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Money Talks in Pakistan

By Jhumpa Lahiri

MOTH SMOKE

By Mohsin Hamid.

247 pp. New York:

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $23.

Mohsin Hamid's first novel turns on a brutal hit-and-run accident involving a complex socioeconomic triangle: the perpetrator of the crime, heir to a corrupt family fortune, drives a pricey Pajero S.U.V.; the sole witness is an unemployed banker in a modest Suzuki; and the victim is a poor boy on a bicycle. When the Pajero takes off, it's the Suzuki's owner who drives the dying boy to the hospital, bloodying his back seat in the process, and eventually getting framed for the crime. The chain of events, in which the reckless rich make messes that others have to clean up, brings to mind "The Great Gatsby" (specifically, the hit-and-run for which Gatsby unfairly pays with his life), as do several other aspects of this brisk, absorbing novel.

Like Fitzgerald, Hamid writes about the slippery ties between the extremely wealthy and those who hover, and generally stumble, in money's glare. Hamid also sets the action over a single, degenerate summer, when passions run high and moral lassitude prevails. And like Fitzgerald, Hamid probes the vulgarity and violence that lurk beneath a surface of affluence and ease. Hamid's setting is modern-day Lahore, a fishbowl of a city whose Beautiful People drink bootleg Johnnie Walker, pop Ecstasy and boogie down to "Stayin' Alive" as the rivalry between Pakistan and India goes nuclear. Our principal guide to this sybaritic milieu is Daru Shezad, a middle-class Tantalus, pushing 30, who grasps at a lifestyle he can never fully possess. Courtesy of his best friend Ozi's father, Daru has studied at a posh, prestigious high school. But while Daru does better on entrance exams, it's Ozi who jets off to obtain that most coveted of commodities in the developing world: a foreign degree.

Somewhere along the way, Daru's disappointment sours into resentment. When the novel begins, Ozi has moved back to Lahore, straining the already testy friendship between him and Daru. Driving to their reunion, Daru chafes at the size of his friend's house and the fancy cars in the driveway. Once inside, he flirts with Ozi's sexy wife, Mumtaz. Though Daru privately calls Ozi a "lucky bastard" who lives off dirty money, he's not one to turn down his expensive alcohol. "Black Label is fine by me," he tells us, "provided someone else is paying."

Only it's not fine. For Daru's fatal flaw, in this contemporary revenge tragedy of sorts, is that while he's contemptuous of the idle rich, he feels nevertheless entitled to join their ranks. Irritated by a client at the bank who has deposited $30,000, Daru takes pleasure in saying the man's check hasn't cleared. "I'm enjoying his discomfort," he admits. This attitude gets him fired, and soon Daru is too broke to pay his electric bill. So as the cool crowd continues to party in air-conditioned mansions, Daru sits at home and sweats. He spends whatever money he has on hash and eventually heroin, which he scores from a dealer named Murad Badshah, and proceeds to sink into a miasma of anger and alienation. When he's really bored, he kills moths with his badminton racquet. Then the tables turn, sort of. He starts selling hash to the party crowd, and he revels in the fact that, for once, the rich depend on him. In addition, Mumtaz, whose marriage to Ozi is actually full of chinks, begins showing up at odd hours at Daru's door. With Ozi frequently away on business, it's not hard to guess what ends up happening. But the illicit adventures turn rank, making Daru feel more disenfranchised than ever. The party crowd dismisses him as a sleazy drug dealer, and while Daru is falling in love, Mumtaz won't leave her husband and child.

"Moth Smoke" is written in a lean, hip present tense. Amid Hamid's lapidary prose are robust images that amplify the festering and the constriction Daru feels. A dead dog on his driveway has "gorged ticks" that "cover his ears like bunches of grapes" and "tendons like tight ropes wrapped around his bones." Every other chapter pulls away from Daru and from the linear sequence of the novel, granting Murad Badshah, Mumtaz and Ozi extended soliloquies that both lighten and complicate the scope of Daru's increasingly claustrophobic vision. Added to the mix are a few chapters set in the courtroom where Daru ends up on trial for murder, an interview with one of Daru's college professors and an extended rant about air conditioners. The playful array of voices and tones makes for an inventive ride, but the constant shifting of gears can be distracting, especially since some of the alternate chapters seem either sketchy or superfluous compared with Daru's dark, solidly realized point of view.

Like most of the people surrounding him, Daru is a largely dislikable character. Despite his indictment of the jet set, he is himself a snob who condescends to the poor. When the going gets rough he beats his servant and withholds his pay. He turns his back on his well-meaning middle-class family, though not before asking them for a loan. Desperate to be what he's not, he's hooked on drugs that relieve him only temporarily from the burden of being who he is. But behind the toxic haze emerges the emotional architecture of this trenchant novel: a lost friendship, a mother's death, a broken marriage, a doomed love affair. Unlike the driver of the Pajero, Hamid steers us from start to finish with assurance and care.

Drawing (Christoph Abbrederis)