

Nonwestern Posthuman Cyborg Ontologies: The Man-Automobile Relationship in Mohsin Hamid's Fiction

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Introduction

The notion of the 'cyborg' has now been established as one of the most pertinent identity signifiers to explore subjectivity transformation in the posthuman era. However, scholars have pointed out that these investigations into the changing contours of identities and subjectivities have been limited to the Euro-American academy and there is a rising need to decolonize this field of study. This article intends to contribute to the decolonization of cyborg subjectivity studies and invite debate over possible nonwestern trajectories for exploring new contours of man-automobile enmeshment as depicted in a South Asian Anglophone fiction by Mohsin Hamid. His fiction is about nonwestern people who have been depicted in close connection with their vehicles. Therefore, human characters in these narratives, in relation to their vehicles, are both unconscious and metaphoric cyborgs. The study contends that a nonwestern posthuman cyborg literary critique can be conducted by critically analyzing the roles of vehicles in the plot, character development, and aesthetic structure of Hamid's novels. In short, this study demonstrates that man-vehicle relationship depicted in Hamid's fiction yields rich interpretations for literary critiques on the possible nonwestern posthuman cyborg subjectivities emerging in contemporary milieu.

The concept of the 'cyborg' provides diverse discursive trajectories for academic investigations. The developments of both the term and the notion of the 'cyborg' have been enriched since its inception in 1960. This word was coined by Manfred Clyne and Nathan Klines in the 1960s to express the blending of humans and microchips for the purposes of space travelling.¹ Etymologically, according to *Oxford Advanced Learner's*

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Dictionary (OALD), this term is a “blend of cyber- and organism ... a creature that is part human, part machine.”² Today, ‘cyber’ means “connected with electronic communication networks, especially the Internet.”³ According to this dictionary definition and common public understanding of the term ‘cyborg’, it is an amalgamation of human and machine through any kind of electronic link. Therefore, whenever someone hears the term ‘cyborg’, it signifies a symbiosis between human and machine as commonly portrayed in popular science fiction cinema and creative writing. The ‘cyborg’ became a popular term in the West after the publication of the 1972 novel *Cyborg* by Martin Caidin which was later adapted for a very popular 1970s television series *The Six Million Dollar Man*. When thinking about the entity of the cyborg images of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the film *Terminator* (1984), *Robocop* (1987), various cyborgs in the *Star Trek* series (1966-1969), and the replicants in *Blade Runner* (1982), may come to mind. All these popular portrayals depict human bodies as enhanced, mutated, or amalgamated with some high-level technology. Nevertheless, the term ‘cyborg’ is much more diverse, flexible, rich, and open-ended in academic discourse, especially that of the posthuman, after Donna Haraway claimed that:

[B]y the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.⁴

According to Haraway, all human beings are cyborgs because they are in one way or another amalgamated with machine, thus, the most significant clue to decoding contemporary epistemology and ontology.

Posthuman cyborg theorists believe that the identity signifier, cyborg, does not mean a cyborg in exclusively dictionary terms but anyone whose identity, psyche, and ideology has been either altered or constructed through nonorganic elements. It is not necessary to be physically altered to become a

¹ Sue Short, *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 35; Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 13.

² *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 371.

³ *OALD*, p. 371.

⁴ Donna Haraway, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s’, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, eds Vincent B. Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, John McGowan, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Jeffrey J. Williams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), p. 2191.

cyborg; an unaltered human body can also be a cyborg.⁵ In recent times, the ‘cyborg’ has become one of the most widely used terms for the study of the changing nature of human subjectivity as it “draws out the effects of new technologies on embodiment and subjectivity in the late twentieth century.”⁶ Thus, the “machinic, the biological, the conceptual and the political—interconnect with one another, where technology as a material reality and as a cultural fiction, are not separable.”⁷ The ‘cyborg’ has now become a critical lens to study the shifting nature of human in an overwhelmingly technologized milieu.

A very comprehensive and detailed analysis of the history, etymology, and mythical sources behind the term ‘cyborg’ has been presented by Sue Short in her book *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity*. Sue Short contends that all human beings are, in fact, cyborgs in contemporary times in one way or another.⁸ Many types of cyborgs are also identified such as ‘unconscious cyborgs’⁹ and ‘bad borgs’.¹⁰ Thus, there are many types of cyborgs are prevalent in the contemporary milieu which are changing the very nature of humanity in subtle ways. Therefore, there is a need to unravel these aspects of cyborg subjectivities for a better understanding of the implications of technologies on human subjectivities in the contemporary literary texts. Hence, the cyborg is a rich concept to explore the human and nonhuman fusion and emerging posthuman identity signifiers.

