



# The Contagious Impact of Unemployment: A Psychosocial Examen of Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the impact of unemployment on Hamid's novel "Moth Smoke," specifically focusing on how it affects the protagonist's psychological well-being and life. The analysis draws on the Social Impact Theory, which elucidates how others shape an individual's mental perceptions and subsequently influence their social interactions. Unemployment leads to various societal pressures, instigates anxiety, and generates a sense of unease, which detrimentally influences the individual's ability to make sound decisions. Moreover, the connection between low socioeconomic status and deteriorating mental health is well-established, resulting in financial turmoil, diminished self-esteem, and a downward shift in social standing. The study underscores the adverse ramifications of unemployment on Pakistani youth, encompassing a range of issues such as lawlessness, criminal activities, burglaries, homicides, depression, compromised self-esteem, involvement in illicit drug trade, moral decline, stress, and an upsurge in sexual proclivities. This portrayal sheds light on the somber repercussions of unemployment on the younger generation within Pakistani society. Consequently, the main objective of this research is to spotlight the pervasive issue of unemployment globally, as well as the severe aftermath it engenders, including increased lawlessness, transgressions, criminal activities, depression, diminished self-esteem, illicit drug trade, moral decay, stress, and heightened sexual interests.

**Keywords:** Social influence, psychoanalysis, unemployment, crime, exploitation, self-destruction.

## Introduction

Hamid is a British-Pakistani contemporary novelist renowned for his literary fiction. He has been celebrated for his straightforward perspectives

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on arts, politics, literature, and, more recently, Pakistan's internal divisions. In recognition of this, he was named one of Foreign Policy magazine's 100 Leading Global Thinkers in 2013. Among his works of fiction, 'Moth Smoke' stands out as Hamid's (2000) debut novel. This book was shortlisted for the PEN/Hemingway Award and was subsequently adapted into a television mini-series in Pakistan, as well as an operetta in Italy.

Adding to its accolades, 'Moth Smoke' was designated a Notable Book of the Year by The New York Times in 2000, the same year it was published. The novel quickly gained popularity among both Pakistani and Indian readers, solidifying its place as a noteworthy contribution to South Asian literature.

In 'Moth Smoke,' Hamid (2000) strives to portray contemporary Pakistan, highlighting its complex social issues, which are far more nuanced and intricate than the Western world's idealized perception of South Asia. Through the story of a young banker, Daru, who grapples with marijuana addiction and is burdened by economic turmoil, cultural clashes, and religious pressures, the novel delves into the idea that these pressures strip away his sense of self and compel him to conform. This internal conflict eventually leads to the protagonist's tragic downfall. Psychologically, Daru's behaviors and his descent into a criminal world are a consequence of the influences exerted by his surroundings and the societal context in which he exists (Collins, 1981).

As American poet David Antin suggests, an individual's identity is a tapestry woven from their past, present, and future experiences. He eloquently puts it, 'The self is an oral society in which the present is constantly engaged in a dialogue with the past and the future within a single skin.' (Antin) This paper, however, takes a unique approach by exploring the devastating impact of unemployment on an individual's psyche through the lens of Social Impact Theory, as conceptualized by Bibb Latané. (Latane 343) This perspective may offer valuable insights for future researchers seeking to expand upon this framework and address the potential limitations of this study.

## **Research Questions**

The current study formulated the following research questions:

1. How does the protagonist's psychological well-being in Mohsin Hamid's novel "Moth Smoke" evolve in response to the experience of unemployment, and how is this evolution influenced by societal pressures, anxiety, and a sense of unease?

2. What are the specific mechanisms through which unemployment leads to a decline in socioeconomic status in "Moth Smoke," resulting in financial turmoil, diminished self-esteem, and a downward shift in social standing, and how do these factors collectively contribute to the deterioration of the character's mental health?

## Literature Review

Saba Pirzadeh's article, titled 'Postcolonial Development, Socio-Ecological Degradation, and Slow Violence in Pakistani Fiction,' delves into the themes of lawlessness and violence in Hamid's (2000) 'Moth Smoke' and Uzma Aslam Khan's 'Trespassing.' Pirzadeh argues that these Pakistani authors utilize the creative power of fiction to illuminate the presence and consequences of slow violence on individuals' social, physical, and psychological well-being, as well as on the natural environment within their fictional works (Simatei, 2005).

