

# Hegemony and Alienation in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Moth Smoke*

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**Abstract-** This study is going to explore the novel *Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid through the lens of hegemony, the concept given by the Italian politician and Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. In the novel *Moth Smoke*, the protagonist Dara Shikhukh loses his job as a banker because of some elite person and is further dissuaded by the life's harsh realities. The whole novel is about his downfall and how the upper class of the society enjoy the comforts of life while the lower class people are subjugated by the rich class. This study will analyze how the hegemony plays its role in letting the oppressed to accept their fate as it is. They become disillusioned and alienated by the hegemonic power and they cannot do anything about it. They lose the battle of the life and accept whatever befalls them without any questioning.

**Keywords-** Hegemony, Alienation, Domination, *Moth Smoke*, power, Rich Class, Subjugation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The word hegemony was first used by Xenophon and Ephorus, the Greek historians in the latest sense, though it was there before Greek civilization. At that time hegemony meant rule, authority and political dominance of a leader. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century many hegemonic powers have tried to give their own interpretation of the word hegemony. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Antonio Gramsci extended this concept of hegemony in his book *Notes on the Southern Question* in 1926. He says:

The term "hegemony" in Gramsci itself has two faces. On the One hand it is contrasted with "domination" (and as such bound up with the opposition State/Civil Society) and on the other hand "hegemonic" is sometimes used as an opposite of "corporate" or "economic-corporate" to designate an historical phase in which a given group moves beyond a position of corporate existence and defense of its economic position and aspires to a position of leadership in the political and social arena." ( Gramsci, Preface)

By the changing lifestyles and norms for the oppressed class will only let the grip of the hegemon group on them more strong. The subordinate group is shown the newer possibilities and the new opportunities, they let the hegemon to rule on them with their consent and by this sense it seems progressive to them.

The working class population have themselves formed an alliance that surrendered to the hegemonic power of the ruling bourgeois, thus they have succeeded in gaining the consent of the broad peasant mass. "The proletariat can become the leading (dirigenle) and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of alliance which allows it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois state" ( Mouffe 178).

Hegemony is the control or dominance of one country, organization, over other country or organization. In cultural dominance, social class is included in it. It represents the domination of lower class or subordinate class by the ruling class in order to represent their world view that this is the reality that the lower class is always to be subjected and they take it as their fate and reality and live life like that. Hegemony is the tact of how to maintain power in the society. Hegemonic group forms its value systems for their own benefits and make is commonsense to others. Others also walk on the path paved by the hegemonic group as they cannot resist it as it is normalized and is a world

view. The hegemonic group whether that is the bourgeoisie, the elite class or any other institution, it does not establish power through coercion or violence but through ideology that is the norms which are made for all whether that is beneficial for the subjected class or not. One of the writers discusses the concept of Gramsci as:

It can be argued that Gramsci's theory suggests that subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, nor because they are ideologically indoctrined, but because they have reason of their own. (166)

The subordinates or the poor class are subjugated because of the economic cause. They are not capable to reach to the level of the ruling class economically. So they are subjugated and oppressed. They themselves feel them to be superior and let them do what they want. The French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser in his essay, *Contradiction and Overdetermination* (1962), discusses hegemony and ideology. Ideology denotes the imaginary relationship between individuals and the real things. Ideology is not the reality, it is the façade which hides the reality or truth from the individuals which is established by the dominant class and which is to be followed by subordinate class. They make it the reality for them. Then in his book, "Ideology and State Apparatus", Louis Althusser said about hegemony,

The class (or class alliances) in power cannot lay down the laws in the ISA'S as easily as it can in the state apparatus, not only because the former ruling class are able to retain strong positions there for a long time, but also because the resistance of the exploited class is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by the utilizations of their contradictions, or by conquering combat position in struggle. (165)

The subordinate group cannot resist or revolt against the hegemon as it is morally subjugated by it. Their minds are subjugated "it is the hegemonic control of the dominant class over the institution of civil society (education, work, family, leisure etc.) within the 'outer defenses' of the repressive state apparatus that makes the revolutionary transformation so difficult..." (Fairclough 93). The ruling class becomes the empathizer for the lower class or the civil society but in reality it is their enemy and they are unaware about it.

In the novel *Moth Smoke*, the protagonist Darashikoh loses his job as a banker because of some elite person Malik Jiwan who is "a rural landlord with a million U.S. in his account, a seat in the Provincial Assembly..." (Hamid 20). He complains about him to his Manager for not doing his work on time. So, he is fired from his job. This is the reality what happens to the working class in the society. Daru is not even given a chance to explain his point of view. So he is expelled from the only source of his income. He has no other source of money to rely on. After this, he becomes addicted to drugs, has illicit relationship with his friend's wife, and indulges in the wrong doings.

Daru's Friend Ozi (Aurenzeb) belongs to a rich class. He is married to his wife Mumtaz. Daru and Ozi have grown up together, studied together but because of daru's father's early death he cannot make it to the U.S for the further studies although he was a bright student of his class. "The colleges are overrun with fundos who have no interest in getting an education, so you have to go abroad. And that's ten lakhs a year, mind you." (Hamid 231) Daru had no background support for his expenditure. It was only the cup of tea of the elite class people to benefit themselves from the western education. Here, the West is also portrayed as the hegemonic influence on the Pakistani people. The people who can afford the Western education leave for the West to get best education. The poor people are left behind like Daru as he cannot go to the West for his further studies as he has many responsibilities to take care of. Ozi says, "People are pulling their pieces out of the pie, and you'd better take you piece now, while there's still some left. That's what I'm doing. And if anyone isn't doing it, it's because they're locked out of the kitchen." (Hamid 231) It shows that ozi belongs to the rich class so he has all the comforts of life while Daru has to struggle to fulfill his basic needs of his life. There is a long description given by Professor Julius Superb on the two distinctive classes of the society. He says,

'The first group, large and sweaty. Contains those referred to as the masses. The second group is much smaller, but its members exercise vastly greater control over their immediate environment and are collectively termed as elite. The distinction between members of these two groups is made on the basis of control of an important resource: air-conditioning... (Hamid 126).

Daru is now jobless and spends his time at home doing nothing. He has no money to pay to his servant so he lets him go. He has nothing to do and indulges in drugs, takes drugs and sells them to others. He becomes

friends with Murad Badshah who sells him drugs. His last downfall comes when Ozi puts the charge of a murder on his head. He is devastated and cannot get himself out of this trap and accepts his fate like that. He cannot defend himself as he is already out of money, has no desire to live his life, he thinks it's better to accept the imprisonment than live a life which not worth living. He is disillusioned and alienated by what befell on him.

According to Enclopedia Britannica, alienation, in social sciences, is the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work or its products, or self. Dara becomes totally estranged and alienated with his self and his life. He knows the lawyers who fight his against are already bribed by Ozi so there is no way he will win this case. He accepts his charges and doesn't want to fight for the justice. Court here acts as the hegemonic institution to put their power on the subjugated like the rich class. The upper class put their forces on the subordinates without taking care what befalls on them. They become psychologically disillusioned and live a life in alienation.

To conclude, Dara Shikokh spends a life a criminal, a drug addict, and a prisoner, while he doesn't resist what comes his way and becomes alienated with his life. Although, he tries a lot to take his life on a right track but after many failures he doesn't even try as he knows the society is full with corruption, bribery and crimes as there is no way out. So accepts his life as it goes.

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