Research Journal of Language and Literary Studies
Volume3, Issue 1, 2023, p 23-37

An Exploration of Leisure Resistance by Female Protagonist in Mohsin Hamid's Moth Smoke: A Post-Structural Feminist Perspective

Anila Afzal[1]

ABSTRACT

Leisure practices serve a dual purpose- they allow people attain self-recovery and self-actualization; they can be adopted as covert means of resistance by the marginalized groups to record their protest against oppression. The present study attempts to explore the leisure-based practices and behaviour that the female protagonist of Hamid's Moth Smoke adopts to subvert and undermine the oppressive circle of patriarchy. Adopting a poststructuralist perspective, this study draws insights from Wearing's leisure resistance theory for the analysis of the data. Data have been analysed qualitatively using purposive sampling technique. The results indicate that the female protagonist, Mumtaz, finds herself confined in acting out the traditional gender roles and adopts many covert leisure-based practices to challenge the set social norms of womanhood. She shows resistance against the patriarchal authority that denies her the due right to have control over her body and mind by indulging in leisure-based smoking, drinking, and sex outside of the marriage and by leading the life of a secret investigative journalist. The study is significant as it highlights the effects covert means can have in the subversion of unjust authority.

Keywords: Leisure practices, self-actualization, resistance, oppression, patriarchy

[1] Assistant Professor, Govt. Associate College (w) Qadirpur Raan, Multan.
E-mail: hassananila2@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Post-structuralism has transformed feminist ways of thinking by creating greater leeway for intersections and innovations resulting in multiplicity of feminist ideologies and praxes (Kinser, 2004). Plurality, inclusivity, self-determination, and freedom of choice are the dominant trends within the latest feminist "lexicon" (Dean, 2009, p. 335) with a deep commitment to address the complex gender relations within patriarchal structures and cultural nexus (Kinser, 2004). Within feminist scholarship, much research has been focused onto the exploration of leisure as a field of life with potential to provide authority to exercise greater freedom of choice. Post-structural feminism has problematized leisure as a fluid concept, which differs from person to person in terms of gender, age, race, economic status etc., thereby rejecting the essentialisng one-size-fits-all approach. Wearing (1998) rejects the traditional definition of leisure as 'non-work time', 'activity' or 'experience' redefining it as "personal spaces, physical and metaphorical, where women can explore their own desires and pleasures and perform acts" (p. 149) that allow them greater control over their bodies thereby constituting "diverse subjectivities and femininities which go beyond what women have been told they should be" (p. 149).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The study of leisure has become an important aspect of feminist scholarship and literature on leisure researches abounds with significant insights from noteworthy post-structural feminists (Aitchison, 2000; Coalter, 1999; Henderson, 2006 ; Shaw, 2001,2013; Wearing, 1998). However, its application onto literary works is lacking. This study, therefore, is an attempt to fill this gap. For this purpose, Hamid's Moth Smoke has been explored to investigate this phenomenon. The questions of power and freedom are central within feminist leisure scholarship that focuses on the exploration of women's leisure as "resistance to normative discourses and performative expectations" (Parry & Fullagar,

2013). Within this methodological framework, leisure practices are seen as strategies and tactics women adopt to create modes of living and becoming different from the ones expected of them within the patriarchal institutions and practices. Mumtaz, the female protagonist in Moth Smoke, feels suffocated and confined within patriarchal structures and tries to break free of these confinements through the application of leisure resistance practices to resist and challenge the normative matrix. This novel, therefore, can provide rich data to explore the concept of 'leisure as resistance' against the hegemonic male norms.

