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The nuclear novel in Pakistan

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6
THE NUCLEAR NOVEL IN PAKISTAN

Michaela M. Henry

In an interview with the Booker Prize Foundation, Mohsin Hamid described his then latest novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007b), as reflecting back to its readers the political-emotional landscape in which they already find themselves. The interview quotes Hamid describing his novel: 'Many people have said it feels like a thriller. The reason for that is we are already afraid' (2007a: n.p.). This reflective process is especially fitting for *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* because the novel is written in the second person, addressing a disembodied 'you', allowing that pronoun to easily act as placeholder for a variety of readers. As the decade since 2007 has progressed, what remains clear is that culture continues to exist within Hamid's terms of, 'we are already afraid' (2007a: n.p.). For Hamid this is a statement of fact (though, importantly, the 'facts' used to support those fears are just as often closer to fiction), and yet he also comes to see his role as a novelist as not just reflecting that fear back to his readers but also as audaciously imagining hopeful futures – both for his home country of Pakistan and for the world. He articulates this mission in a 2016 *New Yorker* interview, stating that 'part of the great political crisis we face in the world today is a failure to imagine plausible desirable futures. We are surrounded by nostalgic visions, violently nostalgic visions. Fiction can imagine differently' (Leyshon 2016: n.p.).

This contentious mixture of pride, audacious hope, and fear, present over the course of Hamid's oeuvre, can also characterise Pakistan's relationship to nuclear weapons. Publicly crossing the nuclear threshold in 1998 – the only Muslim-majority country to successfully do so – elicited an amalgam of fear and pride in Pakistan. It brought fear of India, as the stronger military neighbour on the other side of the border, fear of the United States marching over Pakistan to serve its own needs – Ayesha Jalal remarks that 'the growing American presence in Afghanistan is a matter of great concern, as it is generally believed to be a prelude to a thrust into Pakistan and depriving it of its nuclear arsenal' (2011: 19) – or the inverse fear that the United States and US-backed institutions would march their aid money out of Pakistan. But nuclearisation also elicited pride in the technological achievement of producing the bomb, in the anticipated political clout of earning membership to 'the nuclear club', in the bomb buttressing the country's posture of self-defence, and perhaps in the satisfaction of a postcolonial coming of age for the nation.

The heterogeneous and ambivalent reactions to Pakistan's political complexity in general, and its nuclear weapons programme specifically, are ripe for literary response. As stated above,

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Hamid puts great faith in literature's potential to imagine hopeful, liveable futures, and yet his nuclear novel, *Moth Smoke* (also his first novel) is perhaps his most cynical. In general, literary reactions to the bomb are various. They include terror, cynicism, and resignation, as well as pride, satisfaction, and flights of speculative imaginings. Accordingly, the presence of nuclear weapons presents a mass of potential literary material alongside a great literary challenge. On the one hand, the bomb as literary figure is capacious and generative. It provides powerful material for metaphor, imagery, and allegory, and it demands that tough ethical questions be asked. On the other hand, the bomb as a concept challenges textual representation because it pushes at the boundaries of the human ability to know. For example, access to actual nuclear weapons eludes all but a select group of people, and for all but a few significant exceptions, nuclear detonation exists as a threat, rather than a direct experience. This is all the more true since international treaties now demand that nuclear weapons testing only be conducted underground. When detonation does occur, though its effects are of course catastrophically explosive, the actual mechanism of the bomb operates beyond the reach of human senses, as Gabriel Hecht reminds us, splitting the 'most basic building blocks' of matter (2006: 321).

Therefore, the bomb ruptures the foundation of material existence at the scale of the infinitesimal to produce an explosion on the scale of the enormous, leaving behind residual effects that persist far beyond the duration of individual human lifetimes. The bomb pushes at the extremes of the human sensorium, the extremes of our ability to perceive and to know. This is complicated even more by the fact that after 1945, detonation has not occurred as an act of war. Instead, the general consensus internationally is that nuclear weapons are not tactical military weapons but rather political weapons, not intended for material use.[1] For most humans on this planet, both those who have direct access to nuclear weapons and most people who hopefully will never experience them first-hand, the bomb exists not as a material reality but rather as a figure in the realm of rhetoric, fantasy, and affect.

