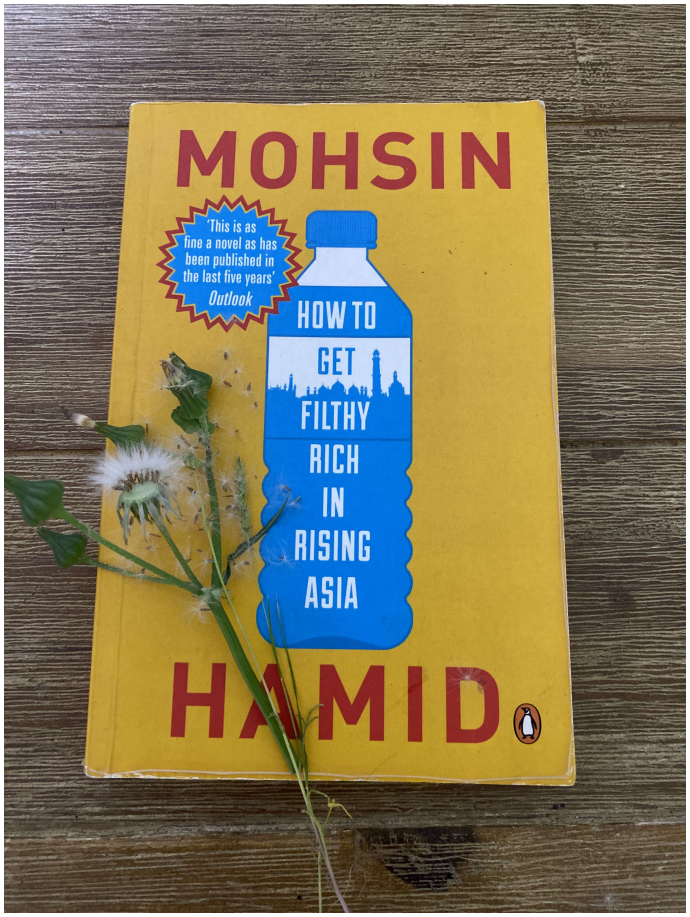
REVIEW

A Sordid Story Told With A Slant Of Humour — A Review of "How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia" By Mohsin Hamid

by Seher Hashmi

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‘How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia’ By Mohsin Hamid © Seher Hashmi

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If you wish to relish in humour that smoothly changes its pace and texture, then this compact novel of 228 pages titled *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) by Mohsin Hamid is the one for you. Through the story of its protagonists, this svelte book shows the pitfalls of modern life and the cruel ironies embedded in economic systems designed to favour the already favoured, all accompanied by the possibility of salvation through real love.

The novel chronicles the endeavors of a “rural boy” and his love interest, the “pretty girl” (all characters are kept nameless throughout the novel), both from the lowest economic strata, to claim their share into the socio-economic stream that somehow flows only through the mega cities.



"How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia" By Mohsin Hamid © Seher Hashmi

Both proceed on, constantly diversifying their modes of livelihood. The pretty girl works as a parlour girl, masseuse, model, escort, and TV show host, eventually owning a furnishing boutique. Persevering, she stays single and largely content with her achievements. On the contrary, the protagonist — despite juggling with marriage, an offspring, and even shady means to finally own a water purification company of his own — is condemned to be lost, insecure and forlorn. He loses his wife, his son departs to America, and he goes bankrupt when his brother-in-law absconds with all funds right before the company is about to be acquired by an international water enterprise. Once penniless, the protagonist is hounded by a sketchy accountability scam and a callous media trial as “he has always been an outsider” in the capitalist urban society.

The novel packs in a delightful assortment of various twists to the genre of humour: from piercing satire to genial comedy; from snarky wit painting graphic details of climate crisis to farcical delineation of swindlers, thugs and corrupt officials, all while keeping their human nature in the foreground.

In order to get an official permit to sell water, the protagonist must offer a considerable bribe to a bureaucrat. The haggling for the bribe money takes place in the government office quietly, for “these days it is difficult to know when a conversation is being recorded.” A chit inscribed with an amount passes from the protagonist to the bureaucrat as they reject or

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approve with a curt shake of head, tap of fingers, and show of phony facial expressions without uttering a single word.

> You are his buyer, and though you must not squeeze, you have him by his enormous, greedy, and extremely useful balls. You haggle, but magnanimously.

It's Hamid's insightful wit and subversive humour that elevates the narrative to astronomical heights; his ability to laugh things into a sense of purposeful perception of the complex human condition ranks the novel as a modern classic.

The novel is a huge satirical comment on self- help books celebrated everywhere and it abounds in ironical comments mostly at the start of every new chapter. Hamid loves fiddling with ironic humour:

> Unless you’ re writing one, a self-help book is an oxymoron.

The sole analogy it owes to self-help books is the idea of resilience and note of hope that the narrative ends on.

It is not an easy feat to tell a tale of a grisly life with a slant of humour. Out of all of Mohsin Hamid’s works, this novel stands out as a literary wonder where subversive humour is kneaded so effortlessly into a tragedy depicting squalor, muck and sense of impending doom slithering its way around the poor and powerless.

It's a shame that this novel remains largely underrated, in spite of summing up the predicament of the vast majority of the population in Pakistan. However, many critics deem it worthy to be added to the syllabus of English Literature studies in Pakistan at all levels, with individual chapters or excerpts for undergraduate and as a complete novel for graduate and masters study programmes.

