A Critical Overview through the Lens of Globalisation: How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia

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Abstract

This paper aims to critically evaluate Mohsin Hamid's How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia as a critique of globalisation and its harmful impact on Pakistan's economy and society. Hamid's novel discusses globalisation as an economic world order, which has failed to ensure economic development in terms of eliminating economic class divisions, and poor living and health conditions amongst unprivileged groups in developing countries, such as that of Pakistan. The text highlights globalisation as the expansion of global capital, which has established the hegemonic power of the multinational corporations and financial institutions, weakened the control of the state, and, with its 'market ethos' and through its corporate networking, promoted a culture of materialism and commodity in Pakistan. The author also draws our attention to the absence of a coherent economic and social policy in Pakistan, which can administer the free flow of capital and accordingly encounter profit-oriented workings of business corporate. As a result, as the text illustrates, Pakistan has failed to improve its economy and social conditions. The text offers numerous references concerning unplanned urban sprawl, urban and rural slums, a lack of power and other living facilities, a lack of proper education and health services, corruption and environmental degradation,all of which, when combined, show that globalisation, with its free flow of capital, technology and new media, has failed to achieve its developmental aims in Pakistan.

Keywords: Globalisation, New economic world order, Socio-cultural and economic transformation of Pakistan, Urban ecology and planning, Environmental degradation

1. Introduction

Globalisation, as the global expansion of capitalism, works for 'a new world order', which promises to bring economic prosperity to all nations on the globe. The new world order envisions the transformation of the world as a global village, where capital, people, goods and ideas flow freely across borders, venturing across the entire globe, and sharing common universal cultural values and social behaviours. Accordingly, throughout recent decades, international trade and business networks have increased significantly across the globe. But, against its vision, globalisation, with its free flow of capital, has failed to induce any significant change in the economic conditions of the developing world. Furthermore, it has failed to provide the third world with equal or sufficient access to global markets and trade opportunities,which thus has increased the divide between developed and developing countries. The global expansion of capital has also resulted in the sharp difference and increased disparity between rich and unprivileged economic classes in developing countries, which have further enhanced the socio-political problems in these countries.

Mohsin Hamid's '*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia'* is a study of Pakistani society in the context of globalisation. The city and the life in the growing city, as depicted in the novel, draw our attention to Pakistan's exposure to globalisation and to its cultural component in the form of

modernity. As 'cultural and social transformation are essential elements of the process of development' (Qadeer, 1999, p. 1193),globalisation in the novel is not viewed merely as an economic shift but also as a cultural change. Pakistanis, in the age of globalisation, in much the same way as other people all over the world,'through radio, film, television, and the internet, … are exposed to the values of other cultures as never before' (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt & Perraton, 1999, p. 486). The text offers references to high-speed internet, CCTV cameras, cell phones, Skype chatting, emerging fashion and the film industry, TV shows, etc., in an effort to portray global cultural and modernist trends that have made their way in Pakistan and have exposed people in this developing nation to new socio-cultural values. Hamid (2013) also reveals the irony of the vision of globalisation, which portrays people as living in peace and harmony in a global village. He refers to wars and conflicts,as well as the related security threats the world is facing today, notably as a result ofthe massive mobility of people across borders and the capitalist interests of rich countries. Similarly, 'Pakistan's exposure to Globalisation is manifold. It is visible through media, information technology, trade, finance, politics and geopolitics, culture, international security regimes and of course global capitalist system as a whole'(Rehman & Jalbani, 2004, p. 48). Hamid makes his readers conscious of their being under constant surveillance in the name of security,and makes particular references to 'national security apparatuses', 'income-tax registries' and'passport and ID card databases',before further explaining how all of us are subject to 'fingertip swirls, facial ratios, dental records, voice patterns, spending trails, e-mail threads' (p. 154).

