

Gendered Nationhood and Female Agency: Mumtaz's Subversion in Moth Smoke

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Abstract

This article examines Mumtaz Kashmiri in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000) as a literary case study to foreground how her subversive female agency evokes and erases the nation's gendered scripts about sexuality and motherhood. The imagined political communities of nation bank on specific imagined gender roles to sustain themselves. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) theorizes how gender relations affect and are affected by national projects and processes (and women are integrated into this project as biological and cultural reproducers, boundary markers and symbolic signifiers of the collectivity. At the heart of all these mechanisms is the institute of motherhood, which is co-opted by the nation and state under the guise of protection of the national honor to justify control of female bodies. This research article seeks to incorporate this theoretical framework in the analysis of the character of Mumtaz from Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000) and inspect how she exercises her agency while facing the constraints of gendered nationhood. Her refusal to be a part of this sociological solidity and homogeneity comes at a hefty price. It ultimately exposes the hypocrisy of the system of gendered expectations which deny women their humanity.

Keywords: Nation, Gendered nationhood, Motherhood, Female agency, Mohsin Hamid, *Moth Smoke*

Introduction

“Nations are not like trees or plants.” John McLeod writes in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, powerfully asserting that “they are not naturally occurring phenomenon.” (McLeod, 2000, p. 68) Despite their constructed nature, however, the nation-state has become one of the most powerful frameworks for organizing the modern world. This idea is elaborated famously by political scientist Benedict

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Anderson, who defined nations as “imagined political communities” (Anderson, 1983, p. 1). A nation is imagined because its members, who will never know most of their fellow citizens, nonetheless, feel a deep horizontal comradeship with them. This shared sense of identity is forged meticulously through deliberately manufactured narratives, rituals, and symbols. These range from foundational myths of shared origin or historical triumphs and traumas to daily enforcement through national anthems, flags, education systems, and common print language (Anderson, 1983). However, feminist and postcolonial scholars have argued that these unifying narratives are grounded in gendered discourses, ideologies, agendas and assumptions. As they argue, the imagined community frequently becomes an imagined community of men, a horizontal comradeship of men. The nation is often symbolically presented as a female body, a motherland (Dharti maa), whose honour is to be protected by the male warrior “son” of the nation. This gendered symbolism does not remain merely metaphorical; it translates into social and political expectations that make women read from the national script. It is inevitable then that gender roles become central to the national project, with women’s bodies being controlled under the pretext of protection and collective morality. In this way, the ‘imagined community’ relies on and perpetuates a parallel “imagined gender order”, using these constructed ideals to regulate, cage and restrain its female citizens within a masculinized script of belonging and sacrifice.

This imagined gender order is extensively theorized by Nira Yuval-Davis in *Gender and Nation* (1997), a pioneering work in the discipline of gendered understanding of nations. She seeks to magnify the scope of our cognizance of how female bodies are regulated in the domain of nationhood affirming that gender relations are lodged in various nationalist projects including reproduction, culture and citizenship, and expanding on the concept of women as “biological reproducers of the nation” (Davis, 1997). The institute of motherhood then becomes a highly controlled project of the nation, with female sexuality becoming a site of central focus where the national policies converge with patriarchal ideologies. The character of Mumtaz in Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke* (2000) serves as a literary demonstration of the theoretical framework provided by Davis. Mohsin Hamid’s debut novel tells the story of Darashikoh “Daru” Shezad, a former banker who loses his job and falls into a world of drugs, crime and existential despair. Set in the city of Lahore, against the backdrop of country’s first nuclear tests in the late 1990s, the novel sets forth a series of narratives, employing first, second, and third person

perspective to unravel the tale of Daru's downfall, at the heart of which is his affair with Mumtaz, his best friend Ozi's wife.

