

**Lurking Antagonism: A Feminist Critique of  
*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* by Mohsin Hamid**

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**Abstract**

*Literary Feminist Criticism has introduced itself against the female representation in literature as an object of beauty and desire. Her existence is only possible if she is obedient and passive. She is born to glorify man as epitome of perfection, and herself as a witless being, useless alone, and if she uses her mental faculties that eventually leads to fall of a man. This academic discipline criticizes male authors who create a female character under the strict patriarchal notions where she is identified as inferior and beautiful creature to amuse her sexual counterpart. Feminist Critique aims to deprecate these stereotypical roles of women by bringing the marginal and peripheral to the centre through their deconstructive readings of the text. The present study employs the technique of close textual analysis to *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and aims to analyze the generalized representation of female characters as mediocre and inferior creature. The novel highlights the image of women as witless beings who are helpless without a man. This study will examine how female characters are stereotyped and associated with man as wife, mother and sister. The paper will finally conceal that the text produced by a male author is captivated with his traditional patriarchal thinking patterns that give fabricated identity and recognition to the female characters.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Female Characters, Woman, Stereotypes, Images

## Introduction

Moving from classical to modern literature, Feminist Literary Criticism analyzed the marginalized and peripheral characterization of women. The critics uncovered the oppressed female characters in literary world created by the male authors. The conventional heroines of classical authors are innocent and obedient daughters, and devoted and passive beloveds like Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Cordelia in *King Lear* and Lady Una in *Faerie Queene*. However, shrewd and clever females are monsters and witches who challenge the traditional submission and devotion to the male characters as Eve in *Paradise Lost* and Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. This representation of good and bad character portrayal categorizes the portrayal of women into two diversities; one is the Spiritual and the other is Dark and Evil. Through the reading of *Faerie Queene*, or any other Shakespearean tragedy it is demonstrated that the feminine obedience and submission always adore its male counterparts, whereas, the stubborn and rebellious female characters become infuriating. Therefore, a subjugated and devoted wife, a passive and beautiful beloved, a submissive and obedient daughter, subservient and dedicated mother are confined as accepted and esteemed attire for the female characters in the world of literature.

The female characters portrayed by male authors in literature aim to prescribe a code of conduct for women by constructing sharp binaries between characters as Nancy and Rose May lie in *Oliver Twist*. The idealized passivity and abhorred independence defines the status of women in the society. The women are confined within domestic fence and work as caretakers for their children and husbands. They are portrayed as dependant, emotional and beautiful. Their beauty and obedience is celebrated in literature with extensive use of expensive proverbial and idiomatic metaphors as well as personifications. This celebration indicates their social position within the society. They are portrayed as an object to satisfy and amuse the male dominance. Feminists aim to eradicate the stereotypical portrayal of women in order to recognize them as strong and independent characters in their writings.

Mohsin Hamid is a very well known Pakistani writer. *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is one of his bestseller novels. It carries unnamed characters and unnamed dwellings. The novel is significant for feminist study since the female characters are playing an important part in the development of the story. It is significant to find that they are introduced in the novel in relation to man and assigned their stereotypical and conventional roles within the home. The present study will aim to evaluate their conventional assignments and the stereotypical portrayal that aims to represent their physical and psychological dependency upon male characters. The study will finally conclude that though the women through constant protest of identification are unable to prove men their individuality. If they are liberated from their domestic sphere the world outside will not entertain them with some esteemed and honourable profession instead they will lean to their success through bargaining with the world outside their domestic fence.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist literary theory fights against the fabricated images of women where she becomes an object of amusement. It aims to deconstruct the accepted conceptual power structure, to rediscover the lost women literary texts and 'to establish a feminine perspective on critical, literary, political, scientific, philosophical theories of the cultural forces' in order to 'change the sexist bias of traditional educational and social practices' (Gubar, et al., 2000, p. 15).

Elaine Showalter (1981) in her work *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* remarks the struggle of the feminists as "we are on a pilgrimage to the promised land in which gender would lose its power, in which all texts would be sexless and equal, like angels" (1981, p. 205). She describes feminist criticism in three modes:

English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression. All, however, have become

gynocentric. All are struggling to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority. (p. 186)

This categorization mainly focuses on the portrayal of women in the patriarchal structure that is scrutinized through characterization or imagery in male or female authored literary texts.