The novel presents a critique of the negative and harmful impacts of capitalist globalisation on Pakistan's economy, society and culture, and the environment. The text raises an important question that pertains to whether Pakistan's exposure to transnational trade and experience of globalisation have any significant influence on reducing economic inequality, poverty and enhanced well-being of people. For Nabiha Gul (2003),'the impact and growing influence, cultural ascendancy and competitive environment of globalisation, brought into force by multinational corporations, is largely negative in posture for Pakistani society' (p. 61). She further explains that globalisation has increased transnational trade, which has mostly benefitted giant multinational companies rather than poor economies, which are dependent upon loans provided by international donor agencies. Pakistan, being a growing economy, is dependent on donor agencies, which have negatively impacted its economic efficiency and thereby worsened the 'level and extent of poverty in Pakistan, which has more than doubled in only one decade' (p. 59). As such, according to the writer, for Pakistan, in much the same way as other poor and developing countries, globalisation has worked as a 'two-edged sword',with these countries neither able to escape the growing expansion of the globalised capitalism nor earn the benefits it offers to the developed world (p. 62).

Research on globalisation and its impacts on the world and different human societies across the globe indicate both negative and positive influences. As Sirgy, Lee, Miller &Littlefield (2004) state, globalisation, as'the diffusion of goods, services, capital, technology, and people (workers) across national borders' (p. 253), can direct the significant flow of money across the globe, which may contribute to the increased well-being of human conditions across the world. Neoliberal theorist Ming-Chang Tsai (2007) states that 'global trade, cross-border investment, and technological innovation enhance productive efficiency and generate extraordinary prosperity' (p. 103). Firebaugh (2004) is also optimistic that globalisation can help eliminate poverty and reduce

economic inequality in the world. However, there are many theorists, such as Guillén (2001), Petras &Veltmeyer (2001), Smart (2003), Sholte (2000) and Hill &Rapp (2009), who adopt a different view about globalisation resulting in human well-being, and point out growing economic inequality, the crisis in labour management and other such unsettled issues and economic problems in the developing world. As Hill &Rapp (2009) write,'our investigation suggests that the trade growth and liberalisation have had the little trickle-down impact upon those economies and nations in greatest need' (p. 45).One such example is the countries in South Asia. Huma Baqai (2005) confirms that, so far,globalisation, with its transnational trade and networks of multinational companies,has not made any significant improvement in the economic conditions in South Asia. She regards economic 'divisiveness' in South Asian societies as the primary cause of increasing crimes, violence, and ethnic conflicts and other social-political issues in these societies (p. 59).

The narrative frame of the novel is that of a self-help book on *How to be Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. The power of the book rests in its main character, that is nameless, and its narrative structure and style. The characters and setting of the novel, combined withthe various details the author infuses in the description of his characters and scenes are remarkable as they portray the socioeconomic and political situation of contemporary Pakistan in a realistic manner. This novel is a story of a man who uses his entrepreneurial instincts and cunning nature learned from his unprivileged position in the society and day-to-day life to work his way out of his extreme poverty to achieve success in business. He, like other corrupt businessmen and entrepreneurs in the country accumulates wealth with the support from bureaucracy and politicians and through unethical business and makes the corrupt system work to his advantage. His family is like many other low-income families in Pakistan who migrate from their village in search of better economic opportunities and settle in a slum in a sprawling city. Setting the story in this context gives the excellent opportunity to Hamid to focus his lens on both rural and urban slums in Pakistan experiencing globalisation, and expose painful ironies and contradictions of societies of developing countries, as in the case of Pakistan in rising Asia. As Sharma (2013) observes,'globalisation seems to be more fruitful to the advanced countries, and it is ineffective to solve the fundamental problems of the third world', which includes'massive poverty, increasing unemployment and underemployment, lack of social and economic overheads, widespread and multidimensional human deprivations, hunger, social tension, increasing inequality, dislocations of millions of people and so on' (p. 23).The dream of a better life and better economic opportunities, as propagated by globalisation, attracted and forced many rural poor to migrate to big urban centres in developing countries. The narrative of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), which is crafted as a self-help book, also recommends that 'moving to the city is the first step to getting filthy rich in rising Asia' (p. 20). Migration, as the text illustrates, is also displacement, which exposes migrants to 'an explosive transformation, the supporting, stifling, stabilizing bonds of extended relationships weakening (p. 19) and giving way, leaving in their insecurity, anxiety, productivity, and potential' (p. 20). The story of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is set and can be understood in this background.

