



RESEARCH PAPER

Phases of Human Experience: An Application of Northrop Frye's Theory of Myths/Genre to Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

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ABSTRACT

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Mohsin Hamid in his novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* tells the story of an impoverished rural boy from his early childhood till his death. The protagonist aimed at, succeeded in accumulating money, and by the end lost it. As a human being, he passed through various phases of life. The present study focuses on the evolution of the protagonist's life as a member of a developing Asian society. Applying Northrop Frye's (1957) theory of myths/genre, the study finds that the protagonist's life goes through a specific cycle of seasons: the season of winter (the genre of irony/satire), season of summer (the genre of romance), season of spring (genre of comedy), and season of autumn (genre of tragedy) in this particular order. The season of summer occupies the largest space in the novel. The study helps in developing an understanding of the structural aspects of the novel.

Introduction

How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia is Hamid's third novel and it was published in March, 2013. Michiko Kakutani, the *New York Times* reviewer, writes that Hamid's third novel "reaffirms [Hamid's] place as one of his generation's most inventive and gifted writers" (2013). The novel tells the story of a poor village boy from his early childhood till his death and how in the course of his life the protagonist succeeded in gathering sufficient amount of money only to lose it at the end. The story is narrated in the second person. But, as regards its form, the characteristic feature of the novel is that it gets its shape from the genre of self-help books. The present study is an effort to read the novel in light of the theory of myths/genre presented by Northrop Frye's (1957) in his famous work *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*.

Literature Review

Commenting on Hamid's novel, Cheuse (2013) remarks that *How to Get Filthy Rich* reminded him of F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous novel *The Great Gatsby*. Cheuse feels

that some readers will find the specific “structure and form of address forced or artificial”. He sees the protagonist of the novel as a serious character, a person representing his time and place. Alex Preston (2018) also remarks that Hamid has a natural ability “to summon up the spirits of his time”. According to Sehgal (2013), Hamid’s novel “parodies a get-rich-quick book and gestures to a new direction for the novel”. Sehgal observes that the protagonist teaches us how to lose, “How to relinquish health and hope; how to surrender assets to thieving relatives and one’s children to America”. Andrew Anthony (2013) opines that mastering second person narrative is a tricky business, “There’s something accusatory about the narrational ‘you’ ...”. Anthony remarks that Hamid seems to be unclear about the role of the self-help format. Hamid is in a fix whether he should ridicule this format in his novel or he should use it “as a springboard for quasi-philosophical digressions on the ‘self’”. For Anthony, even though our hero is a “rogue trader”, he is, at least, a “lovable rogue”. Imani (2013) appreciates Hamid’s narrative style because Hamid uses “unique literary techniques”. She sees the self-help genre of the novel as “dark and occasionally humorous”. Imani thinks that Hamid has depicted the village people as progressive.

Material and Methods

The present study takes critical insights from Northrop Frye’s work *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957). Richard Hardin (1989) considers Northrop Frye to be the “most successful of archetypal critics” (p. 52). Commenting on the significance of Frye’s book *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), Richard Lane (2006) calls it a book “that changed the face of literary criticism for several decades” (p. 112). It is the third section of the book that concerns us in this study: ‘Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths’. Frye (1957) defines an archetype as “A symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole” (p. 365). Hamilton (1990) writes: “the theory of myths and *mythoi* becomes a method by which to organize literary works into an order of words, not through their history or sequence of meanings but through their larger generic forms” (p. 123). Mark Bolsover (2006) writes that seen from Frye’s perspective, myth is “the underlying cyclical paradigm, analogous to the cycle of seasons, uniting all works of literature” (p. 190).

Lois Tyson (2006) writes that Frye’s ‘theory of myths’ is a theory of genres. Frye uses the term ‘*mythoi*’ (the singular form is ‘*mythos*’) to refer to the four basic narrative patterns. For Frye, *mythoi* “reveal the structural principles underlying literary genres” (Tyson, 2006, p. 221). Bressler (1994) writes that according to Frye, “all of literature comprises one complete and whole story called the monomyth” (p. 93). This monomyth consists of four seasons of the year and each season points to particular phases of human experience. (i) The *mythos* of summer is associated with the genre of romance. It is located in the ideal world and depicts adventure, fulfillment, and plenitude. The essence of romance is conflict. (ii) The *mythos* of winter is located in the real world and it is associated with the genres of irony / satire. It involves the depiction of human experience leading through uncertainty to failure. Tyson writes that irony is “the real world seen through a tragic lens”. In this world the protagonist suffers. Commenting on the genre of satire, Tyson observes that it is a world of folly and incongruity. In this world, “frailty is mocked, sometimes with biting, merciless humor” (Tyson, p. 221). “Disorder and confusion are the basis of