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The cover bears an image of a bottle of mineral water bubbling into tiny visuals of tombs, minarets and is lettered with the title of the book. Evoking an analogy of ironic sorts with genie from the Arabian tales, it presses on the hocus-pocus of getting filthy rich in rising Asia.

The book is neatly divided into twelve chapters each titled with instructions from the satirical manual of self-help: “Get An Education” is the title of the second chapter which unravels the horror of corporal punishment that the protagonist has to endure at the hands of his incompetent teacher who intended to become a metre reader in the first place. Chapter eight is titled “Befriend A Bureaucrat” and it is an exposé of the rampant corruption and undue use of official power in government offices. No business or startup can be initiated without bribing the bureaucrats who have the backs of the politicians to escape accountability.

This is a tale of nameless people. The defunct socio-economic system — an improvised form of destiny from Greek tragedy — has a demonic presence stripping humans off their identity. So the protagonist, his love, their relatives and an array of other characters have no names to tell.



Mohsin Hamid © Ed Kashi

As hinted at on the cover, one of the plotters of doom is religion, which is appropriated unabashedly to leverage power over youth in educational institutes: “They find an amenable environment of young, impressionable, malcontent and ambitious individuals” who Hamid envisions could have been “dashing off to slay dragons and triumph over genies” had they not been exploited by religious organizations. In university, the protagonist turns to them because “the product it sells is power. In exchange for membership, you are given a monthly cash stipend, food and clothing and a bed at the hostel. You are also given protection.” All that he has to do is to grow a beard and pledge fealty to the ringleader of a religious organisation on campus. Although his father disapproves of this allegiance, he can't dissuade him either because this is where the funds and dubious medical help come from when his wife, the hero's mother, is diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

Women in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

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Hamid's women are neither subdued nor inactive but ambitious and assertive in exercising their agency and keeping their dignity. It's the wretched system they live in which quickens to thwart them one way or another.

The protagonist's mother has robust health which is marred by cancer that goes ill-treated due to quacks and absence of a healthcare system. Battling a losing fight, “she is gripped by fear, surprised both by her unyielding attachment to life and by the failure of her imagination to conceive of a proud ending to it.” She is a vivacious and agile woman with a loud mouth and a flair for crude humour — her only defense against the harshness of her low life. Even her take on her deteriorating health is doused in sardonic humour. “If it wasn't for my tits, everybody would think I'm a frog.” She sweeps, cooks, milks the cow and medicates her sick children while standing the strict scrutiny of her mother-in-law in the village in absence of her husband. While in the city with him, she and her daughter work as cleaners to lessen his financial burden. She is not romantically disposed. It's her blunt demeanor and her uncouth warmth — quintessential of a rustic — which turn her into a lovable well-rounded character. Working alone in the city, her husband misses not only sex but her rude humour and warmth of companionship, though sex, in a small house with kids, is crude and it feels like her whole life is infringed upon: “Intercourse in the village is a private act only when it takes place in the fields.”

The pretty girl, who works at a salon, is too proud of her earnings to accept gifts from the protagonist. Living in a village, where her walk to the salon is the center of “all masturbatory activity,” she has discovered that her only entry into the system will be through her body. She is very forthright in forging a friendship with him. She discerns the innate reason of his infatuation and performs sex for him in exchange of the movies he brings for her. Later, she runs away from her poor family to better her life in the city where she builds a career as a billboard model. Ironically, unlike the protagonist who, after his disillusionment with education which entails unquestionable loyalty to on-campus wielders of religion, is condemned to swindle expired food and boiled-at-home water as good ones to earn a living, she makes more than he does out of her modeling career. It's her straightforwardness which stands out when the destinies of two have-nots are juxtaposed against each other.

Even his wife, twenty years younger, demands to be allowed to complete her education without bearing a child after marriage. He agrees to it and treats her well, but he keeps longing for the bodily chemistry and emotional intimacy with the pretty girl, while she spends fortunes on waxing her pubes and purchasing lacy lingerie to seduce him.

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Another trait that Hamid's women possess so relentlessly is the skill to improvise on their living conditions. Giving up on him, his wife overcomes the hurt by resorting to religious activism rolled into community help which rewards her enough leverage to part ways and start anew with another man. As the novel records, “to leverage is to be immortal.”

Another woman, “of girth and substance” is his sister, gifted with vivid imagination and intelligence to excel in school. Sadly, her evolution is compromised for the sake of her brothers. Dropping out from school, she works as a cleaner till married off to a man a decade her senior. Her sisterly love combined with her talent for singing and creativity provide a much needed escape to her brothers from their plight. She conjures up a game called “playing river” where both pretend that the stinky sewer is a gushing river which they cross cautiously; when thrashed by his school teacher, she sings to comfort him. “You lean against her as she sings, and feel your body swell and diminish like a harmonium.”

The Possibility of Salvation despite Everything

A hint of salvation comes when the protagonist is united with the pretty girl only for a short time before her death. In that brief time, both experience something they had striven for all along, misconstruing it for wealth, i.e love which triumphs over misery.

> She sees how you diminish her solitude, and more meaningfully, she sees you seeing, which sparks in her that oddest of desire an I can have for a you, the desire that you be less lonely.

In keeping with the tradition of classical literature, the last chapter titled "Have An Exit Strategy" wraps up the novel with intensely evocative lines as the protagonist confronts death, finding solace in love and fortitude: “For despite all else you have loved, you have been beyond yourself, you have courage, and you have dignity, and you have calmness in the face of terror.”

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