The construct of the cyborg has multiple implications and angles for its application on a literary text, but each study will ultimately focus on human’s connection with the nonhuman. One possible way to study nonwestern posthuman cyborg subjectivities is to critically analyze human-automobile relationship in fictional accounts. The impending change of human psyche and society due to the invention of the automobiles has been depicted in seminal Western texts, and as Andrew Thacker has argued the

⁵ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 4; Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs*, pp. 3-6; Short, *Cyborg Cinema*, pp. 44-45; Claire Chambers, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* (New York: Springer, 2019), pp. 213-14.

⁶ Krista G. Lynes and Katerina Symes, ‘Cyborg and Virtual Bodies’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, eds Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 122-42.

⁷ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 161.

⁸ Short, *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity*, p. 45.

⁹ Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs*, pp. 167-95.

“motor car is not just a vehicle for symbolic meaning ... it also has a powerful influence on the narratives of the novels.”¹¹ Paul Ryder provides further direction for the exploration of the man-automobile relationship in literature. He points to classics like the *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) by Kenneth Grahame, in which a motor car crashes into a cart; hinting at the historic instance of removing carriages and carts from roads and giving way to motor cars. Accordingly, contemporary literary and popular cinema productions create subjectivities of their characters with the help of the vehicle they own. For instance, a Rolls Royce Tourer imbued the persona of Jay Gatsby with affluence, charm, and stateliness in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. ‘Classy’ cars like the Aston Martin DB Mark 5 have been used to indicate the charisma, elegance, and mystery of the secret agent, James Bond, in the 007 franchise. The irresistible attractiveness and extreme wealth of the character Christian Grey in the *Fifty Shades* series by E. L. James was connected to his Audi R8 Spyder. Thus, automobiles owned by characters become signifiers of their social status as well as their personality traits. Ryder also notes that automobiles foreshadow events and reinforce the themes of a literary text. He claims that in the novels of Kenneth Grahame, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, F. Scott Fitzgerald vehicles are representative of the dreams, aspirations and historical contingencies informed by the artistic intuition of the authors. He writes:

the automobile represents a competing complex of liberating and destructive forces ... display a particularly acute perception of the motorcar’s remarkable duality ... the automobile is represented as a semantic and structural mechanism of near oxymoronic significance: on one hand a vehicle of agency and conquest, and on the other a machine of death and destruction ... the motorcar ... a symbol of breakdown and cultural wreckage ... frequently signposts disruption, collision, and breakdown: accidents and catastrophes; physical and emotional collapse; the shattering of natural linkages; the wrecking of human relationships ... the motorcar enlarges our capacity to conquer, through a range of metaphoric and stylistic contrivances ... it redoubles our tendency to destroy.¹²

Automobiles have emerged as very significant literary devices to provide an additional layer of meaning by becoming recurrent symbols, metaphors and motifs, as well as to magnify the impact of tragic plights of the

¹¹ Andrew Thacker, ‘E.M. Forster and the Motor Car’, *Literature & History*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2000), p. 37.

¹² Paul Ryder, ‘The Motorcar and Desire: A Cultural and Literary Reconsideration of the Motorcar in Modernity’, *Southern Semiotic Review*, vol. 2 (2013), pp. 1-18.

characters in contemporary narratives. The novels of British-Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*,¹³ *How to Get Filthy Rich in South Asia*,¹⁴ and *Moth Smoke*¹⁵ see various kinds of automobiles deeply embedded in the structures of these texts and the destinies of the characters portrayed in them. This article conducts a hermeneutic textual analysis of the symbiosis of characters with their automobiles in these works. The critical lens of Haraway's 'cyborg' is the most appropriate for this study to illustrate the emerging enmeshment of man and automobile in this text. This text demonstrates that the relationship between humans and their locomotives has transformed their notions about status in society, outlook on life, social class, psyche and destinies, thus, turning their human personas into cyborg subjectivities.