The nuclear bomb in its expansive capacity, materialises in a variety of ways in twenty-first-century Pakistani novels in English. As in most places in the world, it most frequently materialises in the novel as it does in life – as a lurking presence, generally in the background, occasionally making its way to the foreground in the form of threat. This chapter will consider a selection of novels from Pakistan and its diasporic writers that deal with nuclear weapons. These include two works of literary fiction, Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000) and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009), and two more recent thrillers: Akbar Agha's *Juggernaut* (2015) and Munir Muhammad's *India Pakistan Nuclear War* (2016). Addressing the issue of nuclear weapons seems to cause writers of literary fiction, such as Hamid and Shamsie, to abandon, at least temporarily, their projects of imagining hopeful futures, other incarnations of the present world, or, as Shamsie says in a *New York Times Latitude* blogpost, to 'tell another story of Pakistan'. Instead, the bomb leads to the explorations of fairy tales, allegory, and other fictions we tell ourselves, individually and collectively, to process the 'unthinkability' of nuclear weapons. A nuclear novel of literary fiction seems to concern itself with finding ways to describe what exists in the world now, looking at that reality with a kind of blinking disbelief. Perhaps ironically, nuclear thrillers, on the other hand, are much more capable of indulging in audacious imagining, as their generic form allows them to put the greatest fears of the nuclear age into reality on the pages of the novel and then conjure up a hero to save the day.

Capaciousness of the nuclear question

The anglophone nuclear novel in Pakistan, in its various forms, demonstrates that the nuclear question in Pakistan always contains so many other concerns: Partition and the subsequent

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wars with India (often seen as unfinished business), growing fundamentalism, fears of so-called 'nuclear *jihadi*s' hiding within military ranks, the US presence (ranging from intervention to malicious meddling), Kashmir, Kargil, Zia and the Bhuttos, and even 9/11. This phenomenon, on the one hand, speaks to Pakistan's historical and political realities. As Maleeha Lodhi argues in her introductory essay to *Beyond the Crisis State*, 'the external and internal have been so intertwined in Pakistan's history – as they are today – as to compound political challenges' (2011: 46). And nuclear weapons bring about unique transnational entanglements on top of the already intertwined 'external and internal' concerns within Pakistan. In addition to reflecting political realities, this level of entanglement is also consistent with the capaciousness of the bomb as a rhetorical figure and literary device.[2]

Part of the rhetorical power of the bomb, as Hecht reminds us, is that it is always singular. Hecht, drawing on Itty Abraham, calls the bomb 'the ultimate fetish object of our time' (2006: 100). She defines this singularity as enabling the capaciousness of the bomb as metonym, able to contain 'it all':

> Salvation and apocalypse, sacred and profane, sex and death: the bomb contains it all. World order has been imagined and challenged in its name and for its sake. Although well over twenty-eight thousand nuclear warheads populate the planet, they somehow maintain their singularity. It's always 'the' bomb.
>
> (Hecht 2007: 100)

'The bomb' as an image, in its enormous yet flexible scale, in its singularity and elusiveness, possesses the power to shape narrative, even when (or perhaps especially when) no individual or actual bomb is detonated. Hecht writes of 'nuclearity' as a capacious concept that 'depends on history and geography, science and technology, bodies and politics, radiation and race, states and capitalism. It is not so much an essential property of things, as it is distributed *in* things' (2007: 100). The bomb's lurking potentiality, its scale that exceeds the human sensorium on macro and micro levels, has hero-making and hero-defaming capabilities in literature as in life.

Each of the nuclear novels referenced in this chapter see the nuclear question as 'distributed' across – and inseparable from – a variety of the categories named above. For example, literary and genre fiction alike contextualise their nuclear plots in terms of corruption at home in Pakistan. And each novel contextualises that corruption in terms of corruption at the highest levels of the world's most respected institutions. They thereby make the argument that Pakistan is more alike the other nations in the world than aberrant, countering the perception that the nation is an abject outsider, merely a failed state. For example, Hamid's protagonist in *Moth Smoke*, Daru, uses examples of corruption in Pakistan and around the world to justify the increasingly volatile and self-serving nature of his own actions. He insists that he finally refuses to serve, saying, 'I'm ready to take' (2000: 247). *Moth Smoke* does not valorise Daru for turning to drugs and robbery, nor does it absolve him of his selfishness, but it does have empathy for him and his exhaustion. Moreover, the novel's narration places him directly in the company of the Nobel and the Rhodes families, responsible for money laundering and horrific colonial violence but now known for financing the worlds' most prestigious prizes for research, arts, and world peace in the case of the Nobels, and one of the world's most prestigious scholarship institutions in the case of the Rhodes. According to Hamid and his compatriot nuclear novelists, Pakistan is a part of a complex economy of global wrongdoing, but like Daru, it lacks the cash and the clout to launder its image in the way more affluent people and countries can. *Moth Smoke* does not absolve its characters