In the initial appearances of Mumtaz, Daru observes her as an independent and established woman, with her visits to red-light district and her complete comfort in her desires towards Daru. However, when the perspective shifts to that of Mumtaz, we find out that manacles of the patriarchal motherhood constrain her despite her elite class status and initial assertions of agency. In the gendered outline of nationhood, reproductive rights are often a violated aspect of the female autonomy and Mumtaz is a tragic illustration of this phenomenon. When she gets pregnant, her liberal alcohol-consuming, club-going husband forces her to carry the child even though she explicitly expresses her desire to abort it. Her reproductive capacity does not remain in the domain of personal choice, and she is trapped in the societal expectations of motherhood, as foreshadowed by her allegorical position in the Mughal history. In the story of Mughal brothers Darashikoh and Aurangzeb, allegorical parallels to Daru and Ozi, Mumtaz is their mother but, in the novel, she is their wife and lover, suggesting her dual role towards both men. As the narrative unwinds, Mumtaz's reduction to motherhood by everyone around her echoes expectations of the gendered nation. The birth of her son was not an act of creation but of alienation, resulting in a child she cannot love, a symbol of her subjugation she ultimately abandons as the final act of defiance against a system that denies her the right to exist freely in her humanity. The paper seeks to examine this main conflict by looking at the agency of Mumtaz in the context of these mechanisms where the sexuality and maternity of Mumtaz is co-opted and manipulated by the converging forces that are the patriarchal family and the implicit assertion of the Pakistani postcolonial nationhood

Review of the Literature

Mohsin Hamid has established himself as one of the most significant figures in the canon of Pakistani Anglophone literature, with his nuanced storytelling and incise engagement with class, desire and national belonging. *Moth Smoke* (2000), his debut novel, served as a powerful introduction to his literary talent, garnering significant attention and generating a considerable body of scholarly discussion. One of the major aspects of his novels that has been a central and recurring focus of this academic scrutiny is Hamid's layered portrayal of female characters. Mumtaz, from *Moth Smoke* (2000), has stood out as a particularly compelling subject for

deconstruction as scholars have examined her character through the lens of gender theory, post-structuralist thought and postcolonial critiques.

In their 2020 study, Hina Rafique and Summaira Mukhtar give a Butlerian analysis of Mumtaz's character by framing her as an active agent who performs a subversive gender identity rather than a passive victim of patriarchal Pakistani society. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not an innate essence but a sustained set of acts, gestures, and desires enacted within a highly rigid regulatory frame, they argue that Mumtaz does not fit into the traditional gender roles that are assigned to a woman and instead strategically adopts coded traditional masculine traits to assert herself as a self-determining subject. Rafique and Mukhtar (2020) solidify their argument by citing feminist scholarship, which contends that "the adoption of masculine ways of living on the part of women is in fact feminine rebellion against patriarchal ideology and society" (p. 31). Through this perspective, Mumtaz's performance is not read as a limitation but as an insurgent re-signification; merely trying to be "like a man" but is deliberately rebelling against the very binaries that uphold patriarchal power and delimit female agency.

In her article, "'I am a Monster': Modern Muslim Womanhood and the Trappings of Globalization in Hamid's Fiction," Fariha Chaudhary (2022) offers a contrastive view. She studies female characters from Mohsin Hamid's fiction to argue that female subjectivities are negotiated within the contested terrain formed by neo-colonialism, westernization, and globalization. Focusing on Mumtaz from *Moth Smoke* (2000) and *Pretty Girl* from *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), she contends that these women's desire for independent and assertive women is set in motion by the "urge to seek glamorous lives, these women transgress sacred religious and cultural boundaries" (Chaudhary, 2022, p. 317). According to her, they become highly engaged in the processes of globalization and the insistent infiltrations of neo-colonial discourse. The focal point of her argument, that the women in Hamid are "a crucial site where both positive and negative effects of globalization, can be understood" (Chaudhary, 2022, p. 317). This empowerment is never total but is instead shadowed by a modernity that incorporates a Western sensibility that subtly sets out the paths they can take and sometimes limits them as well. In other words, their self-determination is not a radical break with the patriarchal or transnational structures. Rather it reinforces in many ways the West-centric global political and cultural dynamics. Chaudhary (2022) resists from reading

their sexual liberation, careerism and consumerism as an act of unadulterated empowerment. Rather she thinks their rebellions relegates them to assimilation towards neocolonial globalization.