While evaluating the representation of female characters in literary texts, Mary Ellman in *Thinking about Women* (1968) drags the attention towards the 'sexual analogy'. She considers it a root cause to restrict and delimit women on emotional and intellectual grounds. It is 'sexual analogy' that perpetuates the stereotypes of men with 'expensive' and 'exploratory' mind and women with 'interiorizing'. She finds a list of stereotypes of female characters that appear to be absurd before the nobility of literature, as they are associated with passivity, compliance, confinement, spirituality, piety, materialism on the one side and irrationality, formlessness, instability, the Witch and the Shrew on the other side. The literary representation of female character sets her into two parameters of identification: good and evil, angel and monster, penitent prostitutes and angelic virgins. This literary image of a woman is depicted in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000) as 'angel' who is 'fairy and perhaps sprite, on the other side she is a 'monster' who is 'ghost, witch and fiend' (p. 19). The ideal image of women in literature is 'angel in the house' that indicates honour, respect and dignity of women confined with the four walls of their house. Thus, the woman who chooses to dismantle the very notion is a 'witch or a monster, a magical creature of the lower world who is a kind of antithetical mirror image of an angel' (p. 27-28).

Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (2000) engrosses the idea of 'sexual analogy' towards the politics of power relations that takes a way out from the bedroom relationship of a man and a woman. She finds that within this private sphere of the bedroom the woman is lead towards the public submission where she is thought to be "a mere vessel in which the magic seeds grow, invent male gods who gave birth alone to Adam or Athena,

and begin long subordination of woman in every avenue of human experience and civilization--- even to its symbols" (p. xi). Millett exemplifies different myths where woman is known as evil and fallen or submissive and passive. She takes these associations in literary interpretations where different fictional female characters are found as a continuation of mythic feminine ideology of good and evil woman. They are likely 'to wear the recognizable social and economic garments of prostitution or punury' or 'servant seduced' (p. 128). She evaluates the image of woman through passivity, ignorance, docility, virtue and ineffectuality whereas intelligence, force, aggression and efficacy cherish the male character. She discriminates male image in literature as the dominated and powerful who defines the character of woman and becomes the source of her identity.

Image of women criticism projects the association of female character with the male. It inspects "self-discovery" and identity of female characters in literature which perpetuates that they are only "male-identified" and 'it is a failure for a woman to take her identity from her man" (1981, p. 347). Betty Friedan (1963) investigates the idea of female identity as a problem that has no name. She argues that a patriarchal culture "does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human being, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role" (1963, p. 69). She insists that the image of women perpetuated by the magazines, television and literature shapes the life of women and directs them a life within domestic sphere:

The image of women ... is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home ... but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit? In [this] image, women do not work except housework and work to keep their bodies beautiful and to get and keep a man. (p. 30)

She exposes the masculine interests to restrict women for “the only pursuit, the only goal” and “that is the pursuit of man” (p. 30). The literature that entirely narrates male experiences idealizes the character of female as passive and submissive within domestic sphere, that is an object for male gratification and satisfaction who cannot think on their own. While analyzing the canonical literature Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find the attributes of 'Eternal feminine' as “gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability and politeness”. The existence is bearable only “if woman owes her Being to the Comfort and profit of man, 'tis highly reasonable that she should be careful and diligent to content and please him” (2000, p. 23).

Simone de Beauvoir (1989) also evaluates the status of woman as an object of beauty and desire who can only appeal a man through her body, therefore:

It is not entirely futile for her to attach so much importance as she does to silk or nylon stockings, to gloves, to a hat, because it is an imperative obligation for her to keep up her position. (p. 534)

Beauvoir (1989) sympathizes with her because these vanities are not self chosen but rather associated with her on her birth:

One is not born woman, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch which is described as feminine. (p. 267)

She exposes the image of this fabricated woman as “silliness, prudence, shabbiness, boredom” and “the other” (p. 187). While analyzing literary texts she assumes the “Ideal woman is perfectly stupid and perfectly submissive; she is always ready to accept the male, never makes any demands upon him' moreover, 'she is for man a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object- an Other through whom he seeks himself” (p. 59, 203). Mary Wollstonecraft (1796) evaluates the representation of

female characters in Literature where the ideal character of female is melancholic, “she was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (p. 66).