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involved in their different levels of corruption but places them in terms of history and current events on a global scale.

Nuclear armament in Pakistan

The nuclear novel in Pakistan, much like the nation itself, can be characterised by syntactical relations – accidents of geography and temporality, consequences of living in 'the neighbourhood' (Hamid 2000: 129) where it is caught between India, China, and Afghanistan, and swimming in a history of unresolved conflicts. As a consequence, from its birth in independence movements, the anglophone Pakistani novel has always been already transnational or, as Lodhi says, 'intertwined'. Pakistan's birth as an independent nation occurred simultaneously with India's, and its nuclearisation (at least in public form) was twinned with India's too. On its other border, Pakistani writers figure their nation as being penetrated by US forces, overt and covert, and, similarly to the India case, this is a consequence of geographic proximity, this time to Afghanistan.

The anglophone novel holds a complicated position in Pakistan – as the novel form does throughout the postcolony, since its form and language are inherited from colonising cultures. Earlier twentieth-century writers of the subcontinent, some of whom would become Pakistani and some Indian,[3] chose the novel form as one expansive enough to contain the social and psychological complexities of a nation in the process of becoming. Others chose the novel, especially in English, as a way of communicating to the rest of the English-speaking world, especially in the West, the capacity of India/Pakistan to produce the art form most associated with becoming, thereby making a case for the justice of independence. In its variety of forms, the anglophone novel in what would become Pakistan largely came to be as a part of Indian/Pakistani independence movements.

In India and Pakistan alike, the novel in English became a way to think through the development of the new nation, with a full range of emotions, from hope to discontent and disillusionment. Although this historical inheritance remains in twenty-first-century texts, enough time has passed to dull its determining weight over new novels being written. This brings about the question of how to think the new novel and of what a novelist writes when she writes of Pakistan now. Nuclear novels, because of their relationship to actual nuclear weapons' capabilities of the state, coupled with the metaphoric capacity of the image of the bomb, offer one of several answers to these questions.

Fifty-one years after their twinned independence and the violence of Partition, India and Pakistan each crossed the threshold of nuclear armament – India's test on 11 May 1998 was quickly followed by Pakistan on 28 May 1998. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was quoted at the time of the Pakistani tests as saying that 'Today, we have evened the score with India' (Burns 1998: n.p.). With such a statement, Sharif claimed the need to avenge historical inequities and restore national pride, because of both the recent nuclear test and the list of ways in which Pakistan figures itself as having been unevenly treated. For example, Akbar Ahmed describes Jinnah's plan for Pakistan as an independent Muslim state as a seemingly impossible achievement, but one aimed at 'restoring Muslim pride' (2011: 20). And yet this achievement at the time of independence was already, by Jinnah's own words, 'truncated' and 'moth-eaten' (Ahmed 2011: 20). By 1971, with the war with India and the creation of Bangladesh, Pakistan's territory was further eroded to the point of existential fear. Many saw the bomb as a long-awaited assertion that Pakistan could not be pushed around.

Declarations of 'We are a nuclear power' were proudly made by government and civilians alike. Meanwhile, the Pakistani government simultaneously declared a state of emergency,

fearing military confrontation with India. The *New York Times* quoted then US President Bill Clinton as saying:

> I cannot believe […] that we are about to start the twenty-first century by having the Indian subcontinent repeat the worst mistakes of the twentieth century, when we know it is not necessary to peace, to security, to prosperity, to national greatness, or to personal fulfilment.
>
> (Burns 1998: n.p.)

