WALLED IN ROLES: 
WOMAN AS A WIFE AND MOTHER IN 
MOHSIN HAMID’S MOTH SMOKE (2000)

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Abstract

This paper discusses veils and walls in Mohsin Hamid’s novel Moth Smoke (2000) and shows how the woman in the novel, named Mumtaz, responds to her role as a wife and a mother. This essay has three parts: the first part compares the figure of Mumtaz with the seventeenth-century Mughal empress upon whom the character in the novel is based. The second part shows how Mumtaz tries to free herself from the walls of socially assigned roles and resists predetermined gender roles. The third part then analyses how names and titles function as veils to hide the individual behind a constricting network of nomenclature. Acquiring a male pseudonym, Mumtaz, defies the walls of a gender-specific identity.

Keywords

Class-conflict, gender roles, motherhood, gender identity, aggression, male-female gaze

Introduction

Moth Smoke (2000) is set in Lahore in the late 1990s, a place full of competition, bribery, drugs and secret love affairs. Most of the characters in the novel belong to the upper-class
society of the city, though some characters come from the lower-middle class of society and resort to crime to maintain their financial and social status. Apart from representing the atmosphere of cutthroat competition and the hashish-smoking elite class of Lahore, Moth Smoke also represents the predicament faced by women of this society, who are bound by the restrictions imposed on them by the patriarchal order and constrained by the demands of their roles as mothers and wives. Hamid’s novel explores a woman’s thoughts and feelings as a separate individual, as a part of the family, and as a member of society. In particular, the novel presents the woman protagonist who feels walled up or constricted by stereotypical and patriarchal roles. Mumtaz belongs to an affluent family of Lahore yet still feels the suffocating limitations imposed upon her because she is a woman.

**History recreated in Moth Smoke**

The plot of Moth Smoke, while set in late twentieth-century Lahore, is based on an earlier episode in the history of India, associated with the family of the fifth Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan (1594-1666) and his wife, Mumtaz Mahall (referred to here as Empress Mumtaz in order to differentiate her from the character ‘Mumtaz’ in the novel). Empress Mumtaz died in 1631 in childbirth. Shah Jahan loved his wife very much and built the famous Taj Mahal as her mausoleum. As the Emperor aged, there arose a fierce war of succession among his four sons—Dara Shikoh, Shuja, Aurangzeb and Murad. Aurangzeb emerged victorious, had his father imprisoned in his Agra fort in 1658, and became Emperor. Aurangzeb then had his other three brothers arrested and executed. The most important contender for the throne was Aurangzeb’s eldest brother, Dara Shikoh, also favoured by their father as the heir apparent. Soon after becoming emperor, Aurangzeb charged Dara Shikoh with apostasy and had him executed in 1659.

In Moth Smoke, Mohsin Hamid recasts the story of the Mughal family in modern day Lahore. The novel revolves around Darashikoh (Daru), his best friend Aurangzeb (Ozi), and Ozi’s wife, Mumtaz. Ozi and Mumtaz have a three-year old son, Muazzam. Ozi and Mumtaz belong to the elite class of Lahore, while Daru clings precariously to this class through his friendship with Ozi and Mumtaz. Daru’s financial circumstances, however, keep deteriorating. He loses his job in the bank when he retaliates after being insulted by a client with a powerful background and connections with the bank manager. Unemployed, his finances rapidly dwindling and his stress level rising, Daru starts selling drugs and takes part in robbing a jewellery shop. During the course of the novel Daru becomes attracted to Mumtaz, and the two start having a secret love affair. When Ozi learns of the affair, he gets Daru implicated in a false hit-and-run car accident, for which Ozi himself was actually responsible. Daru is arrested and a trial follows. At the end of the novel, Daru’s fate still hangs in the air, as he asks the readers to judge the case for themselves. The novel deploys the narrative through the trial in which the characters, one by one, narrate their part of the
story, and readers are asked to act as judge and pass their verdict on Daru’s innocence or guilt. At the end of the novel, we see Daru still in prison, as he awaits the readers’ judgement, while Mumtaz leaves her husband and son and keeps working to prove Daru’s innocence.

There are several similarities between the story of the seventeenth-century royal family and Hamid’s novel. One can easily see that the novel is an exact adaptation of the Mughal dynasty: Daru and Ozi are named after the Mughal princes, Darashikoh and Aurangzeb. Ozi’s father is named Khurram, which was the original name of Emperor Shah Jahan. One of Daru’s accomplices in crime is named Murad, who, in the Mughal family, was the third prince, and a partner of Aurangzeb in defeating Dara Shikoh. Even the road crossing where the hit-and-run accident takes place is named after the very place where Aurangzeb and Dara Shikoh had their final battle, which Aurangzeb won. All incidents and characters of the earlier historical story are replicated in Hamid’s novel.

