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TRANSGRESSIVE DESIRE, EVERYDAY LIFE, AND THE PRODUCTION OF 'MODERNITY' IN PAKISTANI ANGLOPHONE FICTION

Mosarrap Hossain Khan

On 27 May 2014, a twenty-something Pakistani woman, Farzana, was killed outside the Lahore High Court by members of her own family, who included her father, brother, a cousin, and possibly a female relative, for falling in love with an elderly married man, Muhammad Iqbal, and marrying him. Erum Haider reported that she was killed because 'Many conservative families consider it shameful for a woman to fall in love and choose her own husband' (2014: n.p.). Haider very perceptively points out that love is something that women cannot experience in conservative societies. It is something done to them. The agency of loving is ascribed to men because women are merely 'loved'. This narrative framing of the incident renders the voice of the woman silent, as she is killed while men live to tell the tale. I start with this incident of 'honour killing'¹ because this essay will explore, through a reading of Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000) and Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), the question of 'deviant' sexual desire in everyday life and the production of what I term a 'worldly subjectivity'.

The events of 9/11 have enabled the emergence of new texts and connections that may be termed 'Muslim writing' (Chambers 2011: 125). This corpus – 'Muslim writing' – represents, in general, 'the culture and civilization of Islam from within' (Malak 2005: 2), as opposed to earlier writings, especially in the context of Pakistani anglophone fiction, which focused, according to Cara Cilano, on issues of migration and diaspora (2009). In contemporary Pakistani writing, there is a corpus of novels in which romantic/illicit love takes centre stage: Hamid's *Moth Smoke*, Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Moni Mohsin's *The End of Innocence* (2006), Musharraf Ali Farooqi's *The Story of a Widow* (2008), etc. Through a reading of *Moth Smoke* and *Maps for Lost Lovers*, this chapter will argue that individual subjects seek to defamiliarise their ordinary life, suffused with extreme religiosity, by engaging in romantic/illicit love, which becomes a site for the production of an incipient 'modern' Muslim subjectivity. According to Henri Lefebvre (2008), 'defamiliarization' denotes utopian moments of transformation, which surmount the dreary routine of everyday life. Here I argue that transgressive desire becomes

utopian, transformative in the way it de-alienates the lives of individual characters in Hamid's and Aslam's novels.

Since these novels deal with the supposedly controversial themes of Muslim sexuality and violence, their popularity is thought to be a consequence of a stereotypical representation of Pakistani society. While some critics have attributed the creative vigour of Pakistani anglophone fiction after 9/11 to political turbulence at home,² some others (*Hindustan Times* 2010; Rehman 2014) have argued that these novels are popular in the West and in India – a major publishing site for much of this fiction – because of their handling of sensational themes of oppression, violence, terrorism, and Islamisation, all of which generate interest in Pakistani fiction by reducing a complex country to a simplistic duality. Cilano, however, offers a different perspective on the inward turn in contemporary Pakistani anglophone fiction (2009). While commenting on the marketability of fiction from Pakistan, she highlights the difficulty of selling fiction produced by indigenous Pakistani publishers (e.g. Alhamra) in the West, because this fiction does not fit the frame of expectation of international publishers, distributors, and readers.