Tariq et al. (2018) proposes a post-structural analysis of the chosen passages of Hamid fiction by placing it in the context and code of social and cultural environment, in order to examine how language shapes and reinforces power relations. In the analysis of the language, that is not on the surface story, one finds the connection between gender and power that is introduced in the novel. The researchers note that “[t]he patriarchal authority denies [Mumtaz] the due right to explore herself” (Tariq et al., 2018, p. 37). The fact that gender oppression is not a mono-dimensional experience but instead it is deeply influenced by class is also of concern to them and they argue that Mumtaz “happens to have better opportunities for formal education and social awareness”, her privileged identity as a member of elite class is also given her a weapon of resistance that most women do not have. Being lucky to ensure the better opportunities of the formal education and social awareness (Tariq et al., 2018, p. 36), Mumtaz is aware of her rights as a person, unlike other women of unfortunate social and economic status, who, as the scholars remark, are either unaware of their rights or do not have the platform and resources to voice themselves. The point of intersection introduced by this inspection is that, on the one hand, class privilege has the ability to place a woman in a space where even the harshest types of financial difficulties are insignificant but on the other hand, though, in fact, it is through education that makes a woman realize that there is a whole world of restrictions placed upon her.

Shabrang and Tajik (2024) provide a poignant examination of the psychological and social consequences of assimilation by analyzing Mumtaz’s experience within the hybridized atmosphere through the specialized lens of immigration studies. They explore how Mumtaz’s identity, irrevocably altered by her time living in New York, intensifies confusion and agony upon her integration into the Lahori society. The scholars argue that some immigrant women, like Mumtaz, are “torn between two extremities of the first and third world” (Shabrang & Tajik, 2024, p. 139), existing in a liminal space where the values of these disparate cultures clash. Drawing upon the concept of Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, which describes the ambiguous, in-between state that emerges from the collision of colonizer and colonized cultures and further expanded by Gyatri Gayatri Spivak’s focus on the gendered subaltern, Shabrang and Tajik’s (2024) study foregrounds the effects of immigration specifically on women

through the character of Mumtaz as she tries to balance the roles the American and Pakistani society imposes on her and in the end becomes “neither a westernized educated woman nor a glorified eastern mother and wife.” (p. 146). The ambivalent self of Mumtaz thus dangles between the two cultures, resulting in her becoming a “mimic woman”, embodying the tragic paradox of partial belonging and chronic self-alienation, a spectral figure who is no one and belongs to nowhere.

Shazrah Salam (2019) in chapter one of her doctoral dissertation, *Imposed Silences, Subversive Voices: (Re) Reading Selected Pakistani Anglophone Writing through the Bodies of Pakistani-Muslim Women*, offers an alternative reading of *Moth Smoke* (2000), centering Mumtaz and questioning how “gendered identities inform Pakistani nationalist narratives.” (p. 35). Laying an extensive theoretical framework to understand the gendered concept of nationhood, she traces how Hamid gives narrative agency to Mumtaz. Unlike her historical counterpart, the wife of Shah Jahan and mother of his fourteen children, Mumtaz exercises her agency by refusing to be an object in the masculine narratives of the Nation-State. Salam (2019) explores the various aspects of gendered nationhood in Mumtaz: a mother, a monster, and an individual, as presented in the novel. She examines this rebellion through a wide-ranging lens of bodily and discursive agency while also challenging the significant limitations of Hamid’s portrayal of female agency. She observes that Mumtaz’s “emancipation comes only at the cost of exile” (Salam, 2019, p.111), as her rejection of her role as a wife and a mother pushes her to the margins of society. This compromised vision of female emancipation suggests that the narrative is “haunted by the spectre of masculine anxiety” (Salam, 2019, p.111).

Theoretical Framework

The modern nation-state, far from being a neutral or gender-blind entity, is a profoundly gendered construct. The very survival of its symbols is predicated upon specific and controlled performances of gender roles, and central to this project is the regulation of female sexuality and reproductive rights. In the gendered nation, women’s bodies become frontiers of national identity, purity and destiny, despite most hegemonic theorizations about nations claiming gender relations as irrelevant. In fact, the entry of women into the national arena is a relatively new phenomenon in formal political terms. However, “Women did not just ‘enter’ the national arena: they were always there, and central to its constructions and reproductions! (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 14)”. This theoretical framework is anchored in Nira Yuval-Davis’s

seminal work *Gender and Nation* (1997) and analyses how the control of female reproduction is not a byproduct of nationalism but a constitutive mechanism of it, while further nuanced by integrating Partha Chatterjee's (1993) concept of the spiritual domain, Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargains, and Anne McClintock's (1995) temporal metaphors of the national family to present a multi-dimensional understanding of how the nation-state asserts authority over the most intimate part of women's lives. The framework is then employed to analyze the character of Mumtaz from *Moth Smoke* (2000), highlighting her loss of agency in the face of nationalized gendered expectations, especially regarding motherhood, and her regaining that agency at a hefty price.