However, there remains one very prominent discrepancy between Hamid’s novel and history: in the historical narrative Empress Mumtaz was the mother of Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb, while in Moth Smoke Mumtaz is the wife of Ozi and the paramour of Daru. This shift from a mother-child relationship to a husband-wife relationship highlights the problems of gender-specific roles in a patriarchal society. In making Mumtaz the wife and paramour of the two men who, in history, were actually her sons, the narrative raises the question of what the woman actually feels about her relationship with her child, her husband and her lover. In addition, the novel also throws light upon the gender-specific narrative that is woven around and for women, which forces them to act in a certain way as soon as they become wives and mothers.

Critics and readers have responded variously to the historical background to Moth Smoke and to the cyclical nature of the bloody war for power. Paul Jay, in ‘The post-colonial condition: Globalization and historical allegory in Mohsin Hamid’s Moth Smoke’ (2005), sees the use of an historical frame as an attempt to present a picture of Lahore which belongs to the ‘post-post-colonial’ age. Jay sees Hamid as ‘one less interested in foregrounding the persistent effects of British colonization than dramatizing how economic globalization has transformed Lahore and the characters populating his novel’ (Jay 2005, 52). Jay thinks that in spite of Hamid’s attempt to differentiate the colonial period from Pakistan’s current problems, including terrorism and lawlessness, these problems can and do have a link with colonialism. Jay, however, observes that ‘the Mughal Empire was itself a colonialist empire’ (Jay 2005, 56). Referring to the much debated issue of the genesis and beginning of colonialism in South Asia, Jay sides with the view that ‘colonialism in South Asia did not begin with the British Raj’ and argues that the Persian and Islamic invasions from the North are also responsible for it. Jay suggests that ‘the forces of globalization were
Munazza Yaqoob, however, sees the historical narrative in *Moth Smoke* as performing the function of foregrounding the idea of imprisonment. The dominant metaphor in the novel, according to Yaqoob, is of prison and of feeling caged in. Yaqoob writes in ‘Human Perversion and Environmental Space: An Ecocritical reading of Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke*’ that the novel shows that Lahore ‘seems a symbol of apocalypse where life is fluttering in the cage of spiritual and emotional as well as social death’. Yaqoob goes on to say that the city is a place where people are ‘isolated whether they are in large social gatherings, air-conditioned rooms or airless dark rooms’ (Yaqoob 2010, 94).

Other critics focus on the cutthroat competition and criminality in the novel. Thus, Vidisha Barua analyses the scene in the novel in which Daru and Murad rob a jewellery shop, and Daru shoots at a young boy, probably killing him. Barua argues that Daru, clearly imagining the boy at the shop to be Muazzam, Mumtaz’s three-year-old son, shoots the boy at the shop and imagines that he is vicariously killing Mumtaz’s son. Barua, applying Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge (1975) analyses Daru’s criminal act of killing action and compares it with Raskolnikov’s bludgeoning of the old woman in Mikhail Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. Barua’s words are worth quoting here,

When Daru commits his murder during the course of the robbery, his aversion for Muazzam, Mumtaz’s son, had been growing for a while. Daru sees a kid running for the door. Nobody is allowed to leave the boutique alive. Not only does Daru not hesitate to kill the boy (with overpowering thoughts of Muazzam), he feels completely detached from the act, as if it was somebody else who raised the hand and committed the murder. This is comparable to Raskolnikov’s mental state when he killed the old woman. The act is done swiftly, and both the actors are scarcely conscious of themselves at the moment (Vidisha Barua 2007, 233).

The theme of killing in the novel is further reviewed by Cara Cilano in the backdrop of the overall atmosphere of Lahore and the historical and political contexts of wars between countries. Cilano extends the theme of fratricide present in the historical background of the Mughal family and their wars of succession and applies it to contemporary Lahore’s atmosphere where the country’s nuclear programme is frequently linked with the threat of impending war with India. Cilano sees ‘in place of crown-lust’ of the Mughal’s war of succession a desire for ‘drugs, Black Label scotch, and Pajeros’ in Hamid’s contemporary character of Darashikoh (Daru). Thus, "rather than the threat of literal fratricide, the characters inhabiting Lahore at the close of the twentieth century carry around the anxiety of nuclear conflict with India, a figurative fratricide" (Cilano 2009,188).
The theme of fratricide, the metaphor of being caged in, and the shifting desires of parent-child relationships are woven together from the outset of the novel. The nuclear threat in the region contains signs of impending war and hostility between India and Pakistan; the two countries once part of the same Mother India. The presence of the great Taj Mahal in the narrative background also stands as a reminder of the problematic life-death duality present in the mother-child relationship that the novel portrays: Empress Mumtaz died in childbirth and now silently witnesses her own sons killing each other in the struggle for power.