irony and satire" (Tyson, p. 222). (iii) The mythos of spring shows a shift from the real to the ideal world and it is related to the genre of comedy. In this world, the hero succeeds in overcoming the difficulties. The essence of comedy is triumph. (iv) The mythos of autumn involves a shift from the ideal to the real world and it is related to the genre of tragedy. It is a world in which the hero falls from his height and he will never be able to rise again. The essence of tragedy is catastrophe. The present study is an attempt to offer a reading of Hamid's novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* in light of Northrop Frye's theory of myths. It focuses mainly on the story of the protagonist of the novel ('You') which makes a sort of main plot of the novel. The study traces the evolution in the life of the protagonist as he passes through various phases of experience (or seasons) as suggested by Frye's theory of myths.

Results and Discussion

The Mythos of Winter

The mythos of winter takes us to the realm of the real world. It expands over the twin genres of irony and satire. The selected text offers us sufficient examples of irony in the sense of suffering as defined by N. Frye. The very first description of the protagonist in chapter one of the novel shows the effect of the mythos of winter. We find him "shivering, one cold, dewy morning" (p. 4). The start of his life tells the story of a great loss. He is a boy who has lost his chocolate and new sneakers, whose remote control are dysfunctional, and whose scooter has been broken. The irony is that he never possessed these things in his life. The description does not paint a rosy picture as we learn that his eyes are yellow and he is suffering from hepatitis E. His perspective is described as an "erect-worm-height perspective" (p. 8). The irony is that the protagonist is compared to a worm while a parasite is eating him alive from the inside of his body. Having observed all these circumstances, the novelist remarks that getting rich seems quite out of the reach of our protagonist (p. 11). The mythos of winter is a story of fear (Bressler, p. 93). The protagonist's father, a cook working in the city, is on leave and has been spending his time in his native village with his family for some time. Before the day he leaves for his job, he asks the protagonist who is a little boy, "Will you be all right?" (p. 11). It is the first time the father has talked to the young boy and the boy's reaction is recorded in the words that he is "in pain and frightened" (p. 11).

The mythos of winter is the story of frustration and bondage (Bressler, p. 93). At school, when the protagonist (who is around twelve years of age) tries to correct his teacher while the latter is helping pupil memorize multiplication tables, he is punished by the teacher and gets his ear bruised. At home, we learn that the protagonist's sister has been engaged to her father's second cousin, ten years older to her. The sister is frightened because she will have to go back to the village all alone. Marriage at an early age is the price she will have to pay for being "a woman" (p. 26) in a patriarchal society. Though she showed greater zeal at school than her brother did yet she had to discontinue her education to give her brother a chance to get it. The brother, however, was never able to get an education because he got a job as a painter's assistant. The workplace conditions are extremely unhygienic which results in the brother's cough. But he is a paid worker and as regard the serious consequences of his work environment, "there is nothing that does not have as its consequences death" (p. 32).

The first two chapters of the novel belong to the mythos of winter. These chapters offer several instances of irony and satire. The novel, predominantly, is a work in satire. The first two chapters contain several examples of satire. At the very start of chapter one, the protagonist's father is described as "a man of voracious sexual appetite" (p. 5). In chapter two, the school and the teacher are satirized. The number of pupils in the school is greater than that of stools for them to sit on. That is why large number of pupils is forced to sit on the floor or stand in the class-room. The teacher is a "hollow-cheeked, betel-nuts-splitting possibly tubercular" person (p. 21). He never likes his profession. In the first chapter, the rural men, woman, and landlords have also been depicted in a satirical vein.

The Mythos of Summer

Starting with the mythos of winter, the novel then moves to the mythos of summer. It involves the genre of romance from chapter three onward. It is a journey from the real world to the ideal one. Ideally, romance is the story of the triumph of innocence and virtuous heroes. The present text does not properly justify this aspect of the definition of romance because it is primarily a work of satire. However, the mythos of summer offers us sufficient instances of fulfillment, adventure and conflict. At the start of chapter number three, Hamid tells us that our protagonist, who is a teen-age boy, is "infatuated with a pretty girl" (p. 38). The relationship with the pretty girl is a story of fulfillment. This relationship may not be as much satisfying for the pretty girl as it turns out to be for the protagonist of the novel. At the start of their relationship, the pretty girl is a source of much "masturbatory activity" (p. 38). The protagonist's family is enjoying good times at this stage. The protagonist and his beloved (the pretty girl) share each other's phone numbers. She thinks of our protagonist "with warmth and fondness" (p. 52). The first act of fulfillment for our hero takes place at the end of chapter number three when the "pretty girl" gives him for the first time, the pleasure of physical love.