Clinton's words highlight a few significant details of the 1998 South Asian arms race: the degree to which India's and Pakistan's nuclear tests were out of sync with the general trends of the world's most powerful nations, and the way in which the actions and fate of Pakistan and India continued to be linked both in the realm of concrete actions being taken and in the international rhetoric and imaginary.

Even more significantly, when Clinton listed all the things that the bomb 'is not necessary for', he in fact highlighted all the hopes with which the bomb was and is imbued. Clinton stated that it was a mistake of the twentieth century to think that possessing nuclear capability would lead to 'peace' and 'security', even though this was the primary stated motivation behind the United States' decisions to continue to pursue a nuclear programme after the end of the Second World War. By stating the characteristics of the bomb in the negative, Clinton paradoxically identified the still strongly held beliefs that nuclear weapons would lead to things like 'prosperity', 'national greatness', and 'personal fulfilment'. Sharif, among others, characterised the tests 'as a national rite of passage', as inevitable as a God-given 'opportunity to take critical steps for the country's defence' (Burns 1998: n.p.). As an act of justification, he connected the 1998 tests to what he saw as India's expansionist tendencies, claiming that India had started each of the three wars between the two nations and therefore positioning Pakistan's bomb as merely an assertion of self-respect and self-defence. As the *New York Times* reported, an Agence France-Presse report quoted a Pakistani student claiming that the bomb was a worthwhile sacrifice that would allow Pakistan 'to live as a self-respecting nation' (Burns 1998: n.p.).

Addressing the fairy tale of American exceptionalism

In 1998, the bomb was characterised as a material-martial manifestation of national self-esteem. It was characterised as a national coming of age, both keeping pace with India and demanding a seat at the international 'adult's table'. Pakistan figured its public nuclear weaponisation as a taking of power, justified by its perception of Indian aggression and demonstrated in the material form of the test. And yet, as Clinton's comments show, the international community's collective narrative of national power and development by 1998, just prior to the turn of the twenty-first century, had moved on from this understanding of nuclear weapons as something that commanded respect. Insisting on nuclear armament was not seen on the international stage as an assertion of self-respect, one which the rest of the world could not help but follow. Instead, it was seen as a perversion of the hoped-for narrative of national becoming. Clinton clearly characterised Pakistan's nuclearisation as a sort of temper tantrum worthy of sanctions (which had also been applied to India following their nuclear tests) that repeated mistakes long recognised as such by Western powers. Such a statement is at least in part rooted in American exceptionalist beliefs that nuclear weapons are most safe in the hands of the American government and least safe in the hands of anyone else.

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Pakistani nuclear fiction written in English harnesses such American historical short-sightedness, not to absolve Pakistan from the violence of nuclear armament, or its own corruption, but to place those actions without a broader international view. Novels like Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (as well as the more recent thrillers, *Juggernaut* from 2015 and *India Pakistan Nuclear War* from 2016) insist that Pakistan's difficult intimacy with the US is inextricable from the nation's nuclear story. *Burnt Shadows*, for example, examines the way in which the US figures itself as purveyor and protector of justice and peace in the world, stating that American affect works to obscure (to the world and especially to the American people) American acts of violence. Shamsie insists that kindness, familial affinity, and interpersonal intimacy, in the last instance, generally do not prevent violence. Rather, American self-narratives – both individual and collective – of their own righteousness and benign desire to help are extremely effective in justifying violent exercises of power, whether that be the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 or detaining masses of people without sufficient evidence or due process during the post-9/11 securitisation and the ongoing 'war on terror'. The power of such narratives lies in their inability to acknowledge the partiality of the individual's or the group's perspective and the prejudices therein.