Yuval-Davis in *Gender and Nation* (1997) provides a systemic theoretical apparatus to deconstruct the relationship between gender and nationalism, elucidating that despite gender and nation being debated as separate phenomena, they are "informed and constructed by each other" (p. 33). She argues that women are integrated into the nationalist project in three distinct yet overlapping capacities: as biological reproducers of the nation, as boundary markers of the collective, and as the symbolic signifiers of its identity. Reproductive rights have always been a major concern for the feminist movement, and the effects of the presence or absence of these rights on women have been extensively debated. However, nationalist projects which foreground genealogy and origin as the major organizing principles of national collectivity place control of marriage, procreation and therefore sexuality high on their agenda (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 34), making these rights a concern of the nation-state rather than a purely an individual matter. In the second chapter, "Women and the biological reproduction of the nation", Yuval-Davis (1997) maps out the mechanisms through which women's reproductive organs are converted into a national resource and traces their implications for "constructions of nation and women's social positioning" (p. 38).

The myth of common origin plays a central role in the construction of most ethnic and national collectivities, Yuval-Davis (1997) argues, so it becomes apparent why women's reproductive rights are a central focus of the nationalist discourse. The notion of racial 'purity' leads to pronatalist and antinatalist policies, depending on "hegemonic discourses which construct nationalist projects at specific historical moments" (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 41). Some discourses that are explained are "people as power" where the future of the nation is thought to depend on continuous growth (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 41); the "eugenicist discourse" where the quality of the nation

takes precedence over size; and the “Malthusian discourse” which warns that the fear that unchecked growth might bring national or international disaster (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 45). The effect of this discourse is highly gendered, as when the need to control population arises, male children are usually preferred, and baby girls become a target of abortion or infanticide (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 46). All the policies that are implemented because of these discourses, Yuval-Davis (1997) asserts, are embedded in specific social contexts. The absence of public healthcare and welfare structures, as well as the invoking of religious authority to regulate women’s reproductive options, allows such policies to emerge. Furthermore, women face conflicting pressures due to globalization: they are encouraged to participate in the labour market, yet a rise in religious and ethnic fundamentalism often works to deny them reproductive freedom in the name of tradition.

Additionally, Yuval-Davis (1997) delineates that women, especially older women, are “empowered to rule what is appropriate behaviour and appearance and what is not” (p. 49) and thus become agents as well as perpetrators of this oppression, engaging in what Deniz Kandiyoti (1998) calls “patriarchal bargains” (p. 274). Kandiyoti (1998) explicates, through analyzing different forms of these bargains, that women are active —though constrained —participants of the patriarchal system as opposed to being mere passive victims. According to Kandiyoti (1998), in “classic patriarchy”, what she states is the patriarchal system of North Africa, the Muslim Middle East, and South and East Asia, women, as young brides, are subservient not only to all the men in their husband’s family but also to more senior women, especially their mother-in-law (p. 278). This deprivation is then partially unseated by the control she will have over her own daughters-in-law. This cycle of authority encourages the internalization of this form of patriarchy by women themselves. These bargains are micro-level strategies opted by women within the macro-level role assigned to them by the nation as the “cultural reproducer” (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 34).

The role of cultural codes, as demonstrated by Yuval-Davis (1997), is linked to the symbolic border guards, which reproduce and maintain the mythical unity of the national ‘imagined community.’ The construction of manhood and womanhood, as well as sexuality and gendered relations of power, constitutes a significant part of these codes. She discusses women’s position as symbolic border guards and as embodiments of the collectivity, and as cultural reproducers and asserts that this dimension of women’s life is “crucial un understanding their subjectivities [and] their relations with each other, with children and with men” (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.