Apart from the story of fulfillment, the mythos of summer also narrates a tale of adventure. At the university, our hero has "fallen in with university idealists" (p. 58). He has joined an organization led by his hostel leader. Our hero enjoys the nervousness his presence causes among "wealthier pupils and corrupt administrators" (p. 61). Our hero's services for the organization are rewarded properly. He is now part of "something larger... utterly ferocious" (p. 61). Our hero's membership of this organization is a sort of job for which he is paid. He is required to "attend meetings, read the organization's literature" and to keep his eyes and ears open (p. 68).

The mythos of summer also contains the episode of conflict. Chapter number seven of the novel is titled: "Be Prepared to Use Violence". At the start of this chapter, we learn that one of our hero's delivery trucks has been the target of terrorist attack. The destroyed truck was the latest addition to his "transportation fleet" (page. 121). Our hero's business has been thriving – a tale of fulfillment and achievement. "Bottled hydration has proved lucrative" (p. 121). But this achievement is not without its price. An armed motorcyclist forces our hero to lie down on the ground, and warns him of serious consequences. It was an act of warning from a rich businessman, our hero's rival in businesses. As a result, our hero hires the services of a guard. A few days later, the same motorcyclist gunman tries to attack our hero for the second time. But this time, our hero and his guard are quite alert and ready to counter the attack. The guard

shoots three times through our hero's car's windscreen. The gunman is killed. That night our hero was not able to sleep. But this act of violence succeeded in putting an end to threats against our hero. The mythos of summer is the longest mythos of the novel.

The Mythos of Spring

Chapters eight and nine of the novel relate to the mythos of spring. This is the realm of the genre of comedy where our hero settles to a happier state of life. Though not of perfect happiness, yet a happier state of life for our hero because his business is now conquering new territories; he is now set to challenge the state power. He is on the mission of "befriending the right bureaucrat" (p. 140). He wants to get the status of state-licensed provider. The conversation between the bureaucrat and the protagonist turns out to be a business deal where the state officer takes the role of a salesman, and the businessman (our hero) becomes his buyer. After striking a successful deal with the government officer, our hero is required to see the politician. The meeting with the politician also proves to be quite fruitful. Our hero's business is thriving continuously. His relationship with his wife has grown quite cold. But love, for him, has taken a different shape in the form of his son. The one hour that our hero spends with his son dining, is the happiest hour of the day for him. His relationship with his wife has been a passionless affair. However, the pretty girl always remains a source of excitement and fulfillment for him. And Andrew Anthony (2013) has remarked aptly "love is a luxury in conditions of economic struggle".

The Mythos of Autumn

The last three chapters (ten to twelve) of the novel constitute the mythos of autumn, that is, the genre of tragedy. Our hero, at the start of the story, had come from humble origins. In the middle period of his life, he worked efficiently and succeeded in earning sufficient wealth for himself. The same hero is now ready to face his downfall. Money, he had wished to earn, money he succeeded in acquiring, and now, towards the end of his life, money he should be prepared to lose. Therefore, chapter number ten is aptly titled: "Dance with Debt" (p. 180). Our hero's deputy, his ex-brother-in-law, insists that our hero should borrow money or else his company will collapse. Our hero has to agree. In fact, he does not much care about the consequences of this act. Alarmingly, almost all his property, his "offices and trucks and equipment" and his house also have been pledged (p. 183). As if no trouble should be left behind, the heart disease also joins in so that our hero should get no safe passage to escape. Thanks to the expertise of a famous doctor, our hero's heart surgery is successful and he survives.

However, the good news from the hospital is soon dismissed by the bad news that our hero's deputy, his former brother-in-law, has escaped abroad along with the money from our hero's company. As a result, our hero's company is bankrupt as he himself is now. Defeated, broken, and alone, our hero has rented a room in a two-star hotel. Towards the end of the story, our hero's interactions with his son and with the pretty girl are a sort of compensation for total loss in his life. His love for his son is not reciprocated; it is "a love that flows one way, down the generations, not in reverse" (p. 222). When death arrives finally, it finds our hero ready to receive her. And by this

time, he has lost most of his family members, his wife, his company and wealth, and of course, the pretty girl; but, not his pride and interest in life.

Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, it has been seen that the protagonist of the selected text goes through a specific cycle of events and situations. Mohsin Hamid's novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* may be taken as an illustration of Frye's monomyth. The first two chapters have the narrative pattern called the mythos of winter and they are related to the genre of irony/satire. Next follows the mythos of summer, the narrative pattern of romance. It is the longest season of the novel as it extends from chapter three to chapter seven of the novel. The greater space allotted to the season of summer (that is, the genre of romance) is in keeping with the central theme of the novel, an ordinary man's quest for becoming filthy rich in life. Third is the mythos of spring, the narrative pattern of comedy which extends over chapters eight and nine. And lastly, the mythos of autumn, the narrative pattern called tragedy extends over the last three chapters.

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