Man-Automobile Synergy and Class Difference in *Moth Smoke*

Personalized automobiles became an inevitable part of human existence in the twentieth century. Cars have become an integral part of human life all around the world. But cars affect each society and field of study in their own unique way. This exclusive affect might be a behaviour change, a skill extension, intensification of a personality trait and the altered unconscious cyborg subjectivity. In *Moth Smoke* cars play an integral role in defining characters and their aspirations, and the making or unmaking of their social class, psyche, and destiny.

Moth Smoke, originally published in 2000, chronicles the tragic journey of Daru, a middle-class Pakistani who owns a Suzuki Mehran. The narrative elaborates on the characters of Daru's friends Ozi with relation to his Mitsubishi Pajero and Murad Badshah in connection with his rickshaw fleet. The characters and their automobiles are not individuals but prototypes of Pakistani ethnic, social, economic, religious, and gendered groups. Each one of these characters is a microcosmic representation of the socio-economic class, ethnic background, and religious affiliation of their larger communities. Daru, the anti-hero of Hamid's first novel, *Moth Smoke*, is a very evident manifestation of Hamid's vision of Pakistani man-automobile cyborg subjectivities as he suffers along with his car. Whatever tragedy his

¹³ Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Mohsin Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich in South Asia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013).

¹⁵ Mohsin Hamid, *Moth Smoke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

car suffers follows him, and his own down fall is reflected in his car's chronic deterioration.

Daru and his Suzuki Mehran

Daru, the main protagonist, owns a Suzuki Mehran, considered to be an economic car for the lower-middle class in Pakistan. Rebecca Johnke has studied the impact of automobile technology on the masculinity of the main protagonist of Peter Carey's short story *Crabs*. She contends that "Cars are a window into the body image of a driver and the statement they wish to manifest about their status in the community."¹⁶ Similarly, Hamid has very skillfully connected the automobile with the character of Daru to signify his socio-economic class. His car provides the insight that Daru is not very strong financially and belongs to the aspiring middle class. His treatment of the car signifies his overall attitude towards his life. For instance, he tries to steady the steering wheel of his car with his knees,¹⁷ instead of his hands, which hints at his mishandling of his life because he is being careless with his life just as he is sloppy with his dated car. Later on, he refers to getting baked in the car "like a snail on hot asphalt"¹⁸ which foreshadows Daru's survival in the hot weather without any electricity. His vision is also influenced and marred by the windscreen of his car as he navigates the "road through the arc the steering wheel cuts above the dashboard"¹⁹ which implies his excessive reliance on locomotives to judge everyone with respect to the vehicle they own. It happens throughout the novel that he often compares his small, Pakistan-made Suzuki Mehran to the larger, internationally-renowned cars of his friends, and feels inferior to them.²⁰ Therefore, his vision of life is tainted and limited: he cannot see beyond the arc of steering wheel which causes his undoing.

The first journey of Daru in the novel is a symbolic representation of the way he handles/mishandles his life in the overall narrative and foreshadows his doom. Later on, when Daru's car runs out of fuel,²¹ it indicates Daru running out of money. Near the end of this narrative, when

¹⁶ Rebecca Johnke, 'Misogyny, Muscles and Machines: Cars and Masculinity in Australian Literature', in *Contemporary Issues in Australian Literature: International Perspective*, ed. David Callahan (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 102.

¹⁷ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 10.

¹⁸ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 10.

¹⁹ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 10.

²⁰ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 25.

²¹ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 19.

Daru is beaten up badly while selling drugs, the windows of his car are also smashed by the people who beat him.²² Thus, the car is a symbolic as well as personal and social space for Daru.

The ways in which the character of Daru has been fused with the function and malfunction of his car makes Daru a fictional cyborg. This hints at an emerging literary technique of cyborg symbolism where a machine which has been associated with a character manifests their attributes, behaviours, and destinies. Daru seems to be an unconscious cyborg: he does not realise the extent to which his life is enmeshed with his car's, and how it has been mysteriously affecting his vision, his destiny, and his attitude towards life. As an unconscious cyborg Daru has been fused literally as well as metaphorically with his car.