Hamid's novel records the socioeconomic dimensions of contemporary Pakistan in the context of global socio-cultural and political change, manufactured by the 'new' capitalist 'world order'. For the author,'we exist in a financial universe that is subject to massive gravitational pulls from states…state seek to determine our orbits' (p. 133). Globalisation, being the expansion of the

capitalism across borders, has converted the world into a 'financial universe' (p. 133) in which the human world is managed on the principles of the market and value of human actions, and where choice is determined by material worth. As a result, human identity is fixed by numbers and is digitalised, and human affairs are administered by bureaucracy, banks and their supportive institutions. As Hassmann (2010) explains,'Globalisation intensifies the pursuit of private interest and creates a social system in which individuals are increasingly disengaged from family, village, and community'. It works as 'a process that is out of control, destroying traditional societies, local values, and local economies' (p. 35). Rising Asia appears to Hamid (2013) as a good example of this financially controlled world where 'bureaucrats-lead bankers tend to follow' (p. 134), meaning personal dreams and aspirations, and relations are materialised, and their value is associated with money and material prosperity. Bankers act with the support of bureaucrats and bureaucrats work with 'the approval of (their) political masters' (p. 135); therefore, policies are made and proposals meet 'continued success' if bureaucracy is bribed and befriended (p. 135). Bribery is used as the best tool for settling all business matters and record 'books serve merely as a starting point for negotiation' (p. 117).

The protagonist of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* first works with a small business company, which sells expired goods by 'erasing expiry dates from the packaging, and reprints a later date instead' (p. 90), and later on establishes his own water bottle business by giving bribes using personal connections and other illegal strategies. It is the world that is driven by corporations with 'replaced states' (Held *et al*., 1999, p. 486), and 'is driven by the ideology of neoliberalism, which privileges corporate profits over the interests of both states and human beings' (Hassmann, 2010, p. 40).

Smart as cited in Tsai (2007)considers globalisation in line with its 'market ethos', whose 'fervent pursuit of private interests operates without regard for persons' (p. 105). Contemporary Pakistan, in Hamid's novel under the impact of globalisation, illustrates the workings of this 'market ethos'. The protagonist and all other characters from the urban working class, such as 'the pretty girl', and the characters from the elite class, such as the bureaucrats, politicians and businessmen, all are pursuing similar material goals in their different economic situations. Their lives are dedicated to making money and improving the material standard of their lives and their greed for power. None of the characters in this culture of market economy have been portrayed with an active moral consciousness and a vision of life that exhibits a significant concern with aesthetics, ethics, spirituality or higher human values. It is a degenerated world in which aesthetics and intellect are stagnated, and human beings have lost their human essence and are transformed into money-making and commodity-consuming machines. In this deteriorated material society, the narrative portrays corruption and dishonesty as a 'normal' way of living. All human relationships, including romance and love, are affected by complex life conditions in which material standards of life are misconceived as happiness in the growing cities of Asia. Human relationships are as complex as the socioeconomic conditions of the country and are the victim of growing commodification and commercialisation. The love story between the protagonist and the 'pretty girl' illustrate this reality;they sacrificed their romantic feelings for one another to pursue their material dreams on 'incessant treadmill of life' (p. 111). The protagonist devotes his whole life to establishing his business while 'the pretty girl' keeps negotiating with all hierarchies through which she can achieve her dream of becoming a top model or film actress. Both find time to live together for a very short period, but only in the end, when they are old and sick, and near their death. They never