Tension between transgressive desire and social order

Set in Lahore against the backdrop of the nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in 1998, Hamid's *Moth Smoke* sets up a tension between individual choice and social order through a depiction of the transgressive sexual desire of Darashikoh Shezad, or Daru, and Mumtaz. Hamid metafictionally comments on his own intention to write about the surface that lies beneath what realism can achieve (i.e. his writing is not about social ills that can be straightened out but about the unseemly side of Lahore). Hamid evokes the figure of Saadat Hasan Manto,³ who also wrote about elements that many of his contemporaries in the Progressive Writers' Movement castigated. Hamid's novel employs modernist techniques of multiple narrative voices, deliberate rupturing of causal time, and the protagonists' alienation from both tradition and consumer capitalism. The novel is structured around three layers of time: historical time, which frames the novel by taking it back to the Mughal past and the brutal battle of succession between Shahjahan's two sons, Darashikoh and Aurangzeb, the latter of whom emerges victorious; film time, which frames most of the court scenes, as if Darashikoh's trial and judgement are performances and not real; and chronometric time, which undergirds Darashikoh's mundane life in the novel. While Hamid inverts the historical narrative of Shah Jahan and the Mughal Empire, the mode of representation is ironic and yet resonant of a deep similarity between the two historical moments. In an interview with the *Guardian*, Hamid claims that he considers himself to be part of the 'post-post-colonial generation' in Pakistan that has no direct knowledge of colonial rule (Khalili 2013: n.p.). Kamila Shamsie makes a similar point in an interview with Cilano (2007). The use of Mughal allegory is meant to bypass the colonial experience, which is a staple in much contemporary anglophone fiction from the subcontinent. Along with time, *Moth Smoke* experiments, in modernist vein, with multiple narrative voices which, as Paul Jay writes, 'call into question the truthfulness of all the characters' (2005: 53). The narrative of ordinary life is defamiliarised by these rupturing techniques, demonstrating the difficulty of narrating the contingency and fluidity of everyday life without deflecting it through other narrative voices and times.

Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* is set in the fictional town of Dasht-e-Tanhaai ('Desert of Loneliness') in the north of England, populated by an impoverished immigrant Pakistani population from the Indian subcontinent.⁴ Following the seasonal patterns in England, the novel revolves through winter, spring, summer, and autumn, the absence of monsoon, a prominent season in Pakistan, denoting loss because of exile and banishment. This sense of loss is

accentuated by the murder of two lovers, Jugnu and Chanda, who are allegedly killed for defying traditional religious norms and living together. As the immigrant Muslim community copes with alienation in a host country, Shamas and Kaukab, the main protagonists in the novel, reflect on their individual losses: Kaukab's children are lost to her because they have taken up British liberal values; for Shamas, his brother, Jugnu's disappearance is a result of the rigid cultural/religious norms of the immigrant population. However, intergenerational conflict between first- and second-generation Pakistani immigrants is undercut by male characters such as Shamas and Jugnu, who transgress traditional cultural and community norms, and also by female characters such as Mah-Jabin, Kiran, and Chanda, who rebel against patriarchal norms imported from their home countries in the subcontinent. The novel weaves together multiple 'uneasy intersections of ethnicity, religion, gender and class in the margins of social space' (Moore 2009: n.p.) – these loose strands are reminiscent of the traditional *dastaan* (romance) genre in Urdu literature. As Lindsey Moore points out, the key symbols in the novel – butterflies, moths, and peacocks, foregrounding sexual transgression as in Hamid's novel – and the rejection of Islam by Shamas and Jugnu in favour of some other object of erotic devotion draw on the genres of *dastaan* and *ghazal*. Speaking of Islamic cultural influence on the novel, Aslam says: 'The book in many ways is about the classic theme of Islamic literature: the quest for the beloved. The book wouldn't be what it is without *1001 Nights*, the Koran, *Bihzad*' (O'Connor 2005: n.p.). The conflict between individual freedom and social order is encoded as one of sexual transgression between first- and second-generation British-Pakistani Muslims. As Nadia Butt writes, the strife between an orthodox, dogmatic version of Islam and modernity, undergirded by British secular values, manifests as a tension between individuals and families or community (2008: 154), leading to practices such as 'honour killing' and 'forced marriage'.

In 'Modernism and Postmodernism in African Literature', Ato Quayson (2008) writes about the historical strain that constitutes modernism in the West: a crisis of the self and the techniques of introspection, stream-of-consciousness, and a limited point of view. Since African writers constantly struggle to navigate between individualism and communal sensibility in their writing, alienation, the mainstay of modernist writing, is often viewed suspiciously in African literature. Early Indian anglophone writers, such as Mulk Raj Anand (1986) and Ahmed Ali (1984), inaugurated this moment of disjunction between social cohesion and individual alienation in their writing in a realistic mode. Since both these writers were part of the Progressive Writers' Movement, they were committed to the narrative mode of social realism, despite the modernist impetus to represent a crisis of the self under colonialism, nationalism, colonial modernity, and religious reform movements. While alienation and a crisis in knowledge of the self seem to be the focus of Hamid's and Aslam's novels, their narrative modes depict multiple worlds within a single fictional space. In Hamid's novel, Daru and Mumtaz inhabit a globalised, cosmopolitan milieu in which transgressive desire is a marker of secular and 'modern' identity, as is the case with Jugnu and Chanda in Aslam's novel. In contrast, the 'fundos' in Hamid's novel represents a traditional, non-modern, religious sensibility, as embodied by Kaukab in Aslam's novel. To recreate these differing worlds in their fiction, Hamid and Aslam draw on the indigenous traditions of *masnavi* (romance), *ghazals*, and Mughal history, narrativised through a fragmentary technique with a limited omniscient narrator.

