

A Kinder Reader

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When one thinks of stories that improve us as human beings, Aesop's Fables comes to mind, not the dark, dank, heroin-laced world of Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*. But reading is like fashion, and one man's cherished plaid pants are another man's horror. Not all fiction can directly dole out moral advice, such as Jane Austen's warnings about the dangers of hasty judgment in *Pride and Prejudice*, but almost all fiction can proffer tales that at the very least expand our range of vision. *Moth Smoke* brings us, its intended American audience, into the foreign world of modern-day Pakistan. The protagonist, Daru, is recently unemployed, in love with his best friend's wife, and cultivating a small heroin addiction. Hamid puts the readers front and center of this foreign world by making them the judges of Daru. To step out of your surroundings, even if only for 245 pages, changes you, makes you unable to step back into the exact mold of a former self you left behind. Your borders have shifted, been expanded, even if only by a fraction. Terry Eagleton brings these ideas to light in his book *Literary Theory*, when he extrapolates on what it means to become a "better" person—a transformation in which, liberal humanists would argue, literature plays a part.¹ At first glance *Moth Smoke* appears to be a novel left out of the running for this transformative seal of approval. How can a reader be morally transformed by a story that teaches not how to "love thy neighbor" but rather the finer details of how to roll a joint while driving? But after only a few pages, *Moth Smoke* becomes a crash course in moral complexity, throwing readers head-first into uncomfortable situations and then forcing them to make a statement and

draw a conclusion. Hamid chooses to transform his readers into a more empathetic, more understanding audience by forcing them to be both the best friend and the judge of a man. *Moth Smoke* is an excellent example of the type of transformative literature Eagleton's liberal humanists campaign for—this novel attempts to widen the circle of empathy of the reader.

Hamid forces his readers to play an active role in the book, a role they may even be hesitant to play, by making them the judges of Daru's fate. From an early age we are told to "judge not, lest ye be judged," yet in *Moth Smoke* we must come to a conclusion about Daru's guilt. Hamid does this to force the reader to think; instead of just observing this foreign world of Pakistan, the reader participates in the judgment of Daru. "I don't know" is an easy answer, a socially palatable one we often hide behind, but it is one that Hamid will not allow. In his attempt to widen the readers' range of vision, Hamid must force them to process the information they have received and to form conclusions, right or wrong. Not only does Hamid attempt to raise the level of empathy of his readers, but he also tests it. By forcing the reader to play the role of courtroom judge, he is putting their newfound areas of vision to the test. A judge must make very black and white decisions: guilty or not guilty. But empathy is all about understanding the gray areas—being able to sympathize with the situations of others and understand why they would act in such a manner. *Moth Smoke* presents itself in such a manner that it truly is difficult to tell right from wrong, good from bad. Daru is at a point in his life where he has resorted to selling drugs as a form of income. He sinks so low as to sell hash to a high school student, even though he knows it is wrong and struggles with the moral dilemma of his actions before going through with it. Unfortunately, Daru gets more than he had coming

when the henchmen of the boy's dad beat Daru nearly to death. "When my eyes open, Shuja's father is standing over me...he's pointing a shotgun at my head, and I can only whimper, blood and foam spraying from my lips. Then he kicks me in the face" (182).² A detailed, grotesque account of the beating attempts to influence the reader and to prey upon any hesitation. The moral dilemma is there—even Daru knows it is there—but the reader is hesitant to pass judgment, as both sides are culpable. The position of the reader suggests that *Moth Smoke* is trying to raise the reader's awareness of moral complexity—of the delicate issue of trying to be close enough, intimate enough with Daru to understand his life, but then also being reserved enough to pull back and judge him. The emotional reservation that the reader must have is akin to a stance of moral nonparticipation, which is a rather demanding request for Hamid's puritanically rooted American audience.