Ozi and his Pajero

In contrast, Daru's rich childhood friend Ozi, the antagonist of *Moth Smoke*, is portrayed in relation to his Pajero, a bigger and more expensive automobile than Daru's small vehicle. The Pajero, a large, four-wheel drive, sports utility vehicle, is a symbol of the elite, landlord, and upper class in Pakistan. Its large size demonstrates the owners' affluence, status, and power. A bigger vehicle acts as a symbol of a bigger ego in this text. Since the pre-colonial Mughal era, the size of transportation for Nawabs, princes, and emperors was of great importance in the Subcontinent. The kings and emperors from the Mughal era would ride an elephant to display the pomp of their empires: the bigger the animal, the higher the status of the owner. Historians have cited instances where an emperor's large elephant would go berserk and trample commoners in the Mughal era,²³ perhaps another indicator of the impressive and forboding strength of the regime. Having pride in owning a Pajero is a continuation of the same age-old psyche and a projection of cyborg identity: the owner of the car becomes one with its associations: the inflated ego of the ruling elite, extravagance, social superiority, and the ability to run down anyone with impunity.

Owning a large and luxurious automobile is almost always a symbol of higher social status in the novels of Hamid. The social structure he depicts is a technologically mediated class system represented by the ownership of the type and model of a particular vehicle. Daru seems quite impressed when

²² Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 182.

²³ Annemarie Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), p. 217.

he experiences a Pajero ride for the first time; he reflects while sitting in the rear of his friend Ozi's Pajero, "I have never been in a Pajero before. Costs more than my house and moves like a bull, powerful and single-minded."²⁴ Daru uses the simile of a bull for Pajero to highlight immensely ruthless power which can be destructive and merciless. Moreover, bulls, throughout mythic traditions and folklore, have been described as an embodiment of "cosmic energy, which might be worshipped, harnessed, absorbed, or contained."²⁵ The Pajero endows distinct characteristics to Ozi's personality as he shares the unprecedented power, ruthlessness, and affluence that it symbolizes. As Ozi rationalises, "You have to have money these days. The roads are falling apart, so you need a Pajero or land cruiser."²⁶ His own unique style of driving that matches his philosophy: "it's easy to be an idealist when you drive a Pajero."²⁷ As he says, he "doesn't mind putting a little fear into people whose vehicles are smaller than his"²⁸ because according to him, the first rule of road safety is, "bigger cars have the right of way."²⁹

As Alicia Rix argues, "Car literature dwells constantly upon the revelation of identity"—automobiles acquire personhood and personhood is revealed through interactions with automobiles.³⁰ Since the country has uneven bumpy roads, elitists like Ozi can have their own personal mechanical means of transportation which can provide them with cushion from uncomfortable rides. His own luxury car has provided him with the philosophy that he has the right to harass, exploit, and bypass people on roads and here again road stands for the journey of life. Ozi's ruthlessness in driving translates into his attitude in life, for example, he blames Daru for a murder that he himself committed. Most of the times Ozi drives carelessly and recklessly, and does not abide by road rules:

Ozi drives by pointing it in one direction and stepping on the gas, trusting that everyone will get out of ... [the] way. Occasionally, when he cuts things too close and has to swerve to avoid crushing someone,

²⁴ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 25.

²⁵ Boria Sax, *The Mythical Zoo: An Encyclopedia of Animals in World Myth, Legend, and Literature* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2001), p. 51.

²⁶ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 185.

²⁷ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 166.

²⁸ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 95.

²⁹ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 25.

³⁰ Alicia Rix, "'The Lives of Others': Motoring in Henry James's 'The Velvet Glove'", *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2013), p. 45.

the Pajero's engine grumbles with disappointment and Ozi swears ...
'Stupid bastard'.³¹

The passage above highlights the cyborg arrogance which Ozi has attained through his symbiosis with the Pajero.

There are many instances where Ozi gets away with breaking traffic laws. When his wife Mumtaz reproaches him for bypassing "a red light" when his Pajero narrowly misses a man, he blatantly responds "So? He could see me coming," and when guards refuse to open the doors to a carpark he insists on parking inside, the "Pajero gives an 'added authority' to Ozi's words."³² Even the police do not stop him whenever he breaks the rules.³³ This gives him a strong sense of superiority, impunity, and a belief that he is above the law. This over-confidence leads him to mercilessly run down a boy rather than stopping at a red light:

the front of the Pajero dipping like a bull ready to gore, a collision unheard because of the sequel of locked tires. A brief silence. The sound of an engine gathering itself as the Pajero charges away. The boy's body rolls to a stop by a traffic signal that winks green, unnoticed by the receding Pajero.³⁴