**Walled-in motherhood**

*Moth Smoke* can be read intertextually as a comparative text of the role of the mother in a Muslim historical allegory. In the figure of Mumtaz in *Moth Smoke*, Hamid constructs a modern-day response to the figure of the seventeenth-century Empress Mumtaz. Both women, the real Mumtaz and the fictional Mumtaz, are mothers and wives. However, Empress Mumtaz is little known outside her role as a mother. In the nineteen years that she was married to Shah Jahan, she bore him fourteen children; her upbringing of her sons is mentioned in history; and, dying in childbirth, her death also comes stapled with her role as a mother. Khurram Ali Shafique, commenting on Mumtaz who inspired the creation of one of the most magnificent edifices of the world, laments how her character has 'generally escaped the historians'. He glorifies her motherly supervision of her three elder sons: they, 'who had an opportunity to grow up under her supervision were the best disciplined and the noblest generation in the entire dynasty since Tamerlane.' However, Murad, the youngest, who got less time to spend with his mother 'turned out to be a hopeless alcoholic and a complete idiot' (Shafique, 2001, para 6). Mumtaz’s motherly concern for her children, even during her last moments, was so intense that she asked Shahjehan to promise that he would never marry again, so that their sons would not have any stepsons [stepbrothers] to endanger their lives over a war of succession' (Shafique, 2001, para. 8).

Contrary to the historical Empress Mumtaz Mahal, her namesake in *Moth Smoke* is the exact opposite. *Moth Smoke’s* Mumtaz is an outgoing, fun-loving person and, in total contrast to the historic Mumtaz, is tired of her marriage. She has an affair with her husband’s best friend, and gives birth to only one son, whom she also considers a burden. She leaves her three-year-old son at home with his nanny and goes out or parties with her husband and other friends. During her affair with Daru, she has mixed feelings towards her husband and her son, bordering on guilt, boredom and even regret. Zia Ahmed shows that Mumtaz is entirely dissatisfied with her husband, Ozi, which results in her awkward social and sexual behaviour: ‘The cause of much awkwardness in the social and sexual behaviour of Mumtaz cannot be other than her dissatisfaction because of the neglect of her
husband’ (Zia Ahmed 2009, 97). Mumtaz’s own narrative presents her life and feelings towards her family and lover. Mumtaz, it seems, yearns to be freed from the taxing roles of mother and wife and wants to explore a new identity, one where the woman is not seen fixed in roles such as that of mother and wife. In the two chapters allotted to her as the narrator, Mumtaz takes the reader to her innermost self. In these chapters, entitled ‘wife and mother (part one)’ and ‘wife and mother (part two)’, Mumtaz talks about her changing feelings towards her husband, Ozi, and her feelings towards her son, Muazzam.

The two narratives, indeed, contrast others’ reports about her with Mumtaz’s own self-narration. She tells the readers about her past, her reaction to her pregnancy and the birth of her son. She shows how, in spite of all her efforts, she could not bring herself to really love her son:

I started to get bored. And then I started to get frightened. Because when I looked at the little mass of flesh I’d produced, I didn’t feel anything. My son, my baby, my little janoo, my one and only: I felt nothing for him. No wonder, no joy, no happiness. Nothing (Hamid 2000, 152).

Mumtaz’s own narration rejects the traditional images of a devoted mother and undermines her relation to her seventeenth-century historical counterpart. After the birth of her son, Mumtaz feels as if she is caught in the role of motherhood. She tries to liberate herself from this taxing duty by trying to get a job. However, this option is denied to her because of the expectations attached to her as the mother of a little baby:

I’d done everything I was supposed to do. I’d played with Muazzam and read to him, even though he couldn’t understand a word, and bought him clothes and fed him with my own body and cleaned his shit with my own hands. I felt so guilty. I knew there was something wrong with me. I was a monster. But I didn’t want to be. Staying with my baby was the right thing to do, what everyone expected of me (Hamid 2000, 153).