Many a liberal humanist would, most likely, consider Hamid's novel to be one that improves the quality of the human beings we can be. Eagleton states that liberal humanists "wish to discuss literature in ways which will deepen, enrich and extend our lives."³ Although this is a rather bold statement to make, there may be truth to it. After all, who can argue against education and its goal to make you a "better" person? True, we may not need to read *Moth Smoke* in order to learn how not to fall into a life of drugs and crime, but we are no worse off or more narrow minded for having read this novel. Eagleton puts it best when he says, "we may not use *Moby Dick* to learn how to hunt whales, but we 'get something out of it' even so."⁴ Many readers cannot identify with Daru's slot in life right now, but almost all human beings can understand the story of a man who has hit rock bottom. Hamid makes sure not to give us the easy way out—there

are many wrong turns and an unhappy ending for Daru. *Moth Smoke* closes with Daru in jail, for a crime he did not commit. There is no question of Daru's guilt—the man is guilty of many things: selling heroin, armed robbery, and possibly the death of child. But the crime for which he is incarcerated is not his but rather the senseless killing of a child committed by Ozi, Daru's best friend. *Moth Smoke* has neatly tied together the legal situation with the moral one; both Daru and Ozi are guilty, in an overall sense, but Ozi will go free because of his wealth and power and Daru will pass the rest of his days in a cell. Legal sentencing and moral condemnation can be conveniently packaged together; the judgments of Daru as a criminal and as a human being are both bestowed with the gavel. Some will argue that Daru belongs in jail anyway—his record is hardly squeaky clean—but still, to lock up a man for a crime he did not commit makes one morally squeamish. Hamid never lets us know for sure which path is right and which is wrong; instead he abandons us, alone in the vast, open terrain of human judgment that he has placed us in. This increased empathy is exactly what liberal humanists would argue makes a “better” person. As Eagleton says, “what it means to be a ‘better person’, then, must be concrete and practical...concerned with people's political situation as a whole.”⁵ A transformative agenda is most definitely present in *Moth Smoke* as it places the readers in a position in which they can't help but be concerned with Daru, with his “situation as a whole.”

Daru is the protagonist of this book, but the reader sits right beside him like your driver's ed. instructor, with his foot on the brake the whole time. Hamid brings the readers into this book and forces them to play a part. Hamid even stops the book at points to address the readers directly and demand that they play judge. The readers are

intimate friends of the characters, as Mumtaz (Ozi's wife but Daru's lover) and Ozi confide to us in hushed voices and tell dark, dirty secrets about each other and even themselves. It is so easy to judge strangers and so hard to judge your friends. Why? Because you understand them better, you sympathize with their actions, identify with their dilemmas. As if reaching some sort of conclusion based on Daru's actions alone wasn't difficult enough, the reader also must sort through the three sides to the story (Ozi's, Mumtaz's, and Daru's) and then form a conclusion. How can the readers ever make up their minds when they truly see every side of the story? To be a "better person" is by no means easy. By thrusting the readers into every gray crevice and cranny of Daru's life, *Moth Smoke* makes judgment of the man that much harder, even though he is a heroin addict and adulterer. A work of transformative literature is one that does not lead the reader down only one path; all paths are presented, the good and the bad ones. The character Professor Julius Superb gives us the perfect description of such a complex issue when he describes the murder trial in which Daru is the accused. "The case is a box. In this situation, the accused is bright, well educated, and charismatic. An orphan, extremely sympathetic. So the box is wide. The crime is violent and despicable: the needless killing of a boy. So the box is long. And the defense invokes a grand conspiracy, corruption, which is particularly resonant these days. So the box is tall" (38). Professor Superb's dimensions of the box serve as a tangible example of the judgment the reader must make. In each direction, on every axis of the box is a different, but equally valid, moral decision to be made. Transformative literature such as *Moth Smoke* forces its readers to expand their empathy in order to make such decisions with clarity and conviction.

Notes

1. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
2. All references in the text are to Mohsin Hamid, *Moth Smoke* (New York: Picador USA, 2000).
3. Eagleton, 210.
4. Eagleton, 208.
5. Eagleton, 208.

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