Feminists study the literature where female characters are subjected as an object of desire. Male authored texts celebrate the beauty of female characters with passivity and obedience that augment their physical gratitude. Germaine Greer (1970) in *The Female Eunuch* scrutinizes the stereotypical representation of female character who is gratified as an object of admiration “her hair was gold wires, her brow ivory, her lips ruby, her teeth gates of pearl, her breasts alabaster veined with lapis lazuli, her eyes as black as jet”, she summarizes the idea of Female myth in literature as 'Eternal Feminine' whose worth is associated with the demand of others, does not need to “give positive evidence of her moral character because virtue is assumed from her loveliness, and her passivity” (p. 65, 67).

The feminists aim to deconstruct these stereotypical images of female characters by writing back. The female writers focus on the identity of female characters that is best evaluated by the feminist critique. The Female writings presented female characters as strong, independent and authoritative who can think and respond to the challenges of their lives.

Feminist critique and the Female Writings have influenced the culturally constructed mindsets of the male writers who have revised their patriarchal thoughts and produced such fictional works wherein female characters are protagonists. However, it may also be accepted that a male writer may hardly overcome the patriarchal constructed notions as Williamson (2001) considers the position of male authors while portraying a female character:

Feminist criticism has felt the need to emphasize how hard it is for men really to imagine what women experience. It has been quick to smell preemption, rather than legitimate empathy, whenever male writers attempt to represent a female point of view. They fear

that they will perpetuate stereotypes, offer up straw men, or rather straw women, so that the patriarchal side can have the last word, or, at best, steal insights women writers deserve the chance to express for themselves. (p. 2)

Williamson (2001) describes the difference between the contemporary male writings that are different from the canonical literature but he also takes this belief that the male writers often feel 'shame' for being identified through female that may interrogate their status as 'real men'. Therefore, they are unable to detract the strong patriarchal construction of mindsets where woman is always adored for her passivity. Mary Wollstonecraft describes it as “taught from infancy that beauty is women's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison” (1792, p. 90). The male writers are unable to deconstruct this inbuilt notion where woman is presented as an object of ecstasy “more body than soul, more soul than mind” (1970, p. 63). Susan Gubar (1981) finds that the female-identified male writers identifies woman an easy subject to write on, a blank page where they are open to create a woman of their own choice hence a woman will not be completed until the male author finishes her. He is free to give her beauty, names and her identity. Therefore, a female character produced by male author is completely derived from his male experience of assumptions and prejudices where inbuilt patriarchal disintegration plays an important part to demean woman. Such shallow portrayal of female characters in literature where woman is demeaned physically and psychologically have instigated and will be instigating the feminists to accentuate the truth repudiate the phallo-centric notion of feminine passivity.

### **Feminist Critique**

*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* by Mohsin Hamid depicts a life full of frustrations and desires in metropolis rising Asia. The characters are struggling to attain a better lifestyle in growing the city without any discrimination of virtue and vice. Hamid's deliberate attempt of

presenting nameless characters in the novel signifies unique minimalism by describing them through their different roles; 'You' is the protagonist who is encompassed with different female characters; mother, grandmother, sister, wife and the pretty girl.

Mohsin Hamid audaciously presents a life of a common man who struggles to achieve dignified and honorable status in the society. The protagonist sees his father who earns money in the metropolis and visits his family as he gets the chance. He finds his mother obedient and submissive to his father and a source of his sexual gratification and pleasure. Hamid describes how her body invites her husband miles away. He spends a contended life since his wife protects his family within a prescribed economic budget. She is a devoted caretaker of his children and his home in his absence by satisfying his 'voracious sexual appetite'. She remains busy in domestic sphere under cruel supervision of her mother in law. Hamid portrays the typical relationship of the mother and mother-in-law:

Your mother and grandmother play a waiting game. The older woman waits for the younger woman to age, the younger woman waits for the older woman to die. ...In the meantime your grandmother flaunts her authority when she can, and your mother flaunts her physical strength. (2013, p. 9)

Hamid points out how women are busy in their internal hostility and engage the men folk in their domestic affairs as well who are already occupied with the administrative tasks outside. By indicating characters through their roles, Hamid presents a stereotypical image of a mother, a mother-in-law and a father; equally ensnared between them.