Jack Zipes' language of fairy tale's political dimension helps frame these narrative practices of US exceptionalism. In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Zipes focuses on the utopic potential of fairy tales, but he helpfully identifies the use value of the fairy tale form to being in the world and shaping the world to suit one's needs. Zipes writes that 'Fairy tales are predicated on a human disposition to social action – to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs while we try to change and make ourselves fit for the world' (1999: ix). As I will show below, Shamsie's engagement with nuclear war in *Burnt Shadows*, in actuality (Nagasaki in 1945) and threat (Pakistan in 2001–2002), demonstrates the use of fairy tale's storytelling mechanisms towards any kind of 'social action' that suits the personal-political needs of the storyteller. This, according to Shamsie, can serve a variety of needs, from processing memories of nuclear detonation towards personal healing, to justifying callous acts in the name of American security. For Zipes, fairy tales' 'disposition to social action' is located in 'their focus […] on the struggle to find magical instruments, extraordinary technologies, or helpful people and animals that will enable protagonists to transform themselves and their environment and make the world more suitable for living in peace and contentment. (1999: ix–x). Shamsie offers a variety of scenes where fairy tales are read or told, and she also shows how the mechanism of fairy tales towards 'magical instruments' or magical mechanism of simplification can be used in real life to commit acts of violence regardless of good or ill will. The protagonist of *Burnt Shadows*, Hiroko Tanaka-Ashraf, is a survivor of the nuclear bomb in Nagasaki who finds herself in Delhi in 1946 and in Karachi from 1947 to 2001, when she moves to New York, running away from the threat of nuclear war on the subcontinent. In her past, she had invented fairy tales to explain to her son what it had been like living through the nuclear explosion in Nagasaki and its aftermath. Her husband had used the story of the Prophet Muhammad being protected by the spider as an allegory to explain the unlikely but mutually protective friendship between their family, the Tanaka-Ashrafs, and another transnational family with whom their lives were intertwined, the German-British-American Weiss-Burtons. However, Hiroko's final scenes demonstrate the insidious possibilities of fairy tale's 'disposition to social action' seen through the lens of the form's narrative practice of using magical mechanisms of simplification.

In the case of American action in the larger world, Hiroko names this practice the deployment of 'the big picture'. Upon hearing of her son Raza's detainment under vague suspicion of terrorism, Hiroko identifies a common American practice, repeated often, from the bombing of Nagasaki to the indiscriminate detention or murder of Afghans after 9/11. According to Hiroko,

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this practice does not, for example, disregard or erase human rights of its target populations (or any populations caught in the line of fire, for that matter), but merely reduces the focus on individuals in service of 'the big picture'. Shamsie writes:

> Hiroko spoke […] 'When Konrad first heard of the concentration camps he said you have to deny people their humanity in order to decimate them […] You just have to put them in a little corner of the big picture. In the big picture of the Second World War, what was seventy-five thousand more Japanese dead? Acceptable, that's what it was. In the big picture of threats to America, what is one Afghan? Expendable. Maybe he's guilty, maybe not. Why risk it? Kim, you are the kindest, most generous woman I know. But right now, because of you, I understand for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb.'
>
> (2009: 370)

In these, some her final words in the novel, Hiroko connects and indicts US practices from 1945 to 2001. As she states, the US' strategy of expansive nationalism – zooming out to the big picture – does not need to 'deny the humanity' of those individuals or populations obstructing its chosen mission. It does not need to exterminate a demonised population, nor does it need to expel groups of foreigners publicly and outright. Instead, the US needs only expand the frame of the story it tells of itself, putting undesired elements, human or otherwise, in the corner, out of the way.

This narrative practice of deploying the (at times) hidden nationalist narrative of 'the big picture' secured US military victory and global hegemony at the end of the Second World War and perpetuates US moral dominance into the post-9/11 twenty-first century. *Burnt Shadows* argues for the omnipresence of this narrative practice by demonstrating the inability of personal friendship to overcome it. At the beginning of the novel, at the very end of the Second World War, Hiroko is caught in the invisible and inconsequential corner of the big picture on the impersonal world-historical scale, when the Americans happen to drop the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, the city of her birth. At the end of the novel, Hiroko is caught in the invisible corner of the big picture on the personal scale when Kim Burton, her roommate and companion, the granddaughter of her nearly life-long closest friend, unwittingly betrays her son, Raza. Hiroko's close proximity to Kim does not allow her to escape to the refuge of the big picture with clear 'good guys' and 'bad guys', just as, over fifty years before, Hiroko's husband Sajjad's proximity to Kim's grandfather, James Burton, did not spare him the violence and heartbreak of Partition, even when it allowed him to escape physical harm.