In the above passage Hamid cleverly incorporates vocabulary from the aggressive sport of bull fighting. For Ozi, it is a sport to ride his bull-like Pajero, spurred on by the red of the traffic light like a matador's cape. The results are deadly: he takes the life of not only the boy he hits but, by falsely allowing Daru to be charged for that murder, leads indirectly to Daru's death as well. In short, Ozi's cyborg subjectivity shows itself in the way his personality and his future, one of violence, aggression, brutality, and mercilessness, is interconnected with his car. As the Pajero impacts on Ozi's personality, Ozi also projects his socio-economic arrogance, his stubbornness, and his tyrannical attitude on the mechanical body of the vehicle. Hence, it seems a reciprocal man-machine symbiosis.

The Pajero and Daru's Tragedy

The Pajero has been used as a major motif in the overall tragedy which Daru has to go through in *Moth Smoke*. Brian Pearce comments that "cars can symbolize human attributes and aspirations, and ... have contributed to the

³¹ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 25.

³² Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 26.

³³ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 38.

³⁴ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 96.

modern conception of tragedy.”³⁵ Just like other literary figures connected with their cars like Jay Gatsby, Daru’s tragedy is connected to the automobiles around him. For instance, his girlfriend Nadira leaves him because she wants to pursue men with Pajeros.³⁶ If Nadira and Daru had stayed together, there would have been less chance (no matter how small) of Daru becoming involved with Ozi’s wife, Mumtaz. This, in turn, could have saved him from Ozi’s revenge for becoming involved with his wife and being accused of a murder that Ozi had committed, leading Daru to his death. Throughout the narrative, Daru feels inferior to Ozi because he idealizes his Pajero: “In the driveway I don’t stand next to my car. It’s silly, I know, but I lean against Ozi’s Pajero instead.”³⁷ This also reflects Daru’s inability to accept his true social and financial status which is another cause of his tragedy. He idolizes people in Pajeros and Land Cruisers, even when he has financial stability and owns his own car.

Hamid’s simple comparison of a Mitsubishi Pajero and a Suzuki Mehran has a deeper meaning. Throughout his life in the novel, Daru tries to compete with Ozi; envious of his house, car, and partner. “I follow Ozi’s Pajero in my Suzuki, struggling to keep pace,”³⁸ says Daru at one point: Daru is metaphorically as well as literally trying to keep pace with Ozi, which inevitably leads to a tragic end as the luxury sports vehicle outruns the beat up Suzuki. Daru also loses the game of life while making an attempt to come to terms with Ozi and his high social status. He hangs out with his friends who are well-to-do and own Pajeros, but does not associate with his paternal uncle, Fatty Chacha’s family, who has only “one car”³⁹ and a house smaller than Daru’s.

Like Gatsby’s association with his Rolls Royce, Ozi’s automobile is also a revelation of his inner self, his arrogance, his priggishness and his bullying attitude towards people from the lower strata of the society. Similarly, Daru’s Suzuki stands for the collective identity of the middle classes who face a lot of difficulties in making both ends meet. These cyborg subjectivities demonstrate how car ownership acts as a metonym for both individual characters and the collective persona of the different classes of modern Pakistani society.

³⁵ Brian Pearce, ‘Gatsby’s Rolls-Royce: Reflections on the Automobile and Literature’, *English Academy Review*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2016), p. 52.

³⁶ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 140.

³⁷ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 80.

³⁸ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 81.

³⁹ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 54.

Murad Badshah and his Rickshaw Fleet

The third stratum of Pakistani society portrayed using reference to automobiles in *Moth Smoke* explored here is the lower socio-economic class, affiliated with the character of Murad Badshah, a university graduate, socialist, a drug dealer, a mugger, and owner of a rickshaw fleet. Murad becomes a protestor and plays the role of a local 'rickshaw Robin Hood', explaining that the "marauding yellow cabs had devastated the rickshaw industry, so I conducted a little redistribution of wealth on my own. Robbing yellow-cab drivers as they slept put my finances back in the black."⁴⁰ Despite being a university graduate, he cannot get a decent job, and commits all kinds of crimes with his own kind of impunity. Murad Badshah, in association with the cheap and dirty rickshaw, stands for the lower and underprivileged classes who metaphorically run on three wheels instead of four and try to 'snatch' things from the rich.