had the time to share their passions and emotions, even when involved in physical intimacy. Their romance was as barren as their material lives. Similarly, the protagonist fails to develop any intimacy and companionship with his wife and his son, and so they both leave him, and he spends the last days of his life alone in a hotel. In the end, he is lonely and sick and has no genuine relationships to take care of him. The story of the protagonist and 'the pretty girl' illustrate the life conditions of the urban working class in the novel which is the victim of capitalist globalisation and market culture. They are not 'the beneficiaries of the economic growth that has taken place' (Baqi, 2005, p. 62). The beneficiaries, as Baqi continues, are 'a limited privileged minority (the educated urban population)'; for the rest of the population, 'globalisation gets translated into bloated prices with, may be, more choices; poverty of employment opportunities, with the shrinking public sector, and a highly competitive and knowledge-based job market in which the privileged few can compete, increasing inequalities and poverty' (p. 62). Some of them who are clever and learn the rules to rise in the cities,much like the protagonist, are successful in securing a good standard of life, but even they fail to find happiness and satisfaction in their lives. In the end, they are beaten in the race of money-making by the more privileged and more powerful business class, and are left neither with material resources nor with health, happiness or human relationships. Their material dreams end in misery and loss.

The social history of contemporary Pakistan, as portrayed in the novel, presents the country as a corrupt society, which has failed to ensure social justice and fundamental human rights. Politicians, bureaucracy, military and business class, as highlighted by the text, have fully manoeuvred the capitalist market to their use and are getting filthy rich; the poor and disadvantaged, on the other hand, are living below the poverty line and are hardly making both ends meet. The unprivileged economic class in the rising cities of Asia in the age of globalised capital is deprived of the necessities and facilities which a state must offer to its citizens. The lives of people living in rural suburbs or urban slums are exposed to various diseases and malnutrition, and are deprived of proper education and living spaces. They live in houses with 'minimum facilities and no sense of privacy' (Hamid, 2013, p. 17). The text identifies the contradictions and divides in economic classes visible in everyday life. Hamid regards the rising city of Asia as a 'wealthy nucleus surrounded by an ooze of slums' where 'wealthy neighbourhoods are often divided by a single boulevard from factories and markets and graveyards, and those, in turn, may be separated from the homes of the improvised only by an open sewer, railroad track, or narrow alley' (p. 23). The living conditions of the disadvantaged are inhuman as their houses, schools and hospitals are deprived of the basic facilities. There is no proper provision of electricity or gas in their houses. The schools are overcrowded and are without proper hygiene, furniture, equipment and even teachers. The protagonist describes his school as having 'fifty pupils in (the) class and stools for thirty' (p. 24), where these pupils are 'instructed by a single hollow-cheeked, betel-nut-spitting, possibly tubercular teacher' (p. 24). In addition to this, the most depressing reality, as the author observes, is that these schools for poor are under the impact of rampant corruption as the teachers are not only unqualified to do this job but also are hired through unfair means. The protagonist informs us about one the teachers in his school who had 'narrowly failed his secondary school's examination but was able to have the results falsified, and with his false results, a bribe… and a good low-level connection in the education bureaucracy in the form of a cousin secured only the post he currently occupies' (p. 26). Similarly, state-subsidised universities suffer from the evils of bribery and 'rampant nepotism' (p. 60). The protagonist informs the readers that 'a small payment and exam invigilators are willing to overlook neighbourly cheating' and even 'blank

exam books' bring 'miraculously, the first-class result' (p. 61). He also informs of the role of student organisations, which are funded by religious and political parties, and which manipulate students to establish hegemony of their parties in universities and control university authorities. They commonly use the students for strikes and other such political activities (p. 62). The text thus highlights that Pakistan's experience of globalisation has failed to improve its institutions and social structures. The corrupt 'institutions and cultural practices', as mentioned in the text,'drag down economic productivity, efficiency and equity' generate an 'economy of affection, nepotism, corruption, personalisation of the impersonal, political instability and social strife' (Qadeer, 1999, p. 1207). Pakistan requires deliberate and planned efforts of socioeconomic reform in order to benefit from the free flow of capital.