The smouldering sense of waste and hopelessness that Mumtaz feels as a new mother is accentuated by the setting of the novel. Set in contemporary Lahore where society, environment, and even the people are smouldering in the self-destructive fire of corruption, *Moth Smoke* tells the story of Mumtaz’s conflict and her sense of futility with regard to her son. Motherhood in *Moth Smoke* is not necessarily full of or synonymous with love. For Mumtaz motherhood is mostly a bodily function, the result of certain physical phenomena such as intercourse, conception and pregnancy, over which the woman might or might not have any control. These physical conditions faced by a woman often lead her to emotional problems, such as frustration, guilt and even hatred, about which the new
mother might feel equally helpless. In Moth Smoke, the three-year-old Muazzam appears twice only and that too briefly, yet Mumtaz and the other characters speak of him frequently. Mumtaz mostly criticises herself for the way she feels. She is angry and guilty for not loving her son, as she should and says, ‘it wasn’t my fault I didn’t love my son (Hamid 2000, 241).

In the chapter ‘wife and mother (part one)’ Mumtaz tells the reader of her feelings upon finding out about her pregnancy, which was an entirely unwelcome development for her:

We were growing together, and I was happy.
Then I got pregnant.
I’d always been a condom person, but since I was regular and we’d both tested negative, Ozi and I switched to the rhythm method. Which can be almost as reliable as the pill. Almost. I told Ozi about it sadly, because I’d decided to have an abortion. But he was ecstatic. I’d never seen him so happy. He told me I had to think about it for a week. And he did something I still haven’t forgiven him for: he told his mother. She flew out to New York immediately, bringing gifts and advice. It’s amazing what the gene pool will do to perpetuate itself. [emphasis added] (Hamid 2000, 150).

Here we see Mumtaz caught in an unwanted relationship with her child, a relationship that reminds her of her own physicality and biological make-up. In spite of belonging to the upper class, Mumtaz feels as helpless as any other woman in society does when she realises how powerless she actually is when it comes to having control or decision-making power regarding her own body. Her feeling of helplessness comes not simply out of physical subjectivity, as is the case for many other women in similar circumstances, or for the Heera Mandi prostitutes,¹ but also due to the pressure of public opinion, represented in the novel by her mother-in-law who flies to them with presents and eager advice for the would-be mother.

As weeks pass and her pregnancy advances, Mumtaz starts feeling more and more helpless:

I decided to take another week to think about it. Then another week. And the more I thought about it, the less power I seemed to have to end it. I felt guilty. More than that, I felt selfish. I tried to convince myself that I wanted the child as well, that childbirth was an expression of female power, that it would make our

¹ Heera Mandi is an historic area in Lahore known for prostitution.
bond even stronger. So the week turned into weeks. Eventually we had a sonogram done, and after that, the idea was a little person, growing, and it was too late to turn back (Hamid 2000, 150-51).

We see Mumtaz falling into the role of motherhood out of sheer helplessness, fear or inertia, something not forced upon her by her husband, but which arises out of her feeling of guilt and her awareness of her body. She reluctantly accepts the biological imperative of her maternal body specially created for propagating the race and which carries the socio-cultural titles of love and sacrifice: ‘I resigned myself to it. Or maybe I saw it as a kind of martyrdom. Sacrificing myself for something noble: for love, my man, the species’ (Hamid 2000, 151). From being a free and independent woman, Mumtaz is caught in the maze of roles and titles of her biological make-up and the duties and virtues of motherhood, social values anchored to the female body.

The notion of the body as a central motif in women’s identity forms the crux of Moth Smoke’s narrative. The woman’s body turns out to be her most vulnerable part, over which she seems to have little or no control. In her essay ‘Physical Subjectivity and the Risk of Essentialism’, Suparna Bhaskaran refers to the woman’s body and the biological processes attached to it, such as motherhood, as being a major factor in contributing to essentialising the definition of a ‘woman’. Bhaskaran points out that the anti-essentialist feminists argue that the concept of ‘woman’ is unstable and the act of defining and naming the concept of woman is problematic (Bhaskaran 1993, 192). Problematic, Bhaskaran explains, because ‘the category “woman” in the heterosexual-patriarchal naming scheme would deem it perfectly “natural” or normal or even mandatory for women to pursue motherhood or wifehood.’ As a result, ‘motherhood is considered to be a logical destiny (gets fixed) for women’ (Bhaskaran 1993, 192).