Postcolonial Pakistan and Automobiles

Pakistani narratives of automobiles have their own unique spectrum of human-automobile symbiosis with respect to the postcolonial reality. In postcolonial novels, "the car often represents the dangers of colonialism and capitalism; in other words, the 'evils' of the West and the Americanisation of culture."⁴¹ More recent Pakistani novels depict a deeper link between characters and their vehicles who are more profoundly affected by their integration with cars and other automobiles. *Moth Smoke* sets the tone for Pakistani posthumanist discourse about almost all modes of transportation as Hamid writes, "You drive cars, knowing eventually you will probably kill somebody or be killed."⁴² Here, Hamid affirms the destructive element associated with automobiles and how they either destroy the user or the people around him. It also foreshadows the impending doom of Daru, the main protagonist and his tragic destiny because of an automobile accident later narrated in the novel. We are told that the grandfather of Daru was killed on a train from Amritsar to Lahore⁴³ during the migration after the independence of Pakistan. Hereby, the historical association of the train with

⁴⁰ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 63.

⁴¹ Andrew Taylor, 'Character Driven', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September (2008), at <https://www.smh.com.au/national/character-driven-20080912-gdsuk4.html>. Accessed 5/10/2021.

⁴² Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 65.

⁴³ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 54.

the violence can be traced through Pakistani collective memory. Thus, one prominent feature related to man-automobile relationship in this postcolonial text is the apprehension of being killed while being in contact with a locomotive, a symbol of the colonialist Western influences.

Automobiles and Masculinity

Scholars have noted the role of masculinity and gender played in narratives wherein the relationships of cars to characters (often male characters) are essential to plot and identity formation.⁴⁴ Many such studies contend that the trope of the car lends itself to stereotypically masculine gender traits.⁴⁵ This correlation has already been noted between wealthy, powerful, and desirable male characters like James Bond and Jay Gatsby. Elsewhere, Andrew Thacker⁴⁶ notes that the automobile constructs a specific gendered subjectivity in the works of Virginia Woolf and the 1989 novel *London Fields* by Martin Amis. In the examples of vehicles been portrayed in association with the male characters in Pakistani Anglophone novels, gender is an important consideration.

In *Moth Smoke*, Hamid describes Daru and Ozi in their teenage years speeding around the city in Ozi's 1982 Corolla to follow "cute girls up and down the boulevard, memorizing their number plates,"⁴⁷ playing "heavy metal cassettes recorded with too much bass and even more treble"⁴⁸ to attract their attention. Similarly, the main protagonist who rises from rags to riches in Hamid's third novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, has a character arc punctuated by the many vehicles he uses in his life, charting his increasing social and economic progress. When young, the landlords in his childhood village "drive by in their SUV"⁴⁹ while the poor family members of the protagonist must migrate from their village to the city on the "roof of the overloaded bus."⁵⁰ From the overcrowded roof of a bus, he is later given a bicycle by his employer to deliver rental DVDs.⁵¹ At the next stage of his

⁴⁴ Johinke, 'Misogyny, Muscles and Machines', p. 102.

⁴⁵ Johinke, 'Misogyny, Muscles and Machines', p. 102; Rix, 'The Lives of Others', p. 45.

⁴⁶ Andrew Thacker, 'Traffic, gender, modernism,' *The Sociological Review*, vol. 54, no. 1 (2006), pp. 175-189.

⁴⁷ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 25.

⁴⁸ Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, p. 25.

⁴⁹ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 7.

⁵⁰ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 13.

⁵¹ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 40.

financial evolution, he rides a motorcycle.⁵² When he starts his own sealed water business, he buys a small pickup truck which is older than him.⁵³ When he goes to meet his first love in a hotel, he is asked to park in a “secondary parking lot in the rear” from where he has to take a long detour, since a micro pickup truck is not perceived as a very respectable mode of transportation.⁵⁴ When his water business becomes successful, he drives a car.⁵⁵ Then, he buys an “only lightly second hand” SUV.⁵⁶ At a later stage, he rides in an aeroplane’s business class section,⁵⁷ and at the apex of his career he gets a chance to ride “great armor plated, signal jamming, depleted-uranium-firing helicopter.”⁵⁸ At the peak of his financial success, he rides in the back of his limousine, which is “driven by the driver”⁵⁹ and has “fourteen speakers and four sub-woofers.”⁶⁰ When his downfall begins he is without a “driver or a car” and mostly “travels by taxi.”⁶¹ Thus, since his childhood his socio-economic status has evolved along with the vehicles he associates with, and has delimited the ‘kind of man’ he is able to be, an apt demonstration of a socio-economic cyborg.