Globalisation exposes states to the international flow of capital, which is controlled by multinational corporations and their networks. This, for Sharma (2013), weakens the control of the states and accordingly 'reduces government's role in the economy and increases economic interdependency among different nations' (p. 27). Thus, it becomes imperative for states to make their position more assertive in devising and implementing social and economic policy and civil planning so as to manage the flow of international capital and its proper distribution within the state; this would ensure better life conditions of its citizens and decrease economic disparity among the classes (Sirgy *et al*., as cited in Tsai, 2007, p. 105). Similarly, for Tsai (2007),'the national government remains an influential agency with extensive public resources and powers to sustain social stability' (p. 108). *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* draws our attention to this important dimension of globalisation as operative in the rising cities of Asia. The city and lives of people portrayed in the city reveal that there is an absence of proper civil planning and socioeconomic policy that otherwise could manage shifting economic and cultural conditions. The author observes that,'since the colonization generations ago' still the city lacks 'governance powerful enough to dispossess individuals of their property in sufficient numbers' (p. 23). As a result, there are numerous 'illegally built encroachments', such as small hotels, labour residences, workshops for tailors and other craftsmen, and small business offices (p. 32), 'small scale manufacturing' shops and factories, all polluting the air with their toxins and chemicals (p. 33).Development, which globalisation promises, is undermined by increasing economic class divide, unmanaged social mobility, scarcity of water and other energy sources, environmental degradation, poor civic conditions, poor civil system and rampant corruption, and market flooding with illegal businesses. Urban sprawl and related poor conditions of the urban spaces, notably as a result of unplanned massive migration from rural areas to the urban centres, is one manifestation of the lack of economic policy and civil planning in developing countries. Cities of South Asia, being connected to the international global capitalist market through multinational business companies and their digitalised communication networks, are open to economic opportunities. And these increased economic opportunities are the main factor responsible for causing rural emigration in the cities of developing countries, as in the case of Pakistan. The text under discussion highlights that better economic opportunities have drawn people from rural areas to urban centres. However, since there is no coherent economic policy and civic planning, this social mobility has resulted in unmanageable city sprawl and significant pressure on resources, which has further increased poverty and unemployment in cities. Like other South Asian countries,'Pakistan severely lacks in these facilities and services all across the country, but their inadequacy is striking in cities. The power and water shortages, traffic gridlocks, telephone breakdowns, housing shortage, and crimes are symptoms of infrastructural deficiencies' (Qadeer,

1999, p. 1204). The text informs us that diverse people in cities 'have been pulled to this colossal city by the commerce linked to its part' (Hamid, 2013, p. 145) and has put enormous pressure on transportation, housing, water supply, and waste and garbage management in the city. There are many references made to the lack of 'sufficient mass transit' (p. 23) and poor transportation, such as 'overloaded' (p. 18),'lurching buses' (p. 126),'innumerable blockages' of traffic (p. 127),'surge in air traffic' (p. 144), 'poor supply and shortage of basic necessities, such as gas' (p. 97) and'frequent electricity failures' (p. 59).

There has also been a growing concern pertaining to the scarcity of water in Pakistan and the crisis of drinking water in Pakistani cities. For Iqbal (2010),'Pakistan is heading towards "water stress" country and has already reached to the limit of 1000 cubic meters per person per year, below which serious economic and social consequences are likely' (p. 11). According to a report published by American Pakistan Foundation (2017), the scarcity of water is one of the most critical issues in Pakistan today and has threatened the survival of the country;however, in spite of this, no significant steps are being taken by the state. As recommended by the report, Pakistan has to direct serious attention to the crisis and implement proper planning to manage its water reserves for the survival of its industry, agriculture and human population. The report also draws attention to the lack of urban water treatment policy, pointing out the dramatic increase in the pollution of underground water streams and rivers, which has caused serious threats to face human health. Similarly, Naeem Shahzad (2016) considers that the water crisis is rising in Pakistan, and he regards the lack of serious planning for management of water as the main cause of the aggravation in the water problem (p. 140). Hamid also thinks that the crisis of drinking water and the scarcity of water in the rising cities of Asia is another manifestation of the lack or absence of urban planning. Furthermore, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* informs us that 'neglected pipelines are cracking, the content of underground water mains and sewers intermingle' (p. 96), which pollutes underground streams of clean water. This water mismanagement in large city spaces, deprives inhabitants from clean drinking water and, as a result,those 'more well-off' switch to 'bottled water' (p. 96) whilst those who cannot afford bottled water become victims of water-related diseases, such as Hepatitis. Hamid also associates this issue with globalisation, which has put massive pressure on water resources in the rapidly expanding cities. For him, opportunist corrupt businessmen and entrepreneurs use this situation to establish their corrupt business and play with the health and lives of common citizens. Hamid's protagonist is one of many such corrupt opportunist entrepreneurs who only work for themselves (p. 111) and join hands as recommended by this self-help book to make filthy money with a 'fake water bottle business' (p. 97). They buy used water bottles, wash them and refill them with water boiled on simple stoves used for domestic cooking, and sell them as mineral water at cheaper rates. He criticises not only this corrupt business practice but also the big water bottle multinational companies who sell 'real' mineral water. For him, these giant companies, with their enormous capital and abundance of resources, are responsible for water scarcity problems in the global South. These companies engaged in water-bottle business with their 'powerful extraction and purification equipment' and machinery extract huge water reserves from the earth and also 'draw water from canals intended for agriculture' (p. 158) and sell it for their profit. These companies are contributing to the depletion of the earth's resources, which is one of the basic factors underpinning the environmental degradation in poor countries.