In the article 'Psychoanalysis and Transformation of Heroes in Hamid's Novels: 'Moth Smoke' and 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist',' the protagonists of both novels by Hamid are subjected to a comprehensive analysis. The focus here extends to the profound inner responses of Daru and Changez resulting from various incidents they encounter. Through a detailed textual examination, the author contends that Daru undergoes psychological turmoil due to the socio-economic desolation he experiences.

Authors, Awan and Raza (2016), in their work titled 'The Effects of Marxism on Characters in Hamid's Novel: 'Moth Smoke' and Zulfiqar Ghous's Novel: 'Murder of Aziz Khan',' explore the exploitative impact of Marxism on the characters in 'Moth Smoke' and 'The Murder of The Aziz Khan.' This analysis sheds light on the detrimental socio-political issues and the futile struggles of working-class individuals for survival (Awan & Parveen, 2018).

The article 'Identifying the Effect of Unemployment on Crime' primarily aims to establish an empirical link between unemployment and crime. The study utilizes data from U.S. employees to unveil demographic and economic factors contributing to the rise in property crime rates within the state (Raphael & Winter-Ebmer, 2001).

In the piece 'Friendship and Money in Hamid's Moth Smoke,' the focus is

on the asymmetrical power dynamic between two male best friends who reunite after a prolonged separation, only to find themselves divided by differing social statuses: one in the higher echelons, the other in the lower. Their enduring friendship deteriorates due to class disparities, leading to a 'catastrophic collapse' and eventual estrangement (Kowal, 2017).

'Sex, Drugs, and Deception' asserts that the depicted literature challenges the notion of a redemptive character in 'Moth Smoke.' Instead, the reality portrayed is more relentless and harsher than dreams. Hamid attempts to capture the predicament of underdeveloped countries like Pakistan. In essence, the piece suggests that, in 'Moth Smoke,' reality proves to be even more brutal than any dream. The protagonist becomes a victim of numerous immoral acts and crimes while simply striving for survival. This unrelenting pursuit drives him into unlawful realms, ultimately leaving him isolated and burdened with guilt and shame, imprisoned among 'many shadows.' Differing from the other analyses, my research seeks to explore how one's mind becomes susceptible to evil and immorality under the dominant influence of various external factors, particularly unemployment and economic downturn (Null & Alfred, 2003).

## **Research Methodology**

This research paper employs a qualitative approach, primarily focusing on a psychosocial perspective. The chosen method for analysis is the "one-in-question" technique, which is applied to Hamid's (2000) novel, "Moth Smoke" – the central primary source of this study. The research process involves multiple readings of the text to ensure a deep comprehension, a comprehensive textual analysis, and an examination of secondary sources. These secondary sources encompass pertinent books, academic articles from reputable sources, as well as various peer reviews published in international magazines and newspapers.

The primary goal of this paper is to shed light on the protagonist's distressing journey during a period of unemployment, achieved through in-depth characterization. To achieve this, the paper utilizes the Social Impact Theory, as presented by Bibb Latane in 1981. By employing this theory, the study aims to underscore the profound impact of joblessness, leading to societal issues such as lawlessness, misdemeanors, transgressions, and immorality.

In contrast, the paper also proposes potential solutions to address these challenges. These solutions encompass creating more suitable job

opportunities, establishing a transparent and fair employee selection process, and promoting equitable wealth distribution within society. Through these insights, the paper seeks to captivate readers' attention to the pressing concern of unemployment and its far-reaching negative consequences.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Earlier, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) introduced the idea that society plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's mind. This concept led to the notion of a "collective consciousness," where various societal forces exert their influence. The origins of social psychology can be attributed to Australia and Germany, which fostered its development. Notably, Lewin et al. (1939) are widely recognized as the "proponents of social psychology" due to their groundbreaking research. These social scientists emphasized that an individual's behavior is influenced both by their personality and the social environment they are in. Moreover, he highlighted that social factors often hold more sway than individual personality traits.