34). Women as symbolic border guards are made to bear the 'burden of representation' of the collectivity's identity and to carry its honor. In this manner, the control of women's conduct, clothing, and, of course, sexuality becomes justified, and any step "out of the line" is seen as a betrayal of the nation. Anne McClintock (1995) provides a temporal dimension to this notion as she analyses the temporal anomaly within nationalism where "men are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backwards-looking and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity" (p. 359). At the same time, men are represented as "the progressive agent[s] of national modernity" (p. 359).

This anchoring of women in a nostalgic past aligns with Partha Chatterjee's (1993) idea of the "spiritual domain" in his analysis of anti-colonial nationalism of India. The dichotomy created between the outer, material world and the inner, spiritual world was a way of asserting autonomy as a nation in the face of imperial power, with the inner domain "bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity" and refusing to "allow the colonial power to intervene in [this] domain. (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 6). The institution of family, and by extension, the positioning of women in the family, was to be recast and made new to be different from the Western family. The "new woman" was to be modern and not as atavistic and inert as McClintock (1995) contended, but she was still expected to display the "signs of national tradition" (p. 9). This setting of women in the family and in the nation is further inspected by Yuval-Davis (1997) in her chapter "Citizen and Difference", where she argues that citizenship is a multilayered and stratified construct as abstract promises of universal rights are mediated by social differences of class, race, and gender. A woman's experience of citizenship is therefore fractured. She may be a "legal" citizen in the outer domain, yet her identity and rights are often constrained in the inner domain of family and tradition. Consequently, citizenship cannot be analyzed as a completely individual or collective phenomenon, as it is at the intersection of these spheres —the public and private, the modern and traditional, the individual and the collective —that the gendered nature of the national belonging is most clearly revealed.

At the heart of all these debates is the institution of motherhood, which is mobilized as a central mechanism by the nationalist discourse through which the nation consolidates its identity and exercises control. There are several interconnected dimensions through which women are reduced to their reproductive and symbolic

capacities, most visibly through the symbolic representation of the nation itself. This powerful icon demands devotion and sacrifice. However, this elevation has a concrete and often oppressive counterpart in the lives of real women, who are themselves reduced to the function of motherhood, whether biologically, in bearing children, or culturally, as the primary transmitters of traditions. Within the private sphere, where a woman's political and social power is made contingent on her reproductive role, her value is narrowly defined by her capacity to have sons. Furthermore, the choice to have or not have children is frequently taken from women either by forcing them to reproduce to bolster ethnic majorities or by forcibly preventing them from reproducing, in policies targeting marginalized groups. Beyond biological reproduction, as stated earlier, women are given the task of being the cultural reproducers, expected to become the custodians of language, religion and national values. This burden of cultural reproduction extends their maternal role beyond their children to encompass their husbands and the broader community, effectively expanding motherhood into an ideological labour that "mothers" the entire national culture into existence and preservation.

In this way, the nation's strategic hold over the concept of motherhood fundamentally poisons every relationship a woman has. Her every connection—personal, familial and civic—is refracted through her status as a mother. This integrated and intersectional framework brings to light how motherhood is appropriated by the gendered discourse of nationhood and also widens the scope to closely inspect the character of Mumtaz in *Moth Smoke* (2000) as she is forced into motherhood and later attempts the reclamation of her agency in the face of the totalizing narrative of nation.

Textual Analysis: Mumtaz's Subversive Female Agency and the Gendered Nationhood

In Mohsin Hamid's searing portrayal of a decaying Lahore, *Moth Smoke* (2000), the character of Mumtaz Kashmiri serves as a profound critique of the suffocating expectations regarding motherhood placed upon women within the intersecting framework of nationhood and culture. The novel is essentially a tale of loss in which almost every character grapple with a personal tragedy, but it is in the parallel yet divergent journeys of Daru and Mumtaz that the central conflict of agency is most powerfully explored. Both are caged by the oppressive structures of society and their struggles to reclaim their power form the moral and narrative core of the story.