Bhaskaran asserts that making connections between the female biology and the category ‘woman’ would mean ‘engaging in essentialism and biological determinism’ (Bhaskaran 1993, 192). In Moth Smoke the connection between female biology and womanhood is maintained first by Mumtaz’s mother-in-law, who comes loaded with presents and advice for Mumtaz, and later by Mumtaz’s own acceptance of her biological essentialism in a new key: ‘childbirth was a form of female power’. This very system of naming denies Mumtaz the power of refusing to enter the role of motherhood. She is unable to get the abortion done, not because of any feeling of love for her baby — though she does go on to have a consideration for the ‘little person’ growing in her (Hamid, 2000, p. 151) — but because having an abortion goes against the heterosexual-patriarchal scheme of naming that makes her see herself as a ‘mother’.
Here the part played by language in defining the role of motherhood for Mumtaz is significant. Through the verbal medium Mumtaz is made to realise the exalted status of motherhood which she is about to enter. Commenting upon Simone de Beauvoir’s early reaction to French feminism, Arleen B. Dallery points out that ‘the structures of language and other signifying practices that code a woman’s body are as oppressive as the material/social structures that have tended to mediate one’s awareness of one’s body and self and erotic possibilities’ (Dallery 1989, 54). Dallery refers to Julia Kristeva, who says that by giving birth, a woman enters into a relationship with her own mother, and with the nature of continuity. In her essay ‘Motherhood According to Bellini’ (1980), Kristeva distinguishes between the symbolic aspect of motherhood in the patriarchal scheme, where the role of motherhood has strong phallocentric associations, and the presymbolic. In the presymbolic, Kristeva writes that ‘the Mother’s body is that towards which all women aspire just because it lacks a penis. ... It is the reunion of a woman—Mother with the body of her Mother’ (cited in Dallery 1989, 57).

In Mumtaz’s case, the presymbolic associations of motherhood are hardly benevolent — her father used to beat her mother, ‘once so badly she lost her hearing in her left ear’ (Hamid, 2000, p. 149). Furthermore, Mumtaz’s flamboyant lifestyle — ‘I should have known I wasn’t the marrying sort’ (Hamid 2000, 148) — implies that Mumtaz never aspired to marriage or motherhood at all in the first place. In the absence of any presymbolic, and benevolent, associations of motherhood, Mumtaz refuses to see herself in the feminine roles assigned by motherhood and womanhood. In the opening lines of Mumtaz’s narrated chapter ‘The wife and mother (part one)’, she introduces herself to the readers: ‘I’m sure we’ve already met, Lahore being such a small place and all, but let’s introduce ourselves so that there is no mistake. I’m Mumtaz Kashmiri’ (Hamid 2000, 147).

She then goes on to tell the readers more about herself:

Where to begin? Certainly before Muazzam was born. Definitely before I got married. Before I went to America? Hnm. No. we haven’t the time to go that far back just now.

Let’s start in New York City, my senior year in college. The scene is the East Village, a little before midnight, on the steps of a fourth-floor walk-up on Avenue A. The date is important: October 31. Halloween. I’m dressed as Mother Earth (rather ironic, as you’ll see). My roommate, Egyptian, English major, is improvising around the Cleopatra theme again. This year there’s a sun motif. Ra, you know. Last year it was more Leo. (Hamid 2000, 147).

Mumtaz’s denial of her role as a mother comes with her rejection of her essentialised self, as represented by her Mother Earth costume. ‘How upset I was when I finally got my
period, at fifteen, because I’d accepted it would never come’ (Hamid 2000, 149). She refuses to accommodate herself to her menstrual cycle, another sign of prospective motherhood, and revolts against her unwanted pregnancy.

Mumtaz’s reluctant acceptance of her pregnancy comes through the associative use of language and symbolism. The language of motherhood comes from Ozi’s mother, another woman who sees her son as a prospective father. In the eyes of Ozi’s mother, Mumtaz’s motherhood is both a sign of her son’s phallic power as well as her daughter-in-law’s entering into the continuity of motherhood. That is why, when Mumtaz meets her mother-in-law, she sees Ozi’s mother as a subconscious mother-wife to her son:

How do you lose your respect for the person you love? It isn’t easy. It takes— it took—a lot. It took his mother, for one thing. She’d spent half her life making her son into the man she’d wished she’d married, and now that he’d returned, she was back in business. She corrected his posture, critiqued his suits, made him self-conscious about his receding hairline by telling him again and again how a good haircut would hide it. And the effect she had on him was incredible. One look from her would transform the relaxed, charming, sexy man I’d married into an uncomfortable little schoolboy. [emphasis added] (Hamid 2000,156).

