she does not. She is ambitious, and wants to make a name for herself. She refuses to be defined by the clan or the area from which she comes. She isn't afraid to use people as a means to get to where she wants to go. "What is clear to the pretty girl is that she must bridge a significant cultural and class divide to enter even the lower realms of the world of fashion"(Hamid 44). She uses the protagonist's access to movies to build up her knowledge of the commercial world. She uses her job to save money to run away. She uses her marketing manager to make her move away from the constricting world in which she was born into.

While the pretty girl's rise to fame was a reasonably quick process, the protagonist had to resort to different paths - joining a student political organisation proved worthless until he became a sales distributor for an old businessman. It is this job that proves to be the starting point in his rise in society. The man teaches him to be cunning, intelligent and ambitious. He learns here to use all that is available to him and to turn it to his benefit. He is intelligent enough to gauge the pulse of the society and use it to his benefit. It is this ability that enables him to use the city's lack of proper water supply as a way to make a name for himself by starting his own water distribution business in his home. But he also knows that in the present climate, running a

legitimate business without greasing a few hands along the way is impossible. Therefore he is ready to resort to illegal means to do whatever he needs to do and keep his business afloat. As his business prospers and he becomes reasonably rich he decides to take matters into his own hands by first buying the property on which his business runs, and later on widening his business by becoming a state contractor.

His decisions as an adult prove that he was a risk-taker who wasn't afraid to try something new. It also proved that he had a great deal of belief in his own self and abilities. He had also become adept at reading the world and the people with which he lives. He has learned to lie, manipulate, hope and make decisive choices which have helped him rise up in the world. "Risk brings with it the potential for return, and, besides, you have begun to recognise your dream of a home of your own for what it is, an illusion, unless financed in full by cold, hard cash" (Hamid 91).

The lengths to which Hamid's protagonist goes, highlights the corruption that modern society seems to be completely entrenched within. Corruption stems from the highest to the lowest levels of Asian society. While we know already that the protagonist resorts to corrupt means to protect his business, we also see how politicians and bureaucrats thrive on accepting bribes for granting permissions even for legitimate businesses. These men aren't afraid of exploiting the circumstances for their benefit.

He knows your type, self-made, on the rise, and because of his education, family background, and temperament he regards you with disdain, but also with satisfaction, for there is usually more money to be had from supplicants who seek to challenge the status quo than from those who seek merely to maintain it. You were delivered to him by a sticky web of red tape. Permits denied, inspections failed, meters improperly read, audits initiated, all these scams and hassles you have over the years surmounted by greasing junior and mid-level palms. (Hamid 97)

Despite his misgivings the protagonist accepts such actions as normal because he realises that this is the only way to get things done.

While the protagonist's star was on the rise, the PrettyGirl's was beginning to fade. After becoming a fashion model immediately after running away, she went on to act in small roles in television and film finally becoming an entrepreneur specializing in furniture design. Every time her star seems to fade she goes on to do something that adds shine again. Like the protagonist, the PrettyGirl never lays down and accepts things languidly. Even though society seems to be working against her, she fights back, finding ways to reinvent herself and maintain the status that she has earned for herself.

Unlike the protagonist however, the PrettyGirl did not resort to corrupt means to build her life. While he made use of the situation to make his money, the girl built up the rest of her life by doing what she was passionate about.

The paths of both the characters diverged in the manner in which they were helped along in their quest for success. While the protagonist chose his wife's brother thinking he could trust him, the girl chose someone who has always worked closely with her. While the brother-in-law helped himself monetarily by skimming money from the protagonist's business, the girl's assistant proves to be more loyal. While the protagonist manages to rise higher in society, he never truly gains any lasting friends, only acquaintances, who all desert him when he is arrested after his brother-in-law absconds with all his money. The girl, on the other hand, finds a lasting friendship in her assistant who becomes a close friend, advisor and confidant, right until the moment she dies.

This brings one back to chapter 3, where Hamid suggests that love is an impediment. While it is true that an absence of love allows one to be more focused in attaining one's goal in the beginning of the novel, the same cannot be said of the rest of the novel. All the characters are searching for love and companionship– the protagonist loves the pretty girl, but is unable to truly be with her until the last years of his life; the girl also wants love, but balks at the notion of commitment, until she reaches her middle age, when the world no longer seems to look up to her; the boy's father recognizes his need for love only when his children fall sick. Hamid's words about love take on a new meaning at the end of the novel. These words said at the beginning of the novel essentially foreshadow the paths that the main characters take.

Because as far as getting rich is concerned, love can be an impediment. Yes, the pursuit of love and the pursuit of wealth have much in common. Both have the potential to inspire, motivate, uplift, and kill. But whereas achieving a massive bank balance demonstrably attracts fine physical specimens desperate to give their love in exchange, achieving love tends to do the opposite. It dampens the fire in the steam furnace of ambition, robbing of essential propulsion an already fraught upriver journey to the heart of financial success. (Hamid 29)

Despite the characters trying to remain non-committal towards love, it is love that eventually saves them in the end. Both characters reach their lowest points towards the latter part of their careers – the protagonist, when he loses his business after a massive heart attack and is subsequently robbed, and the girl when she loses her best friend and appears to be left alone. These two lost souls find each other, and no amount of money or fame could give them the peace that they eventually find in each other.

In the pretty girl's company, you give up a small degree of the physical isolation you had imposed upon yourself, venturing out into the city a little more, having,

through the presence of a friend, greater reason to do so than you did before, and also, when part of a group of two people, being less afraid than when alone. Yes, the city remains intermittently perilous, but you savor your tentative, shared reentry, and think that the city may not be quite so fearsome, that indeed, when gazed upon with the good humor that can come from companionship, significant swaths of it appear mostly navigable, at least for the present, while a measure of bodily vitality endures. (Hamid 119)

Both characters have always been alone in their journey of self fulfilment - they earned money, gained fame and made powerful acquaintances. But all this does not give them the satisfaction that they were truly searching for. It is only after they have lost everything that they have understood the true meaning of love, “You feel a love you know you will never be able to adequately explain or express... and is understood and reciprocated only when time has made of a younger generation an older one” (Hamid 146).

Once love becomes the foundation of their lives, they are finally able to accept all things, even death:

you are ready, ready to die well, ready to die like a man, like a woman, like a human, for despite all else you have loved, you have loved your father and your mother and your brother and your sister and your son and, yes, your ex-wife, and you have loved the pretty girl, you have been beyond yourself, and so you have courage, and you have dignity, and you have calmness in the face of terror, and awe, and the pretty girl holds your hand, and you contain her, and this book, and me writing it, and I too contain you, who may not yet even be born, you inside me inside you, though not in a creepy way, and so may you, may I, may we, so may all of us confront the end. (Hamid 176)

Thus, Hamid skilfully uses this book as a ‘self-help novel’ to both teach the readers how to become rich, but also caution them that while money may be their goal, it should not be the only one that defines one’s life. Morality and love should be the guiding factors that make you ‘rich’ not just money.

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