Hamid defines the life of a respectable woman is life within the home. He idealizes the role mother, sister and wife who have confined themselves inside their homes. They are accepted and adored for their obedience and passivity. Marriage and reproduction are the sole purposes of their lifespan instead of their education. As he states: "but your sister

will not be sent there [school] in his stead. Her time for that has passed. Marriage is her future. She has been marked for the entry". (p. 28)

As the protagonist enters the life of fascinations the first girl he meets, remains the last one. She is named as "the pretty girl". The pretty girl is not the character as pretty as the very title suggests:

Her looks would not traditionally have been considered beautiful. No milky complexion, raven tresses, bountiful bosom, or soft, moon-like face for her. Her skin is darker than average, her hair and eyes lighter, making all three features a strikingly similar shade of brown. This bestows upon her a smoky quality, as though she has been drawn with charcoal. She is also lean, tall, and flat-chested, her breasts the size, as your mother notes dismissively, of two cheap little squashed mangoes. (p. 38)

The portrayal of the pretty girl opposes the traditional representation of the protagonist. Hamid does not embellish her beauty as:

The sun shines only to burnish her skin and gild her hair; the wind blows only to whip up the color in her cheeks; the sea strives to bathe her; flowers die gladly so that her skin may luxuriate in their essence. She is the crown of creation, the masterpiece. (1970, p. 63)

Hamid portrays pretty girl not as pretty and beautiful but dark. Hamid introduces her as potentially attractive who has a lot of admirers:

You are not the pretty girl's only admirer. In fact, legions of boys of your age turn to watch her as she walks by, her jaunty strut sticking out in your neighbourhood like a bikini in a seminary... Whatever the reason, the pretty girl is the object of much desire anguish and masturbatory activity. (p. 38)

The portrayal of the pretty girl is reflected as object of satisfaction and desire for the street boys. His introductory remarks upon the darkness of pretty girl portray her as a leading evil seductress who uses men as a key to her success. In order to achieve a status in the society she uses different professional men who can take her a step further. The contradiction between the entitled pretty woman and the reality symbolizes Hamid's disapproval for such a woman who sells herself for the sake of money. Pretty girl is an opportunist who gradually moves to sell herself as she gets closer to her motives:

In exchange, the marketing manager demands physical favors. Initially these were kisses and permissions to fondle her body. Then oral sex was required. This was followed by anal sex, which she believed, much to his surprise and delights, would allow her to preserve her virginity. But as the months passed, she came to doubt this logic, and eventually she permitted vaginal sex as well. (p. 50-51)

She has not restricted this relationship towards the professionals only rather she invites the protagonist on her roof for this sake as well. The protagonist becomes excited for this unexpected date. Hamid reveals the innocence of the protagonist who becomes shocked and surprised when she reveals her real intentions: "after she has dressed, she says with a smile, "I'm leaving." She disappears downstairs. You have not kissed her. You have not even spoken". (p. 53).

It was not the only instance when she uses the protagonist rather whenever they encounter she exploits him for her sexual gratification. She was unable to determine her destiny apart from money and status. Her fate provides her a chance to contemplate on her future when the protagonist proposes her for getting married:

"Are you married?"

"No. Are you?"

She laughs. "No. I'm not sure I'm the type men marry".

"I'd marry you." (p. 86-87).

She escapes this auspicious chance to live a respectable and honorable life instead her haunt for fame defames her. She is unable to find a place in the world of fashion then she shifts to cooking shows and finally she opens a designer kitchen showroom that is also robbed.

Though, the pretty girl becomes a source of the salvation of the protagonist but this salvation is also covered with her atrocious desires. She provides him a place to live when he faces the financial crisis. Hamid portrays her immorality when she does not avoid using him even at the age of infirmity. She is depicted as a vicious and wicked character who exhibits her virginity for the sake of money for which she is punished in shape of cancer. The setting of her burial is represented as a symbol of castigation and it also becomes a trouble for the protagonist who hires professional mourners on her death:

She dies on a windy morning with her eyes open. You arrange to bury her as a graveyard belonging to her community. She might not have had much to do with them, but it is unclear to you where else she ought to be buried. (p. 227)

Hamid presents another female character that is the wife of the protagonist. He marries a young and pretty woman. She is presented as authoritative and commanding. Though, their marriage is arranged but she manages to make it conditional:

She attached two conditions, first that she be allowed to complete her university, a lengthy course in law, and second that she not be tasked with producing any children while studying. She attached these conditions partly because she wanted them fulfilled and partly to test her powers. You acceded, and you are honoring them. (p. 125)

Through these prescribed conditions of getting married Hamid reveals the priorities of the character who suffers its consequences. Hamid portrays the protagonist as courteous and respectful to fulfill her desires. Hamid reveals how her preferences put her into endless efforts to attract

her husband. He provides her a status in the life that she has not enjoyed before. He allows her to complete her studies as she desires. However, she as his loyal wife also wishes to be loved by her husband. Initially, she considers the age difference that does not let him get closer; therefore, she seeks a chance of romantic love from her husband at his forties by reading glossy magazines in order 'to please her man when he seems displeased':