Shamsie shows the haphazard narrative mechanism that undergirds the US' world-dominating force that wins out over other empires by telling fairy tales about itself to its own people. The novel links the nuclear bomb in 1945 to an unnamed detainee in an identified location that could be any black site, and links CIA involvement in Pakistan and Afghanistan over three decades to the same, by showing the mechanism of shifting narrative scale that produces the fairy tale of its own benevolence that America as a nation and Americans as individuals must repeatedly tell and retell to themselves. The novel identifies American individual friendliness and affability – Americans' willingness to mix with others around the world – as a means of solidifying their dominance, buttressing their illusion of benevolence, an illusion that does not need to fool dominated peoples nearly as much as it must convince Americans themselves in order to be effective. According to *Burnt Shadows*, it is America's (and Americans') belief in its benevolence and its good intentions that makes it most capable of doing harm.

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In short, Shamsie's novel puts forth a long view of US neo-imperialism that begins with the bomb being dropped on Nagasaki in 1945 and continues through the US 'war on terror' in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Hiroko shows that regard for others on the individual scale – when pressed – is not a prophylactic against violence, whether individual, structural, or mass. The text ends with Hiroko's resignation, perhaps even despair: 'outside at least, the world went on' (Shamsie 2009: 370). Thus, for Shamsie's protagonist, Pakistan's nuclear weaponisation is just another example of misguided nationalist storytelling that leads to violence. For Shamsie, Pakistan's first nuclear decade cannot be separated from a global history of violence that precedes the nuclear age and exceeds the specifics of nuclear weapons.

Moth Smoke: regionality and allegory

In Hamid's *Moth Smoke*, the bomb features in the background – it is the backdrop to two-thirds of his novel about the deterioration of a protagonist, Daru, once a promising student of development studies (a field emblematic of hope in the possibility of positive change) turned disaffected banker. *Moth Smoke* is most often characterised as a drug novel. However, it also invites us to read the story of its protagonist as an allegory of contemporary Pakistan's coming of age with extraordinary potential. He is dangerously smart and irreverent, but seeks to quickly acquire the spoils of wealth; hating the super-rich party class of Lahore, while coveting their drugs, money, ease of life, and fancy lifestyle.

Interestingly, both *Moth Smoke* and *Juggernaut*, discussed below, feature once-staunchly ethical, idealist academics who forgo those ethics and ideals in favour of corruption and self-interest – blaming the tides of the country and absolving themselves. *Moth Smoke* is in some ways more cynical, positioning such a figure as its young protagonist, while *Juggernaut* positions a similar figure as an older, dim-witted side character who causes problems but is too peripheral to be either sympathetic or truly villainous. Both novels show this figure as dulling his morals and intellects with alcohol, drugs, and sex. Only one, *Juggernaut*, passes judgement on that degeneracy, however. The other, *Moth Smoke*, seems to view it as an unfortunate accident of fate, and some arrogance.

Among other things, Hamid's *Moth Smoke* tracks the various reactions of Lahoris as they learn of Pakistan's nuclear weaponisation in real time in 1998, and the great variety of responses of citizens across class lines, demonstrating the difficulty of pinning down a single literary use of the bomb. In one moment, the novel reduces the bomb to the digestive tract – as something that undergirds everything, but remains untalked about in polite company:

> It was the summer of great rumblings in the belly of the earth, of atomic flatulence and geopolitical indigestion, consequences of the consumption of sectarian chickpeas by our famished and increasingly incontinent subcontinent. Clenched beneath the tightened sphincters of the test sites and silos, the pressure of superheated gasses was registering in spasms on the Richter scale.
>
> (Hamid 2000: 79)

At the same time as it mocks the nuclear test as delivering real power in the world, the novel recognises the bomb's subject-forming power for Pakistan's exhausted or jaded citizens. For example, *Moth Smoke*'s narration exclaims: 'We've done it! […] We've exploded the bomb', and this spirit affects even the cynical Lahoris, fulfilling some national psychological chasm. Even Daru narrates, 'I feel something straighten my back, a strange excitement, the posture-correcting force of pride' (2000: 148). Clinton's statement above – naming all the things the

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bomb is not – fails to recognise the subject-creating power of the nuclear bomb as symbolic weapon, while *Moth Smoke* recognises it immediately.