Here we see Ozi’s mother re-enacting her own motherhood in the face of Mumtaz’s motherhood. In spite of Ozi’s adulthood, his mother still clings to his role as a child in her life, turning him from a mature man in Mumtaz’s eyes into ‘an uncomfortable school boy’ (Hamid 2000, 156). Motherhood is seen by Ozi’s mother as an expression of woman’s power, one which she does not want to let go of, even at an age when Ozi is himself a father.

Clearly Ozi loves their son more than Mumtaz does. In his part of the narration Ozi never once mentions Muazzam as being a burden, as Mumtaz does in her section of the narration. In Ozi’s love there is the hint of the phallocentric discourse, whereby the male sexuality fears the woman as a mother. As Dallery states, ‘Patriarchal culture seeks to repress this primordial memory of fusion with and later separation from the maternal body; this fear of the mother is masked in male sexuality (Dallery, 1989, p. 57). Ozi’s phallocentric love for the mother-son relationship is seen in the way in which he and Mumtaz pursue their relationship as husband and wife after the birth of Muazzam: ‘You learn a lot about your man when you become the mother of his child. Ozi began drinking my milk and talking like a little boy when we made love’ (Hamid 2000, 152). It is indeed not without reason that Hamid has chosen the historical personalities of Empress Mumtaz and her son Aurangzeb, and converted them into a husband-wife relationship in his novel.
Names and the dynamics of viewership

If Mumtaz cannot escape her biological essentialism through rejecting the role of motherhood, she does succeed in denying her womanhood in another far more direct and physical way, which seems almost in direct line with Bhaskaran’s comments about naming and language. Mumtaz adopts a male pseudonym and starts writing as a freelance journalist. The name she chooses for herself is Zulfikar Manto, directly drawing upon the famous Urdu writer Saadat Hassan Manto (d. 1955), known for his controversial subject matter involving man-woman relationships, and for his bold portrayal of many taboo subjects, including the graphic portrayal of the woman’s body. Manto is one of the most famous short story writers in Urdu literature, and Mumtaz’s adoption of his name for herself directly retaliates against any attempt to fix her in terms of any traditional form of gendered essentialism or norm. As a journalist she writes about social evils, gender discrimination and other forms of injustice just as Saadat Hassan Manto did.

Often, in protest at her writings, the windows of the newspaper’s office get broken by angry mobs. The first part of her pseudonym is also interesting. Zulfikar literally means sword, implying, perhaps, that she is using her pen as a sword. I find in the reference to sword another phallocentric hint, with an underlying wish to acquire a phallic pleasure for penetration, whether through sword or the penis. Therefore, not only does Mumtaz adopt a male name, but the meaning also contains connotations of penetration, carrying with it the image of what Beauvoir calls ‘the construction of a counter-penis’ (cited in Daller, 1989, 54). Through her change of identity from Mumtaz to Zulfikar Manto, Mumtaz’s intentions clearly have phallic undertones, which are in line with her earlier attempts at the rejection of her own womanhood and the desire for the acquisition of a masculine identity.

Where her male pseudonym gives her a masculine identity and freedom from the essentialised female existence, it also turns Mumtaz into an onlooker, a witness who can examine or survey Lahore’s society without herself becoming a part of the scene. Thus, her male pen name turns Mumtaz into the gazer instead of the gazed. Luce Irigarary observes that ‘Investment in the look is not privileged in women as in men. More than the other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, maintains the distance … the moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality’ (cited in Owens 1985, 70). We see Mumtaz relishing her role as a journalist, writing under a male pen name. She goes to different places, conducts interviews, writes articles under an assumed identity, and enjoys her sense of freedom by being liberated from her female identity. When asked why she writes under a masculine identity, Mumtaz’s answer shows how an assumed male identity makes life much easier for her:

“So who is Zulfikar Manto?” I ask.
She laughs. “Me.”
“You?”
“Me. I am Zulfikar Manto.”
I start to laugh, too. “But why don’t you just write articles under your own name?”
“That’s a little complicated. Anyway life is much easier if I’m not working and Zulfikar Manto is.” (Hamid 2000, 46).