When a character owns a vehicle he also demonstrates the mechanic characteristics of that machine, but rented, hired, and public forms of transportation have also been used by Hamid to shape the cyborg subjectivity of his characters. Changez, the Pakistani protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, lives in the United States and usually travels by subways and taxis.⁶² He gets excited about flying first-class and reflects, “I will never forget the feeling of reclining in my seat, clad in my suit, as I was served champagne by an attractive ... flirtatious flight attendant. I was in my own eyes, a veritable James Bond—only younger, darker and possibly better paid.”⁶³ Flying first-class is not only associated with luxury and superiority but perceptions of desirability and masculinity, especially as they relate to racial identity. Modes of transportation are again in this novel affiliated with

⁵² Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 83.

⁵³ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 102.

⁵⁴ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 105.

⁵⁵ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 129.

⁵⁶ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 143.

⁵⁷ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 151.

⁵⁸ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 160.

⁵⁹ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 182.

⁶⁰ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 183.

⁶¹ Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich*, p. 191.

⁶² Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, pp. 20, 23.

⁶³ Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, pp. 37-38.

class distinctions, implied by the stare of a Jeepney car driver who resents the privilege of the expensive car in which Changez is travelling.⁶⁴ It is clear that this level of privilege is believed by some to be unfit for Changez: in the aftermath of 9/11, Changez would often “emerge into the car park to find that one of the tires of my rental car was punctured—far too often for it to be mere coincidence.”⁶⁵

In contrast to the characters in *Moth Smoke* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* the cyborg identity of Changez is mostly portrayed via the automobiles chosen for him by his American employers. He is only temporarily on a flight, or riding in a fancy hire car. His rented vehicles hint at his loaned identity with which he tries to fit into an increasingly hostile America. The punctured tires of his rentals may be a metonym for the deflation of this pseudo-American identity. It also furthers the novel’s overall theme of the failure of the American Dream for youngsters like Changez following 9/11.

Hence, in Hamid’s fiction, male protagonists are closely connected with their automobiles. Their dreams, aspirations, personality traits, failures, success, revenge, and tragedy have been portrayed in connection with the vehicles they possess or want to own. The socio-economic division of the fictional world has also been portrayed in relation to the locomotives. In some instances, vehicles become material representations of otherwise unobservable psyche and nature of characters such as Daru and Ozi in *Moth Smoke* and Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The depiction of automobiles in Hamid’s is a productive motif to reflect upon cyborg subjectivities in the contemporary posthuman and postcolonial milieu.

Conclusion

The man-automobile symbiosis of cyborg subjectivities in Hamid’s fiction portrays many aspects of the characters, the societies, and the attitudes of their contexts. Class differences, the inner emotions of the characters, and perceptions of masculinity and race, are all communicated through interaction with vehicles of transportation. Automobiles can represent ethnic, religious, geographical, gendered, and racial identities and magnify the attributes of a certain class and community. As in the varying experiences and socio-economic statuses of the men and their motor vehicles in *Moth*

⁶⁴ Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 40.

⁶⁵ Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 57.

Smoke and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, human symbiosis with automobiles has become a significant mode for cyborg identities in Pakistani fiction. Pakistani novels are powerful representations of the digitally mediated Pakistani society where man and automobiles are inseparable. These texts provide ample examples related to both road and airborne vehicles. Human and automobiles are fused together literally and metaphorically as the fates of automobiles and human beings are shown as interdependent. Humans are also perceived according to the type of automobile they own as the automobile a person owns reflects his financial status. Vehicles are used as analogies and metaphors to depict the moral, physical, psychological, and economic evolution or devolution of the vehicle owners. Additionally, automobiles and their drivers are shown to be fearsome machines which can kill people, scare people, and torture them. Therefore, by intermingling human subjectivities with those of automobiles these cyborg characters reflect upon the posthuman condition of the Pakistani living in contemporary technologically mediated society.