However, while Daru's path is of an externalized, self-annihilating rebellion —a downward spiral into drugs and crime which ultimately leads to him committing murder —Mumtaz's rebellion is internal and ultimately a more transformative act of self-assertion, rooted in radical honesty. Mohsin Hamid stated in an interview with *Newsweek* that even though her journey is painful, the "steps [Mumtaz] takes are the only positive ones taken in the book" (*Newsweek* Editors, 2000, para. 6). The stark contrast between the different textures of their resistance opens space for the analysis of Mumtaz's integrity towards herself, in her writing and ultimately, in her final devastating choice of defining her own truth even at the price of great personal cost. In doing so, she brings into play her feminine agency to stand up to the master narratives of tradition regulating bodies and sexualities.

As the initial chapters are focalized through Daru's perspective, limiting direct access to Mumtaz's interiority, her subversion of gendered norms is articulated through subtle acts of agency that Daru observes deliberately counter the passive maternal role prescribed to her. This is established in their first encounter: she lets Ozi hold their infant while she proactively gets up to get Scotch, commanding the domestic space. Daru's observation that "Her drink is stiffer than either of ours" (Hamid, 2000, p. 17) is a commentary on her character, which challenges the fragile femininity of women in her social position. This initial act of self-assertion is further compounded by her defiance of Ozi's authority, directly countering his declaration of committing to smoking by stating, "Well, I haven't quit" (Hamid, 2000, p. 8). Moreover, the dynamics of desire are consistently reversed in the novel. Mumtaz is the primary architect of their illicit affair, while Daru remains paralyzed by social caution. She proposes their excursion to the red-light district, leveraging her career as a journalist, not as a shameful secret but as a tool of liberation and connection. Crucially, she not only claims desire but acts on it by initiating their first sexual encounter, positioning herself as the narrative's driving force of transgression long before her internal motivations are revealed to the reader. Through these calculated performances, Hamid establishes Mumtaz not as an object of Daru's gaze but as a subject who is "the architect of her own vision" (*Newsweek* Editors, 2000, para. 6). Being one of the narrators of the novel, Mumtaz insists on telling her story her way. We get to meet Mumtaz personally in chapter 10 titled "the wife and mother (part one)", more than halfway through the novel. The name of the chapter mirrors her initial introduction in the second chapter, "Mumtaz: wife, mother and lover" (Hamid, 2000, p. 12). These are the roles stipulated to her by the narrative of nationhood and of the novel itself, and these are the roles she ultimately abandons

to reclaim ownership over her body and life, repositioning her narrativizing position within the novel as well as in the larger national context. The narration drips with bitter honesty, highlighting her acceptance of her reality, unlike Daru and Ozi, who try to find something to blame for their actions. She shoulders her own mistake of marrying Ozi despite not being the “marrying sort” (Hamid, 2000, p. 142), realizing that she was scared because every woman she’d ever known had told her that “an unspeakable future awaits girls who don’t wind up marrying, and marrying well” (Hamid, 2000, p. 142). In this way, the invisible hand of gendered expectations funnels her toward the path of marriage, despite her heart not being into it. Nevertheless, the first year of her marriage was pleasant; they talked, went out, danced, and above all, as she contends, she was completely open with him. This brief period of intimacy stages the irony of her later confinement, but this happiness ends when Mumtaz gets pregnant, an event through which her initial loss of agency is catalyzed.

Ozi ignores her desire to abort, reducing her body to a vessel of societal and familial legacy, but he does something arguably more corrosive to her autonomy: he tells his mother. The role of Mumtaz’s mother-in-law in her marriage is pivotal. Not only does her arrival in New York force Mumtaz to have second thoughts, but her involvement in Ozi’s life also causes Mumtaz to lose respect for him as a partner capable of emotional independence. She observes that Ozi’s mother “[had] spent half her life making her son into the man she’d wished she’d married” (Hamid, 2000, p. 149), rendering Mumtaz’s attempts to restart their marriage futile. Kandiyoti (1988), while discussing patriarchal bargains, argues that it is in older women’s interest to suppress romantic love between their sons and their wives as they need their life-long loyalty (p. 279), and this can manifest by creating an emotionally incestuous connection with their son. Emotional incest is a form of emotional abuse that occurs when a parent, motivated by the loneliness of a troubled marriage or relationship, makes a child a surrogate partner to meet their own emotional needs (Adams, 1991), and what happens between Ozi and his mother can be classified as such. Çimşir and Akdoğan (2021) maintain that survivors of emotional incest experience low self-esteem and may have troubles in marital/romantic relationships (Çimşir and Akdoğan, 2021, p. 99). Ozi’s mother intimately participating in his life, from correcting his posture to critiquing his suits and making him insecure, is a manifestation of such emotional abuse, with one look from her transforming “the relaxed, charming, sexy man [Mumtaz]’d married into an uncomfortable little schoolboy” (Hamid, 2000, p. 149).