Held *et al*. (1999) observes that,'most forms of environmental degradation were largely local until the middle of this century. Since then, the globalisation of environmental degradation has accelerated'. He further explains that,'the South is now industrializing at breakneck speed, driven by the exponential growth of global population. We also know much more about the dangers and the damage that we have caused' (p. 494). One of the significant concerns held by the author in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is increasingly degrading environmental conditions in urban Pakistan (pp. 32–33). He regards the growing population, unplanned urbanisation and the unrestricted business activities of corporate sectors as the key reasons underpinning pollution and other environmental problems in the cities. These 'man-made crises and environmental degradations', for Sharma (2013),'have been the major issues of today's third world countries since the 1980s' (p. 23). The city portrayed in the novel is always covered with dust, and readers' attention is drawn to other 'airborne particulates' (Hamid, 2013, p. 210) that have transformed 'the sky to copper and clouds to irradiate bronze' (p. 181) during the daytime and thick layers of pollution which hide stars in the evening (p. 55). In addition to air pollution, the city portrayed in the text is also polluted by traffic noise (p. 210) and 'hyper-argumentative talk shows' on televisions (p. 112).

How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia, through its nameless protagonist, portrays the collective identity of communities living in growing urban centres of Pakistan and pursuing their dream of getting filthy rich in the rising cities. The novel is a faithful representation of contemporary Pakistan exposed to the 'new economic world order' engineered by the capitalist globalisation. The text is a microcosm in which all the dynamics of society can be found. For the author, as the discussion given in the preceding pages shows,globalisation and its related economic and cultural transformation have emerged in Pakistan what Žižek, as cited in López & Mohapatra, (2008, p. 3) calls 'materialised nothingness'. For Hamid, the main cause of this negative impact of globalisation and its economic mechanism controlled by multinational corporations is the absence of the decisive role of the state in Pakistan. The text points out the lack of a coherent and serious economic and social policy in Pakistan, which is necessary to harness the free flow of capital and manage international networking of multinational corporations. He also thinks that, much like other developing countries, Pakistan's exposure to the culture of modernity and postmodernity introduced by the globalised digital and new social media and urbanisation have complicated its societal structures. The market culture of materialism and commodification, as depicted in the text,has thrusted people into an unending pursuit of material prosperity, which is being achieved at the cost of health, healthy human relationships and happiness. People are transformed into money-making machines and commodity-consuming subjects.He also regards the lack of proper urban policy and planning as the main causes of major problems, such as water crisis, pollution and environmental issues, increasing poverty, growing economic class divisions and material corruption, and the lack of housing and power, educational and health facilities in the growing urban spaces of Pakistan. For Hamid, the miserable life conditions inherent in the rural and urban unprivileged communities, intensified economic class divisions, illegal business networks and the environment degradation in developing countries,such as that of Pakistan, are contradictions rooted in the world order engineered by capitalist globalisation. Globalisation not only fails to bring about development and improve human conditions in the poor and developing countries, but also replaces social with 'profit motive' (Hassmann, 2010, p. 34) and hence weakens human relationships and disintegrates communities.

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