Where, in *Moth Smoke*, the tension between individual choice and social order is foregrounded through the alienation and transgressive desire of its protagonists, Daru and Mumtaz, *Maps for Lost Lovers* depicts this tension more directly in Jugnu and Chanda's decision to live together and in Shamas' love for Suraya. Although the depiction of transgressive love in literature in general and in the novel in particular is certainly not a consequence of colonial modernity, cultural transactions during the colonial period introduced a new notion of conjugality in the fictional

space.⁵ Unlike many of the Sanskrit *shringara* aesthetics and the Perso-Arabic aesthetics of *ishq* and *muhabbat*, lovers in modern literature can consummate their love in the fictional space. And the new ethic of romantic love is intimately connected with the new aesthetic mode of realism, where the idea of conjugality is imported from Victorian novels.⁶ Citing the example of Chandu Menon's Malayalam novel, *Indulekha* (1889), which narrativises romantic love premised on individual choices and aspirations, Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985) writes that the challenge for Indian novelists in the late nineteenth century was to make the action more exciting in a setting where there was no notion of individualism. Mukherjee further argues that in the late nineteenth century, rigid social norms in India made only two kinds of romantic love fictionally depictable – illicit love for a widow or a courtesan – because 'these two categories of women were without legal "proprietors" and thus seemed to embody a certain amount of unharnessed sexual energy' (1985: 70). However, love of this kind was doomed from the very beginning, because these women were outside of structured society. In Pakistani anglophone novels, this tension between transgressive desire and preservation of the social order becomes a persistent trope, much like what Mukherjee (1985) explores in Bankimchandra Chatterjee's novels or Sudipta Kaviraj (2006) finds in Rabindranath Tagore's writing. In Hamid's *Moth Smoke* and Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, illicit love and the transgression of social conventions form the pegs on which hang the plots of the novels, finally leading to censure and punishment for preservation of the social order. In the banality and boredom of everyday life, illicit love functions as an ideal or as a means of defamiliarising routine, ordinary life, thereby making everyday life and romantic ideals appear to be at odds with each other.

Transgressive desire and the defamiliarisation of everyday life

In rigid, formalised everyday life in *Moth Smoke*, Daru and Mumtaz's illicit sex and drug use become residues of transgressive desire beneath the surface of the ordinary. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (2002), Sigmund Freud analyses such disorderliness beneath the supposed routine order and structure of everyday life, which he terms 'parapraxes': for example, forgetting proper names, foreign words, and certain childhood memories. The stable structure of orderliness is vulnerable to our unconscious ('id') desires and fears, as in the case of hysteria, where the normal is suspended. Freud's notion of 'parapraxes' is located in the everyday traces of a temporality other than the one we see in everyday life, and this notion of simultaneous temporality enables resistance and a creative circumventing of the immutable temporality of religious tradition. Besides Daru and Mumtaz, there are other instances of transgressive, residual desire in the novel: Mumtaz shows Daru a newspaper report about a young missing girl whose family is suspected of having killed her because she had a lover (Hamid 2000: 14). This instance already demonstrates how everyday life is highly regulated and how transgressive desire is particularly disciplined and policed in the name of family honour. Paradoxically, there are places like Heera Mandi (the 'Diamond Market'), Lahore's infamous pleasure district where men satisfy their transgressive sexual desires. One way to understand the existence of such a place is to see it as a space of fluid, subversive desire that existed before such illicit sexual practices were critiqued and disciplined by the colonial regime and the religious reform movements, both of which discouraged decadent Indian sexuality and encouraged conjugal love (Kaviraj 2006; Minault 1998) towards the second half of the nineteenth century. In the case of Pakistan, this fluid notion of sexuality was further regulated after Zia-ul-Haq rose to power in 1978 and declared Pakistan an Islamic state. Another way to understand the presence of Heera Mandi is to see it as a space of masculine transgressive desire, similar to the *kothas* (residences of courtesans) in nineteenth-century North India, which were frequented by men.