In *Moth Smoke* Pakistan's test leads to morbid speculation by various Lahoris. They worry about India, wondering whether 'they' will 'nuke' Lahore, Karachi, or Islamabad first. This worry is quickly mixed with cockiness and blustering – 'we'll nuke them first' (2000: 124). The tests also evoke a secretive fascination among Lahoris – the sense that they have witnessed something that should be forbidden. The novel shows teenage boys (Daru's nephew and his friend) watching nuclear test videos like they might huddle together and watch pornography (not videos of either the Indian or Pakistani tests because these were conducted below ground, but of earlier above-ground tests on the internet).

At this point in the story, Hamid uses language that emphasises the regionality of Pakistan's nuclear situation: 'the neighborhood's nuclear test count is up to five' (2000: 113). Soon, however, the bomb becomes an all-encompassing image, available to be used for whatever need arises. For example, when Daru is at the police station, he walks by an interrogation room where 'an old man is screaming that an atomic bomb incinerated his wife' (2000: 120). Speculation continues and issues vague, metaphorical material that could be applied multiply, to Daru and other characters, to the country overall, perhaps: 'They say the nuclear tests released no radioactivity into the atmosphere. Each a huge gasp, smothered unsatisfied' (2000: 122–123). In this description, the bomb, like Daru, perhaps like Pakistan, remains in a state of waiting, satisfaction repeatedly denied.

Moth Smoke's title imagery, the remnants of the moth drawn to the flame, resists simple coding into celebration or condemnation. Hamid invites comparison between Pakistan's nuclear quest to his protagonists' descent into self-destruction and violence, and implicitly likens both to the moth obsessively seeking the flame. Hamid all but wonders on the page if the state is on the edge of a passion leading to self-immolation: overcome by fascination and desire, it is the moth drawn to the flame. The moth may escape incineration for a while but eventually will go up in smoke. Hamid describes Daru consumed with watching the moth persist towards its death:

> The moth takes off again [...] A few times he seems to touch the flame, but dances off unhurt [...] Then he ignites like a ball of hair, curling into an oily puff of fumes with a hiss. The candle flame flickers and dims for a moment, then burns as bright as before.
> (2000: 168)

The image of the self-immolating moth certainly references Daru's descent into heroin addiction and growing tolerance of violent acts. By placing this imagery within the backdrop of Pakistan's nuclear tests, Hamid links Daru's decline to the nation's flirtation with a substance that both satisfies a great yearning for self-esteem and a sense of empowerment at the same time as it heightens its risk of self-destruction.

Nuclear thrillers

Recently, in contrast to the ambivalence of Hamid and the outward indictments of Shamsie, a small group of nuclear thrillers have emerged, including Agha Akbar's *Juggernaut* and Munir Muhammad's self-published *India Pakistan Nuclear War*. These novels, more straightforward works of genre fiction, are at once more overtly apocalyptic and more hopeful than their counterparts in literary fiction. They tend to take a more masculine tone, common in the thriller genre, and emphasise the triumph of an everyman (although generally a military everyman) hero over internal threats of corruption and nuclear *jihad*, and external threats of Indian aggression

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and American interference. Thus, these thrillers present fantasies of an individual everyman – possessing the proper military or political credentials, appropriately masculine, neither over- nor undereducated, etc. – overcoming both American interference (in the case of *Juggernaut*, the protagonist turns the CIA's intimacy with Pakistan into a sexual conquest of a Pakistani soldier over a female CIA agent) and internal corruption to save the country and the world from nuclear disaster.

The plots of both *Juggernaut* and *India-Pakistan Nuclear War* feature the worst fears of people on both the Indian and Pakistani sides – the possibility of 'nuclear *jihadi*s' lurking among the ranks of Pakistan's most powerful generals – those who wish to bring about the end of the world because, as Muslims, they will be rewarded in heaven. Rather than simply linking contemporary nuclear events to a global network of historical entanglements and wrongdoings, recent nuclear thrillers imagine specific historical wrongs leading directly to an apocalyptic nuclear crisis: *Juggernaut* builds a story about PTSD (though not in name) and deeply rooted hatred of India and Hindus resulting from imprisonment during the war in 1971; *India-Pakistan Nuclear War* builds on the smouldering resentment of US drone strikes and violations of Pakistani sovereignty to motivate bringing about nuclear war. In both cases, a home-grown hero averts the crisis (either partially or fully), allowing the historic wrong to remain highlighted while simultaneously restoring peace and power to Pakistan.