Mumtaz's loss of power in the face of cultural codes of womanhood and sexuality, which causes her to keep her pregnancy and give birth, is partially shaped by her internalization of those codes. Yuval-Davis (1997) has argued that women's position as symbolic border guards justifies control over the most intimate parts of their lives, and this control is often embedded and reproduced in women themselves. The disagreement between her and Ozi is a collision of private desire and culturally coded duty, where the institutional weight of motherhood crushes individual female desire. Mumtaz, feeling guilty and selfish over her desire to abort, tries to convince herself that she wants this child, because "childbirth [is] an expression of female power" (Hamid, 2000, p. 144). But the birth of her son, Muazzam, is anything but empowering. She leaves the hospital feeling like a cripple, and the newborn child feels like a science experiment. Besides, the 'burden of representation' that she bears does not end here. Despite not wanting the child, she goes through the mechanical motions of caring for him and after Muazzam is six months old, she wants to work full-time again, but Ozi is against it and asks her if she loves her son at all, weaponizing motherhood as a moral test and echoing the gendered temporal anomaly of nationhood McClintock (1995) asserts, where women are reduced to atavistic properties. Ozi's condemnation of Mumtaz's decision to terminate her pregnancy and pursue her career exposes the limit of his modernity, which is constrained by the traditionalist expectations of a wife's primary role as a mother and by the nationalist-culturalist script that equates maternal sacrifice with feminine legitimacy.

Mumtaz is once again compelled to give up, resuming her professional life through freelance writing from home. She writes about lullabies and herbal remedies for diaper rash, acknowledging her hypocrisy and admitting a profound sense of maternal inadequacy. The ideology of motherhood, however, extends its influence beyond her career, fundamentally destabilizing her marriage. Her relationship with Ozi deteriorates as he prioritizes their son above everything else and in a disturbing regression, begins to infantilize himself by adopting childish speech and drinking her breastmilk during intimacy. Most critically, their intellectual and emotional connection, the very foundation of their bond, dissipates as she realizes that she "had two selfish children on [her] hands, and they were making [her] miserable" (Hamid, 2000, p. 147). It is in these two domains, her professional and marital life, that Mumtaz experiences a profound loss of agency after being forced into motherhood. Consequently, she strategically reclaims power by covertly working as a journalist and starting an affair with Daru, aiming to de-essentialize the male

nationalist rhetoric of cultural and family codes by creating a double life as she realizes that she “couldn’t be just the good wife and mother anymore” and “wanted to create a life that [Ozi] knew nothing about” (Hamid, 2000, p. 150).