Despite the covert acceptance of subversive desire, religion and its attendant traditions – equated, for the most part, with growing religious fundamentalism – loom menacingly as a spectre that regulates, controls, and polices everyday life in *Moth Smoke*. Since the everyday is strictly regimented by tradition and religion, transgressive sexual encounters become one of the sites for defamiliarising everyday life. There are multiple layers of desire in the novel: those of the lower classes at Heera Mandi and those of the educated upper and middle classes, who engage in covert affairs. Mumtaz confesses that covert sexual relations are ‘the most popular form of entertainment around. And I know why. My affair with Daru was, at first at least, the most liberating experience I have ever had. I felt bad, of course. Selfish. But I also felt good’ (Hamid 2000: 158). Despite class differences, subversive desire seems to seep into every stratum of society and rupture the rhythm of daily life. Daru and Mumtaz’s transgressive sexual liaison is framed through two conventions: the violent and unconsummated love between lovers and the passive, selfless love of the lover for the beloved. The first kind, violent, unconsummated love, is typified in a nuclear explosion, which is metaphorically described as a sexual act with ‘a huge gasp, smothered unsatisfied’ (Hamid 2000: 100), making it appear almost prosaic. In contrast, the trope of passive, selfless love, embodied in the moths visiting Daru’s house, is drawn from the conventions of *ghazal*:

But she keeps coming, like a moth to my candle, staying longer than she should, leaving for dinners and birthday parties, singeing her wings [...] And I, the moth circling her candle, realize that she’s not just a candle. She’s a moth as well, circling me. I look at her and see myself reflected, my feelings, my desires. And she, looking at me, must see herself. And which of us is moth and which is candle hardly seems to matter. We’re both the same.

(Hamid 2000: 204)

In Hamid’s aesthetic, the moth’s attraction to the candle is equated with the attraction of a lover to their beloved, following the traditions of Sufi poetry,⁷ in which love for God is couched as love for one’s Beloved. In Hamid’s reworking of the trope, lover and beloved become interchangeable in a selfless union, foregrounding utopic transformative possibilities in everyday life.

In Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*, the rigid tradition-bound everyday life in which laws and codes have been dragged into England from Pakistan like shit on shoes (2004: 163) is defamiliarised through the tragic transgressive love of Shamas for Suraya, of Jugnu and Chanda, of the murdered Muslim girl for her Hindu lover. In each of these cases, transgressive love is gendered in the way men have access to spaces such as Heera Mandi in Lahore and the white prostitute at Dasht, while women are punished, as in the cases of the unnamed girls in both novels. In this context, Kaukab’s stream-of-consciousness on the Islamic idea of love, as one felt for all creatures within the laws of permissibility, foregrounds the asymmetrical nature of power inherent in transgression:

Love. Islam said that in order not to be unworthy of being, only one thing was required: love. And, said the True Faith, it did not even begin with humans and animals: even the trees were in love. The very stones sang of love. Allah Himself was a being in love with His own creations.

(Aslam 2004: 91)

This notion of a higher love is reiterated during Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan’s concert at Dasht, when ‘he points to the sky with his index finger to indicate and include Allah in the love being felt

and celebrated – a lover looking for the beloved represents the human soul looking for salvation’ (2004: 270). While incompatible with her more stringent faith, Kaukab reflects on the pervasiveness of love in people’s lives, more particularly in the context of people in Dasht, who might have loved someone or other at some point in their lives. And, yet, for Kaukab, the idea of transgression can only go so far, because she finds sublimation in prayers, in her unflinching faith in Allah.