Lombroso (1911) further explored the impact of societal factors, confirming that frustration can lead to criminal behavior. Injustices and inequalities within a society can alienate disadvantaged youth who lack social connections, political influence, and access to resources. This can drive them to resort to unethical or criminal activities like drug use and robbery, akin to Daru's response to unemployment. Lombroso (1911), a prominent figure in late 19th-century Italian criminology, introduced the concept of "born criminals," asserting that some individuals are predisposed to criminal behavior due to physiological differences. His primary aim was to disentangle an individual's actions from their social context.

Allport (1924) contributed to the field by highlighting that social behavior arises from interactions between individuals. He defined social psychology as the study of how an individual's behavior influences others and vice versa.

American psychologist Latane (1996), drawing on the work of Sedikides, and Jackson (1990), formulated the Social Impact Theory, which examines how individuals and events impact each other. This theory emphasizes that social influence brings about changes in attitudes, behaviors, and actions. The theory's main focus is "Social Influence," intersecting closely with social thinking and behavior. It asserts that personal traits and social

situations synergistically shape behavior. Similar to physical forces acting on objects, social forces stemming from the presence of others influence individuals in their surroundings. The theory predicts that conformity increases with the strength of the source, immediacy of the event, and the number of influential sources within a group (Haney et al., 1973).

This analogy is akin to lighting up a dark room with multiple light bulbs: the closer and more numerous the bulbs, the brighter the room. In a similar vein, unwelcome events, such as unemployment, can exponentially impact an individual's life, leading to mental decline and psychological scars. This conceptual framework elucidates how a person's beliefs and judgments influence their choices.

Specifically examining Darashikoh Shezad's case, we observe his choices and decisions devolving into immorality and crime due to the influence of unemployment. This study comprises two sections: the first delves into the adverse effects of job loss and prolonged unemployment on an individual's physical and mental well-being. The second section scrutinizes how these somatic and psychological challenges drive Daru, the central figure, toward a world of crime, immorality, and eventual self-destruction.

Epidemiological studies establish a significant link between unemployment and psychological stress, particularly among individuals experiencing prolonged joblessness. The state of unemployment alone can induce considerable stress, resulting in various physiological changes. An American study notes an increase in the stress hormone cortisol within the first year of unemployment. With prolonged joblessness, cortisol levels continue to rise.

The social causation principle posits that lower socioeconomic status can impair brain function. Perry (1996), in *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, explains that individuals from lower social classes endure higher psychological stress and fewer societal rewards, which can manifest as psychological disorders (Perry, 1996). Lack of income amplifies stress, potentially leading to various stressors like criminal behavior. Economic disparities heighten the risk of mental health issues, forming a linear correlation between psychological distress and social class.

## **Data Analysis**

Hamid's pen is quite fluent in social fiction, portraying the societal climax in Britian-Pakistani context. *Moth Smoke* is one of those novels that reveal

peculiarly Lahore of the 1990s through the story of a marijuana addict criminal ex-banker. Luckily from early childhood, the protagonist, Daru, has been bestowed by an intelligent brain that helps him get good grades at school level. Despite being a part of a struggling lower-middle-class family, he has been fortunate enough to study in a high-cost and renowned institution in the city with his wealthy friend Aurangzeb (Ozi). More than that, he remains quite famous among his rich school fellows. But this granted luxury does not last for long. Soon, his best friend Ozi and a few other friends go abroad for higher studies, and he is left in Pakistan to get an education from some ordinary government institution.

Regardless of being sharp in studies, he, unfortunately, could not get a foreign degree in Business Administration because of low socioeconomic status and limited resources. This disparity of opportunity buds a seed of an inferiority complex in Daru from an early age. His insecurity gets mounted on the arrival of his childhood friend and rival, Ozi, who is not only blessed with desired foreign education but a beautiful wife and a son this time. But it is well-known that misfortunes never come singly. To add to his complex, he got fired from his workplace simply because of the lame accusation of misbehavior by a feudal landlord. This inferiority complex causes corruption, social, religious, moral, and sexual corruption in the character of less fortunate Daru.