The trajectory of Mumtaz’s liberation is inaugurated by her literary pseudonym, Zulfiqar Manto, which functions as her initial act of self-authorship against the prescriptions of a patriarchal nationalist discourse. The act of writing is not merely creative but therapeutic, serving as a salve for the wounds, physical and psychic, inflicted by childbirth. In their study of challenges faced by new mothers in the collectivist culture of Pakistan, Fayyaz and Rani (2025) highlight in their findings that the emotional experiences of these women were largely shaped by societal expectations and familial pressures, with participants reporting “feelings of emotional isolation, stress, and psychological strain due to the overwhelming responsibilities associated with motherhood” (p. 625). Mumtaz experiences these expectations and pressures, asserting that “Childbirth had hurt me inside”, and with writing, as she reclaims a self-fragmented by gendered expectations, she was “finally starting to heal” (Hamid, 2000, p. 151). This culminates in her affair with Daru, which she deems as the “most liberating experience” (Hamid, 2000, p. 151) she has ever had, precisely because it represents a deliberate seizure of bodily and emotional agency. Within this counter-narrative, Mumtaz is imbued with critical consciousness, notably absent in both Ozi and Daru, whose lack of self-reflection and passive acceptance of circumstances stands in sharp relief with her deliberate self-fashioning. She consciously utilizes her affair and writing career to subvert the static roles of mother, wife and national symbol assigned to her by invented traditions, re-negotiating these identities with lucid awareness of her transgressive image and fiercely resisting any external attempts at shaming. However, this assertive agency exists in constant strain with the inescapable shackles of motherhood, subject to rigorous policing and moral surveillance from the gendered nation-state. Despite her tenacious protection of her autonomy, she remains trapped within a symbolic economy where her identity is relentlessly reduced to its maternal function. This is evidenced in the dynamics with Ozi and Daru, where Ozi seeks in her a substitute for maternal care absent from his own mother, and Daru explicitly values her for her capacity to take good care of him. Both relationships, though outwardly different, are founded on a desire for ownership of her body and the extraction of emotional labour, revealing them as microcosmic iterations of the nationalist project, where, as stated by Elleke Boehmer (2005), “the woman – and usually the mother – figure stands for the national territory and for certain national values: symbolically she is

ranged above the men; in reality she is kept below them" (p. 29). In this project, women are denied their humanity and are viewed solely through fixed instrumental roles; upon becoming a mother, a woman is effectively ossified in that singular identity. The hypocrisy of the system is further exposed through the moral calculus applied to violence. Both Ozi and Daru are murderers, yet it is Mumtaz who is deemed a monster at the end, echoing the sentiment Yuval-Davis (1997) expresses in *Gender and Nation* that women and men are considered parts of the collectivity, but "there are always specific rules and regulations which relate to women as women" (p. 49). Operating under this ideological framework, both men assume the right to judge, punish and even forgive Mumtaz, blind to their culpability, which is evoked when Mumtaz asks, "And who will forgive you?" (Hamid, 2000, p. 229) in response to Ozi's ironically given absolution. This presumed authority that Ozi and Daru feel underscores a regime in which women are perpetually positioned as objects of scrutiny, never as legitimate subjects of justice or equal moral agents within the national imagination.

However, Mumtaz does not want to give this system or its representatives to hold absolute sway. Her last act of resistance is meant to sever herself from the system entirely. In ending her affair with Daru, abandoning her son, and repudiating the interpellative and essentializing sociopolitical configuration, she makes a radical negation. She is aware that her humanity will never take precedence over her role in the current symbolic order, hence, her salvation will need a complete disruption. Her escape is itself a potent form of subversion, denying the very conditions in which the gendered nationhood tries to assert itself over her and despite the fact that her insurrection is suicidal, it is a revelation of a deep truth, right before the eyes of the woman in the gilded cage the search against agency is usually an all-or-nothing game, a fatal moth-flight to the candle of individuality.

Conclusion

To conclude, Mumtaz Kashmiri from *Moth Smoke* (2000) embodies subversive potential in the face of all-consuming gendered narratives of nationhood, which aim to control the most intimate parts of her life. She sets out on a path of active insurgency to reclaim agency over her body in the face of the roles imposed upon her by the constraints of the male-centred project of nationalism. Through her pseudonymous pen and her affair with Daru, she challenges the boundaries of what a woman is permitted to be in a system that denies her humanity and constantly

displaces the essentialist script for the idealized roles of mother and wife. However, as Yuval-Davis (1997) posits, in all dimensions of nationalism, gender relations play an important part, and the lives of women are determined by “those who are powerful in the family, and by outside ideologies and practices” (p. 105). Mumtaz’s rebellion ultimately ends with her being deemed a monster. Therefore, her abandonment of her son and her affair with Daru and her decision to leave everything behind are not framed as an escape but as the only viable strategy of self-preservation. The intersections between gender and nation, which Yuval-Davis (1997) maps out, are manifested in *Moth Smoke* (2000), and Mumtaz is situated in the middle of them. In the end, her only salvation is the refusal to participate in the nationalist and patriarchal discourse that wishes to confine her to her symbolic potential and negates her humanity on a foundational level.

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