In Pakistani society, as we have seen (chapter 3), the gaze is mainly a male prerogative. The patriarchal order controls and dictates to the women of society through this tool. Whether this gaze is the fixed stare of a street loafer or the angry glare of the men folk of a conservative family, it is the most effective ploy to control and dominate women. Hamid’s later novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, also makes this point when the narrator’s sister is ogled at by a neighbour. The young brother and sister are playing in the street, imagining the sister’s shawl to be a rope for crossing an imagined river, but their play is halted by the realisation that a neighbour is watching the girl:

You grip the shawl firmly. In your hands it becomes the rope you will use to ford the river. But before you can do so, and without warning, the spell breaks. You follow your sister’s altered gaze and see that a formerly shuttered window is now open. A tall, bald man stands inside, staring at your sister intently. She takes her shawl from you and throws one end over her head, the other across her still-small-chested breast.
She says, “Let’s go home.” (Hamid 2013, 27-28).

This incident shows how the gaze is attached to and dominates the woman’s body. The neighbour’s intent staring at the girl makes her become self-conscious of her body. The shawl here is not just a piece of clothing for fending off the cold, but a veil to hide the body from the penetration of the male gaze. As a result of the male gaze, the veiling shawl, the *chador* or *dopatta* in Urdu, becomes a necessary part of a woman’s clothing, not simply because it hides her body, but because it gives the signal of the wish or attempt to cover one’s body. The contours of the body can hardly be hidden by a covering shawl or *chador*, but the draping stands as an expression of the wearer’s intention to be hidden, to almost become invisible. The gaze and the veil share the effort to annihilate a woman’s identity, the former by dwelling upon its physical contours and the latter through a women’s attempt to make herself vanish into thin air.

The gaze may be a masculine tool, but it is exercised by women too, as Mumtaz’s mother-in-law indicates. Strong women suppress women weaker than themselves by turning them into objects of unchecked scrutiny. One such area of scrutiny where women acquire the male gaze over other women is the institution of marriage. In Pakistani society, marriages are often arranged through a meeting of the boy’s family with the girl’s family.
The first step in such arranged matches is when the boy’s family visits the girl’s house and ‘sees’ the girl, after which she is either rejected or accepted for further visits. During such matchmaking visits, the girl is adorned and presented in front of the boy’s family for possible acceptance. Family matters also revolve around the dynamics of the masculine gaze, where once again the woman is reduced to an object of sight. In her short story on the tradition of matchmaking in Asian societies, Anu Mitra shows how this practice has mentally tormented thousands of unmarried girls whose families are in search of suitors. ‘So every Sunday afternoon, I would go through the motions of displaying myself before a bunch of cynics and a man whom God had created in his parents’ image’ (Mitra 1993, 210-11).

Earlier Mitra points out how the would-be daughter-in-law sees herself being scrutinised by the guests’ piercing gaze:

Then, shepherded by aunts and married cousins, I would be chaperoned to a place in the living room that caught the twilight sun as it filtered in through the windows. I would sit under this makeshift spotlight and barely raise my eyes but not quite.... From the corners of my eye, I would see the parents—the figures of authority and the voices of reason. They saw everything; they judged how I walked into the room, whether my posture was womanly enough, whether my words were to the point and filled with respect and devotion for these unknown people. (Mitra 1993, 210).

The adorned girl is viewed by the guests; while she herself hardly raises her eyes, but not quite. While she timidly only catches glimpses of her onlookers from the corner of her eye, the boy’s parents and other relatives openly watch the girl from every angle, to later on ‘proffer expert advice’ (Mitra, 1993, p. 210) about her. The gaze here is masculine and penetrative, upholding the ‘demeaning tradition that brought women to their knees’ (Mitra 1993, 211), a visual weapon for holding the woman in perpetual realisation of herself as an object to be viewed.

This demeaning tradition is upheld in the story by the women of the family, the grandmother, mother and aunts: ‘I just could not fit into roles determined for me by Grandmother and her purity stories’ (Mitra 1993, 211). Mitra’s narrator finally rejects the one-sided display of power of the gaze, and openly defies the visitors:

At the magical hour of four, the guests arrived. On previous occasions this had been the moment of transformation from a high-schooler to a poised and controlled woman. I was late at the doorway today and the soft and easy transformation just passed me by. I strode in, making direct eye contact with the
prospective in-laws and their son. I gave out a shrill, nervous laugh and proclaimed that I wasn’t really glad to see them. ... I had had enough. I demanded an apology from them — directed to me and all the other unknown women they would measure, and evaluate and consider—before they took their leave.

(Mitra 1993, 211).

The narrator’s defiance of the guests is initiated by her ‘making direct eye contact’ with them. She resists this power structure by returning their gaze and refusing to become an object of display for them.