....and so, greatly daring when your anniversary approaches, she instructs her waxing lady to remove all of her public hair, a bracingly painful experience, purchases with the entirety of her month's pocket money...., and waits for you semi-undressed, in the glow of flickering candles. (p. 130)

However, all of her efforts to make her husband emotionally and sexually attracted go in vain in spite of her beauty. Hamid portrays the wife solely responsible whose prescribed conditions make him reluctant to approach her sexual desires, for him, her career is much more important than her married life. Continuous ignorance from her husband leads her to observe veil and dress more modestly. Her priorities result into his ignorance even when she needs his attention after an endless medication process of her childbirth.

The protagonist fails to disintegrate between his wife and the pretty girl like a common man. Though, his wife is beautiful and strives hard to attract him but he chases a girl who calls him whenever she desires. He ignores his wife and is unable to identify a loyal wife who wishes to live with him. He ignores her at very critical time when after the birth of his son she suffers "a severe third-degree perineal tear" that has damaged her anal sphincter. After receiving a horrible medication, she quits chasing her husband and engages in social activities to help other women who suffer domestic violence. The physical relationship between them has come to an end years ago:

But when you began to turn to her again, to try to see her, as if for the first time, as an adult and a mother

and indeed something wondrous, a warrior, striking in her maturing beauty and her indefatigable determination, and you sought to make conversation with her and to stroke her arm and her cheek and her thigh, you discovered your wife uninterested. (p. 148)

However, when the protagonist desires to bridge up the gap it was too late as he come to know that “she has been overheard by her cleaning girl saying that she will cohabit with you only until your child reaches adulthood, a situation now just a couple of years off”. (p. 167)

The journey from the wife to ex-wife depicts the author's biased intentions with the presentation of female character, though she strives hard to attract her husband and realizes his problems of old age but she is discovered as a corrupted elite class woman who has an affair with her guard and also draws salaries out of a nonprofit engagements of her social services.

Hamid gives superior position to the character of wife than the pretty girl that reveals his animosity for her character. Her character is an amalgamation of loyalty and disloyalty but still she is surrounded with a respectable lot of the religiously-minded activists who sustain her dignity and honor:

In their company, she conducts herself with a gravity that exceeds her years, enjoying an influential position despite the fact that many of them are her seniors. Her legal training and relative prosperity give her pertinent advantages, of course, but mostly it is her bearing, her self-sufficient fire and evident fearlessness that others rally to coupled with her disarming warmth, much sought-after and awarded only to a fortunate few. (p. 149)

Hamid presents two female characters who desire to fulfill their ambitions both have some moralities and immoralities but Hamid rescues the one who chooses to remain within the domestic sphere and wishes to be dependent upon man.

Hamid not only locks a woman within domestic fence socially but also projects her inferiority on biological grounds. He finds women are born inferior creatures, 'a wicked womb'. Hamid expresses his abhorrence for woman on the basis of menstruation. He distinguishes a woman as inferior and disgusting because menstruation becomes the reason of disintegration between the two sexes.

"You're a girl."

"No, I'm a woman."

"A girl."

"I bleed every month. I'm a woman."

"You're disgusting."

"May be." She smiles. "But a woman". (p. 25-26)

The inferiority, passivity and compliance expected by the author from her female characters decide their level of castigation and punishment. However, apart from the errors made by the protagonist, female characters become the source of his salvation.

### **Conclusion:**

The existence of woman as independent being has always been questioned in literary world. Her roles are categorized with respect and honour if she remains locked within domestic fence, and dependent and reliant upon her male counterparts. However, moving beyond these confined limits will result in social outcast. The access to the world outside does not provide her any prestigious opportunities for independent survival; therefore, she is obliged to give up or to bargain with the patriarchal intolerance. These settlements of bargaining or abandoning the constructed world give rise to portray women in the binary of good and bad. Her portrayal reflects how female identity is associated with the male. She is dependent upon her male counterparts for her recognition that implies her existence in the peripheries of the society. The portrayal of women in the novel narrates the set patriarchal thinking patterns that cannot accept a woman as dignified and esteemed counterpart. They are always threatening if they are decisive and authoritative and always admired if passive and indecisive. The study seeks to recognize the potential of female characters and facilitate them

equally before their male counterparts by resisting the stereotypical representation within the patriarchal constructed notion.

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