As money speaks louder than anything else in societies like Pakistan, a moneyless person is considered inequitable to demand and get his basic rights. Under a group method research project on long-term unemployed Australians, an employee under Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) shared his experience of being demoralized and disrespected by CES staff, but no official took notice of ill-treatment. He says, "There are many horrible people in there, they bully you, and you can't afford to say anything to them." Without any warning or notice, Daru is ejected from his workplace. As Bank Manager is senior to him in the social hierarchy, he has the rightful authority to exclude him from work to please a wealthy and resourceful 'rural landlord with half a million U.S. in his account (and) a seat in Provincial Assembly' (Hamid, 2000, P. 20).

Daru undergoes a critical scheme of unpleasant events and consequently alchemizes into a pitiable non-heroic man. Individual accounts of the devastating micro-level impact that unemployment left on day to day living of Daru cannot be ignored. In the case of this dismissed banker, the personal and social costs of joblessness include intense economic

hardship, debt, housing stress, boredom, mental breakdown, stigma, elevated social isolation, ill health, and crime. The human body works like a machine; it stays useful until and unless it remains working. While motionlessly sitting idle contaminates the human capacity to think and perform productively, eventually making him a living dead.

When Daru is out of the blue gets fired from the bank, he cannot make any sense of what has been happening to him from the beginning of the day as he woke up late, ran short of petrol in the car and reached late in the office. He felt very embarrassed and did not have the power to confront anyone in the bank or answer Manucci, his servant in home. In a monologue, he says, "...I'm going to my room, shutting the door, locking it, pulling the curtains, taking off my clothes, crawling under the sheets, and curling up in the dark dark dark" (Hamid, 2000, P.25). Here, the three times iteration of the word 'dark' indicates his desire for social isolation. As in darkness, there is less visual stimulus, which allows concentrating better plus dim light activates circadian rhythms in the brain, disruption of which could instantly cause many other immediate psychological and behavioral changes in him. It is universally accepted that unemployment is not an independent entity. A bulk of scholarly research depicts that unemployed people are more likely to through lower level of psychological well-being in comparison to the employed peers. Especially, unexpected and involuntary unemployment takes more tolls on mental health with other psychological disorders like anxiety, depression and harmful behaviors like violence and aggression. This interdependency again highlights a question of causality as great studies suggest that those unluckily at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder have more risk of being dismissed from a job and have less chance of finding a reasonable new job than those with higher social status.

To add to his frustration, Daru lacks everything, which his wealthy friend Ozi has; wealth, a beautiful wife, lush lifestyle, admirable social status, friends, foreign education, a well-paid job, a resourceful father and a Pajero. Above all, now he lacks the hope to get this grandeur someday due to lost source of income. So, his inferiority complex becomes improbable after job loss, he has no money to pay bills, afford air-conditioner, electricity, servant, and food. He starts running short of petrol in his old model Suzuki. He has been socially degraded to the status of his employee, Manucci as he says, "...No more tissues. No more meat. Soon no more toilet paper, no more shampoo, no more deodorant. It'll be rock salt, soap and a lota for me, like it is for Manucci." (Hamid, 2000, p. 138) It is expressed rightly in this quotation that, 'You don't live when you are unemployed—you exist' (Jackson & Crooks, 1993). Slowly, because of



hopelessness, the happiness start disappearing from his life and the picture of life becomes colorless and dull in the end.

In summer, the extensive use of air conditioning among the elite and the scorching heat bore by the poor gives a sense of acute social dissimilarity that produces frustration in the deprived ones as the rich masterfully control their environment and leave hot toxic air behind for the poor to inhale. Reference to this famous air conditioning chapter is necessary as 'it was more important to Darashikoh Shezad, for it took his mother from him and propelled him inexorably toward a life of crime.' (Hamid, 2000, p.131) With unequal energy consumption, social discrimination, and ecological damage, Daru's partisanship causes disappointment and resentment.