If the marriage market is one domain where the masculine gaze controls the female object, then the brothel house is another. In Moth Smoke Mumtaz, along with Daru, visits a prostitute in Heera Mandi. In the brothel she meets Dilaram. The meeting between the two women in the brothel proves to be an interesting moment when the masculine gaze is exercised by a woman for another woman,

Reclining against a long, round cushion is a middle-aged woman with finely plucked eyebrows, her fleshy body well-proportioned and voluptuous. She takes a gurgling puff from the hookah beside her and with the tiniest dip of her chin indicates that we should sit.

“It’s a man’s habit, but I love it,” she says, taking another puff. (Hamid 2000, 49).

A few lines later, the woman starts talking about Mumtaz,

“You’re not bad-looking,” the woman says to Mumtaz, who smiles and lowers her gaze politely. “A nice face. And good hips. But your breasts aren’t generous. You should eat more.”

Mumtaz starts to laugh. “They are bigger than they were. I’ve fed a boy.”

“With those?” The woman considers. “Perhaps it’s because you have broad shoulders that they seem small.” She smiles. “Are you looking for work?” (Hamid 2000, 49).

The way Dilaram eyes Mumtaz makes her (Dilaram) enter the domain of masculine control exercised over women. The freedom with which Dilaram views her visitors places her into the category of male patriarch and she does enjoy smoking the hookah, a man’s habit.

In spite of being viewed and evaluated by the prostitute, Mumtaz does not at all feel affronted or slighted in the way the narrator of Mitra’s story feels. On the contrary, Mumtaz laughs and responds with equal familiarity: ‘Mumtaz flashes a sly grin. “Your tea is
“How did you come to begin learning?” Mumtaz asks, slowly taking out a minicassette recorder.

Dilaram laughs solidly, her body rippling. “It’s quite a funny story really. I was a pretty girl, like this one here.” She smiles at our adolescent tea server. “Only younger. The landlord of our area asked me to come to his house. I refused, so he threatened to kill my family. When I went, he raped me.”

Mumtaz shut her eyes. Dilaram chuckles. “I was so skinny. Not like a woman at all.”

“He paid you?” Mumtaz’s voice is so soft I can barely hear her.

“No.”

“Then what happened?”

“He kept making me come. ... Then I became pregnant.” (Hamid 2000, 50).

Mumtaz and Dalaram are completely focussed on each other, while Daru, the narrator of this section, is completely left out of the actual event. Daru’s position as actor and narrator is interesting because in spite of being in the same room, he is denied the privilege of becoming part of the conversation. He is treated as being only a man, as the son of another man:

Then [Dilaram] points one henna-decorated finger at me [Daru]. “Have I seen you before?”

“No,” I say.


Daru is seen by Dilaram as just another man, another part of the patriarchal system that has subjected women to such physical and mental ordeals. When the meeting ends and they bid Dilaram farewell, the madam flashes an angry glance at him: “When the interview is over, Dilaram watches us go, laughing to herself. Our eyes meet for a moment, and I’m startled by the anger in her glance” (Hami 2000, 51).
Here we see a difference between Dilaram’s gazing at Mumtaz and the viewing of Mitra’s narrator by the boy’s family. The brothel is a place where the lady of the house, Dilaram, has acquired a masculine position, eyeing her dancing girls and evaluating their prospective gains. But she has gained this masculine position by first being exploited and used as a woman, suffering rape and being sold by her male exploiters in her younger days. Mumtaz sees in the woman a victim of that very patriarchal system which she is apparently supporting by running the brothel. Mitra’s narrator, on the other hand, sees her viewers as endorsing the patriarchal tradition of reducing women to objects of display by their own choice; and the women of the match-making families are themselves acting as propagators of this demeaning tradition.

The historical figure of Empress Mumtaz returns as a direct counterpart to other women. She has been treated as perhaps the biggest object of display of all by being walled in by a marble mausoleum that immortalises her beauty and her husband’s love. In spite of being given the most magnificent memorial, she remains mostly unknown to us as a person, her only titles of identity being those of mother or wife. In taking up the story and family of the historical Mumtaz and recreating a modern Mumtaz, Hamid shows us with irony the place of a woman in Lahore’s society, and by extension her place anywhere in the world, as it is dictated by the tools of power exercised by the patriarchal system. These tools of power include language and the gaze, whereby women are either transfixed into sublimating titles of virtue and sacrifice through their entering into motherhood, or visually scrutinised and held in check by reducing them to mere objects of viewership.

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