Like Heera Mandi in Hamid’s novel, Dasht does have a space for the fulfilment of transgressive male sexual desire: the house of the white prostitute whose presence falls outside the permissible boundaries of purity and honour: ‘had she been Indian or Pakistani, she would have been assaulted and driven out of the area within days of moving in for bringing shame upon her people’ (2004: 14). Aslam refers to Heera Mandi (the ‘Diamond Market’) in Lahore as a transgressive space of sexual awakening for Shamas:

An unmarried young man’s sexual life, in those days and in a segregated country like Pakistan, began late, and so they were also years of his sexual initiation, exploration, and gratification – in the ‘Diamond Market’ district of prostitutes in Lahore.

(Aslam 2004: 113)

Shamas’ initial foray into transgressive sexuality in Dasht is limited to his desire to visit the white prostitute, thereby replicating his sexual initiation in Heera Mandi. This traversing of borders between Pakistan and England is symptomatic of Aslam’s attempt to illustrate how transgressive desire defamiliarises everyday life transnationally across cultures. And yet, as already mentioned in the previous paragraph, the transformative possibilities of transgressive love are gendered, rendering invisible even those women who participate in the sex trade at Heera Mandi.

Shamas’ love for Suraya and their secret rendezvous at the bookshop are undergirded by two different sets of motives, both worldly. For Shamas, his love for Suraya is a way of defamiliarising the ossified ordinary, as is evident when he meets her for the first time: ‘Like a matchstick struck on the inside of his skull, spilling sparks, the ecstatic torpor of adolescent summers comes to him in a brief warm illumination, and he experiences a thrill which is very close to happiness’ (Aslam 2004: 195). He searches for a love that will regenerate him, releasing from his atrophied everyday life with the help of Suraya’s ‘youth, the life in her [...] her living breath on his face’ (2004: 278). For Suraya, transgressive love is tempered by the mundane consideration of finding a temporary husband who will help her reunite with her husband in Pakistan, who divorced her in a drunken state. Despite staying close to the Islamic ideal of marriage, she falls in love with Shamas, his poetry, and his gentleness:

Suraya has started to pay attention to her physical appearance. And, yes, it must be admitted that there are times when she enjoys his compliments concerning her beauty, a sense of well-being spreading over for a while, before she is reminded of her adversity, of her husband, her son, her Allah.

(2004: 301)

Her practical necessities make Suraya negotiate ‘the dinful strife of faith and disbelief’ (2004: 279), knowing full well that sex outside marriage is one of the greatest sins in Islam. In Jugnu and Chanda’s case, their live-in relationship works as a motif of life in the midst of death that surrounds them in Dasht. Jugnu’s love for butterflies is in consonance with the reputation of his family, who did not wish ‘to be bound by any tradition and custom’ (2004: 514). His house is

a museum of dead objects: 'pinned butterflies in glass frames' (2004: 513). When Chanda comes to his house for the first time to deliver food for the butterflies, she accidentally rouses the Bhutan glories, which he had put into ice-induced sleep. Jugnu and Chanda's transgressive love metaphorically defamiliarises their tradition-bound oppressive everyday life, rousing them from a 'sommolent state' (2004: 515). Aslam's deployment of the myth of Krishna and his companions' love for their beloveds on opposite shores of the Jamuna River illustrates how the fulfilment of transgressive desire circumvents 'the disapproving world' (2004: 516), the reified mundane life in a rigid tradition-bound society.

At the end of *Moth Smoke*, the prosecution argues that the illicit sexual relation between Mumtaz and Daru is a breach of the sacred institution of marriage and the court judgement upholds the sanctity of tradition, endorsed through everyday norms, by punishing transgressive desire that ruptures this norm. In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, too, transgressive love is punished and Shamas, Jugnu, Chanda, and the unnamed Muslim girl pay with their lives. The mundane social order is restored at the end by returning to the community of fellow humans, as the illegal immigrant ponders: 'at dawn today he had told himself to go out into the world again. If calamity is coming then where else would he rather be than with his fellow humans? What else is there but them?' (Aslam 2004: 525). In the Indian context, Mukherjee (1985) claims that the representation of such illicit sexual relations in fiction is doomed from the very beginning, because it is at variance with the traditional social reality, which demands that the social order be upheld at the end. While *Moth Smoke* and *Maps for Lost Lovers* depart from the conventions of realism – in their choices of subject matter, which are more suited to the conventions of naturalism, and a narrative technique which closely resembles that of modernist fiction – the protagonists in Hamid's and Aslam's novels fail to disrupt the ossified tradition, despite their momentary defamiliarisation of norm-bound everyday practices, reiterating the conventions of *masnavi* romances, which set up a contest between individual love and obligation towards traditional norms of honour.⁸