A poverty-stricken man, in search of money approaches his M.A pass friend 'remorselessly large' Murad Badshah, presently a rickshaw driver. Ironically, even after successfully passing the degree in English Literature, he is compelled to sweat in rickshaw stands and wander on roads daily to earn his living in small chunks of currency instead of a well-paid job. The reason behind his joblessness is similar to that he is a member of the poor family like Daru, who cannot pay the heavy bribe to get appointed for the job. "Indeed, nothing made Murad Badshah happier than the distress of the rich," (Hamid, 2000, p.128) So, he reacts intensely by indulging in many crimes; drug dealing, robbery and murder when he feels that he has not attained his basic rights yet. He used to get satisfaction by looting and harming the wealthy people. It is his way of dealing with poverty. Gradually, Daru also gives himself up to the abhorrent activity of drug dealing. He cannot discriminate between the binaries of good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral, and, legal and illegal. He impulsively loses his original identity. As Hamid (2000) gives an insight to the character, "He, a man who hated guns, came to accept that he would have to use one." (p.134) He whose hands trembled on being insulted at workplace, he who was frightened enough to establish eye contact with his colleagues, he who was reluctant to justify them that it was not his mistake, to our surprise changes before our eyes, he begins to follow the dirty footsteps of Murad Badshah merely for the timid ray of hope, that he will earn some money. His hash clients have been Raider, the younger banking and business community', and Shuja. Deep down he still wants to stand on his feet, to have a decent job and income free from bribery. But now he has understood and believed that, "... you get no respect unless you have cash." (Hamid, 2000, p. 138)

This shows that the interconnectivity of human actions with his immediate

community resembles the fabric arts where each string of a thread is tightly stitched to make a useful, well-knitted piece of cloth and one inappropriate string can diminish the entire fineness of it (Khan et al., 2022). Similarly, human identity is total sum of his actions, choices and the exerting coercive forces of society. In this delicate situation too, one single mishap or mistake sadly becomes the cause of other countless trials that can infect the calmness and classiness of life (Williams et al., 1995).

His blind inclination towards the world of crime after being unemployed sends him to jail as he murders a kid, robs a boutique with his partner Murad Badshah, keeps illegal guns, and involves in an extra-marital affair with Ozi's wife, Mumtaz. His tragedy revolves around the orbit of 'unemployment and aimlessness'. The words of wisdom by Okonkwo's so called unsuccessful and lazy father, Unoka are noteworthy in this regard. He said, "It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails 'alone'." (Achebe, 1958) as in the beginning, we find twenty-nine-year-old "ruggedly handsome" Daru sitting in lock-up, lonely waiting for the proclamation of his punishment.

## **Conclusion**

This research asserts that an individual's personality is shaped by societal influences. The central character, Darashikoh Shezad, a banker, experiences a sequence of events where he loses his job, develops feelings for his best friend's wife, and becomes entangled in a life of criminal activities including drug dealing, murder, and robbery. As his resentment towards society grows, he gradually loses command over his life. Unknowingly, his mind absorbs the impact of his surroundings.

Evidently, he faces a multitude of hardships akin to a series of pebbles obstructing his path – unemployment, corruption, poverty, lawlessness, and injustice. These adversities collectively leave him in a state of helplessness, akin to being wounded and bleeding, eventually leading him into the confines of prison. The narrative introduces him to us while he is incarcerated, in the opening chapter.

The title of the novel itself holds symbolism; 'Moth' refers to a fragile insect drawn to artificial light sources such as candles. It incessantly orbits the light, risking its life until it's consumed by the ambiguous emptiness of smoke when burnt. Daru, in his relentless pursuit of a higher social status and the luxuries exemplified by Ozi, inadvertently destroys his own life. Strangely, he appears unwilling to harm himself despite all indications to the contrary.

Through multiple perspectives and detailed descriptive passages, the author vividly delineates the character of a despondent, unemployed young man from the middle class. The narrative predominantly revolves around themes of passion, rivalry, adultery, desperation, materialism, corruption, and social class disparities – encapsulating the emotions and conflicts simmering within the youth of Pakistan. Darashikoh's journey is a product of successive hardships and deprivations. In the words of Albert Einstein, "Weakness of attitude becomes weakness of character." It's safe to say that his fragile and feeble response to joblessness and other societal pressures underpins his self-destructive spiral and tragic downfall. Had he displayed more resilience during this testing period, the outcome might have been decidedly different.

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