Juggernaut's army captain protagonist, Gul, after thwarting an assassination attempt on one general, is sent by another to question several others as part of an investigation into a missing and eventually murdered army psychiatrist. Specifically, Gul is sent by a General Shah to question three high-ranking generals who were all forced into the psychiatrist's treatment when they became part of the strategic nuclear response team. Supposedly, it was the psychiatrist's job to root out possible residual issues and treat them to facilitate the greatest possible nuclear safety – ensuring that all future nuclear decisions would be made rationally, rather than emotionally. However, we come to know that General Shah interfered with the treatment, hoping to force the generals to access and exacerbate their anger, fear, and hatred at having been imprisoned and badly treated by India in POW camps, and thus push them over the edge. This, he hopes, *will* incite a subcontinental nuclear war, bringing about the destruction of both countries. Bringing about the end of the world is his goal as it means that Muslims will be ushered into Paradise.

Captain Gul, as the novel's true patriot, is not apocalyptically minded and manages to thwart Shah's plan. In this way, he provides Pakistan with the perfect nuclear-era hero. He embodies the power and self-esteem which the bomb was hoped to bring to the nation, but he has the ethics and savvy to root out the enemies within. In *India Pakistan Nuclear War*, a single bomb is detonated over Mumbai, but not only are a dozen other warheads neutralised, the first detonation causes regional disarmament *and* long-sought peace in Kashmir.

Returning to his 2016 *New Yorker* interview, Hamid writes about his hope for fiction:

> maybe our children and grandchildren can still inhabit a world where they have a chance at hope and optimism. Fiction can explore this possibility, it can make us feel something other than the sense of either doom or denial that is so prevalent in our nonfiction discourse.
>
> (Leyshon 2016: n.p.)

Recent nuclear thrillers seem to do a kind of fictional imagining, offering 'a chance at hope and optimism' but wrapped within existing narratives of the bomb as the embodiment of national self-assertion and self-esteem, narratives questioned long before the nation joined the nuclear club.

It is now nearly twenty years after South Asian nuclearisation. The question of nuclear war remains pressing, perhaps increasingly so, and the appearances of several new nuclear thrillers indicate that the possibility remains compelling, at least in narrative form.[4] Arundhati Roy famously called the twinned Indian and Pakistani nuclearisation 'the end of imagination', claiming that the bomb, as the ever-present threat of total war, is too expansive to allow anyone to think outside of it (1998). Twenty years later, the bomb seems not to have brought about an end of imagination, at least not in the simplest terms. There has been a proliferation of narrative and great exercise of imagination. But perhaps even more dangerously, a tendency has crept up to let the bomb slide into the corner of the big picture. While it remains an ever-lurking threat, its rhetorical nature risks forgetting its enormous materiality – ready at any moment. In 2017, the international nuclear temperature is rising once again, and Pakistani novelists are, as ever, aware of the intertwining of their nation with the outside world.

Notes

1 See Joseph Masco's *The Nuclear Borderlands* (2006) for further reference to nuclear weapons as 'technoaesthetics', rather than material military weapons.

2 I theorise this idea further in my unpublished dissertation, *Narrative's Nuclear Spring: The Anglophone Novel after the Nuclear Bomb* (2017). There, I posit that a subset of anglophone novels in South Asia – those written after the twinned armament of its two largest nations – coalesced around the task of thinking through what the novel is after the region joined the so-called 'nuclear club'. I identify these texts as deploying a nuclear literary method – a collection of trends, rather than hard and fast rules. I argue that the repetition of these trends demonstrates that the novel shifts once 'the bomb' enters the collective imaginary of a nation. In order to make this argument, I draw upon, though not in a straight line, Arundhati Roy's assertion that the bomb led to 'the end of imagination' in South Asia because of its enormity of scale and the Indian and Pakistani governments' linking the bomb to their respective nationalist (and specifically religious-nationalist) narratives.

3 I am referring to certain members of the All India and later All Pakistan Progressive Writer's Associations (AIPWS and APWS), perhaps most famously Ahmed Ali and Mulk Raj Anand, as well as others who never joined the groups or split from them, such as Raja Rao.

4 Other nuclear thrillers include Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006), Mainak Dhar's *Line of Control* (2008), and Vivek Ahuja's *Fenix* (2015).

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