In Hamid's *Moth Smoke* and Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Mumtaz, Daru, Shamas, Suraya, Jugnu, and Chanda transgress moral codes engendered by traditional religious values. While transgressive desire in these novels encapsulates transformative possibilities in the form of defamiliarisation of the ordinary, such transgressions contain within them despair at non-fulfilment, as enunciated in the death or punishment of those who transgress. And yet, Hamid's and Aslam's fictional aesthetics produce a contingent Muslim modernity, despite the gendered nature of transgressions in which women are rendered invisible and punished. The motivations for transgression and engagement with the 'worldly' come from encounters with consumer capitalism, Western secular values, new consumption patterns and lifestyles.⁹ Pakistani anglophone writers, however, seem to encounter a challenge because social ethics and literary aesthetics are in conflict here. Recent religious resurgence, which reinforces and reinvents tradition in Pakistani society, makes difficult the emergence of an individual self, that is able to determine her own course of action, independent of the social structure (Iqtidar 2011). In other words, the project of self-fashioning through transgressive love in Pakistani fiction is almost doomed from the very beginning because writers' aesthetic inclinations and social ethics clash.

Notes

- 1 This chapter does not engage directly with the question of 'honour killing', a violent act most often perpetrated against women in many conservative societies, including Pakistan, for defiling the honour of the family/community through romantic and sexual acts outside marriage. Amir Jafri (2008) contends that 'honour killing' is at once a male performative act demarcating social boundaries and a public

- spectacle. Aroosa Kanwal (2015) asserts that ‘honour killing’ is actually a pre-Islamic, tribal act which has been maintained, incorporated into practices in Islamic countries. In this chapter, I engage with acts of transgressive desire in everyday life, instead of exploring the place of ‘honour killing’ in Pakistani society.
- 2 See William Dalrymple’s ‘Moonlight’s Children: Pakistani fiction, long eclipsed by India’s, is now emerging from the shadows’ (2008), an assessment of Pakistani anglophone fiction which he later followed up in his review of Daniyal Mueenuddin’s short story collection *Other Rooms* in the *Financial Times* (2009).
 - 3 Hamid talks about Manto’s influence on his writing in an interview with the Duke University newspaper, *The Chronicle*, 18 February 2000.
 - 4 While Aslam’s novel engages with British multicultural discourse, it does so by rendering White England absent from the novel and focusing its attention on the micro violence within the Pakistani immigrant community. See O’Connor (2005).
 - 5 However, romantic love in European fiction, including British fiction, which Indians were reading in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was never without a conflict between romance and social realities. What Indians inherited was a fantasy of romantic love and conjugality from such fiction because of the impossibility of romantic fulfilment in a tradition-bound Indian society.
 - 6 The idea of romantic love travelled to India from the West as a fantasy, which in European fiction was more a conflictual desire in which the protagonists, especially women, often followed the head rather than the heart. Yet this idea of companionate marriage and love exerted tremendous influence on Indian fiction writers.
 - 7 See, ‘Mohsin Hamid’, *The Chronicle*, 18 February 2000, in which Hamid elaborates on the influence of Sufi poetry in his novel.
 - 8 In this context, it is apt to remember that the Urdu fiction serialised in Pakistan in the 1970s, which had a predominantly female readership, presents another aesthetic model where rebellious and independent women creatively negotiate with tradition, and often dealt with taboo topics, such as gay sex, illicit desire, etc. As Adam B. Ellick (2010) writes, such risqué writing was extremely popular in the 1970s but banned in the 1980s under Zia-ul-Haq’s regime.
 - 9 For recent studies on the impact of consumer culture on Muslims, especially youth, see, Hossein Godazgar (2011) and Mona Abaza (2001).

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