1.3. Research Questions

1. How does the patriarchal structure suppress the freedom of choice of the female protagonist in the novel?
2. How does the female protagonist use leisure resistance strategies to challenge the matrix of domination?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Women, Gender and Leisure

Under the impact of post-structuralism, feminist scholars (Aitcheson, 2000; Butler, 1990; Henderson, 2013; Shaw, 2013; Wearing 1998;) view gender as cultural construct that influences people's lives from their births until their dying days. People are conditioned through gendered discourses to wear particular types of clothes, exhibit particular types of actions and participate in particular types of activities so as to become "female/ feminine" or "male/masculine" (Freysinger, Shaw, Henderson & Bialesch, 2013). According to Freysinger et. al (2013), gender is practiced, and "enacted in play, recreation, and leisure" (p.4) in the same way it is practiced and enacted in other individual and social activities. They view leisure as a site where gender is (re)produced as well as negotiated and transformed. This makes leisure deeply political in nature that has potential for empowerment through self-recognition, liberation and self-actualization. However, to Parry & Fullagar (2013), as a gendered discursive practice and a site where entitlement to leisure is

determined, leisure has equal potential for disempowerment through continued elimination, expulsion and exploitation.

Dismissal of the gender binaries is a significant point of departure for the post-structural feminist thinkers, as according to Barad (2007), the assumptions about the human subject as masculine by default, oriented at the center of human experience, have been disbanded and questions involving ethical, ontological, and epistemological interventions have been raised to probe normative discourse about women and gender. Parry & Fullagar (2014) emphasise relationality and non-dichotomous thinking of gender in order to pave way towards "epistemological practice that goes beyond the classificatory approach" (p. 18).

2.2. Leisure as Political Practice

Coalter (1999) views leisure as essentially embedded in the personal, social, cultural and political strands of everyday life as access to freedom, work, education and healthcare affect choices available to people in different aspects of life including opportunities and choices for leisure. Henderson (2013) and Howard (2013) stress that racism, sexism, harassment and other forms of discrimination bar opportunities for people including opportunities for leisure preventing them to achieve self-actualization and satisfaction.

Frisby (2013) and Sullivan (2013) highlight the barriers women have to face to access leisure such as workplace stress, family responsibilities - especially the cultural expectation of them to be responsible for taking care of the young and other dependent members of the family - poor health, stress and in less privileged nations economic dependency etc. A large number of leisure scholars (Aitchison,2013; Berdychevsky 2013; Braidotti 1993; Delamere & Dixon 2013; Jordan, & Shaw 2001; Roster 2013; Wearing 1998;) have been interested to explore the way ideologies and power relations are enacted and negotiated through leisure practices to promote or resist inequities. Aitchison (2013) highlights the role of societal institutions in designing leisure policies that determine who is included and who is excluded from a particular leisure activity. Delamere & Dixon (2013) have foregrounded the role (entertainment) media e.g.,

television, movies, video games, fashion shows, newspapers, magazines etc. play in reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies about femininity or masculinity influencing people's beliefs who are involved in these leisure practices, such as watching fashion shows or playing video games etc.

2.3 Leisure as Resistance

According to Shaw (2001), the idea of leisure as a form of resistance implies the political nature of leisure. Leisure is seen as a site for power struggle where power can be won, lost or negotiated. Within feminist leisure scholarship, the concept of leisure as resistance is based on the assumption that leisure behaviors, settings and interactions can challenge and subvert the dominant and repressive patriarchal practices (Shaw, 2001). Wearing (1998) contends that compared to other activities leisure activities and behaviours provide greater leverage for self-assertion and resistance to forced norms. She views leisure in terms of personal spaces, physical as well as metaphorical, that allow women resist the matrix of domination and form new identities.

2.4. Leisure: A complex construct

Traditionally leisure is viewed in terms of (1) free time, (2) discretionary activity, and (3) individual experience (Freysinger et. al ,2013). However, Freysinger et. al (2013), view leisure as a slippery concept whose categorization into sharp boundaries may run the risk of dichotomization and de-politicization of leisure. Other post-structuralist feminist scholars such as Wearing (1998) and Aitchison (2000), whose works resonate with the concepts of multiple identities and ambivalence of postmodern existence, have also been critical of traditional definitions of leisure. To them the concept of leisure necessitates "both-and" rather than "either-or" logic.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methods and Materials

The study intends to investigate the leisure practices and strategies that a woman can adopt to challenge and resist the domination of

patriarchal oppression so as to form new identities for "self-recovery, self-actualization, self-help and healing" (Wearing, 1998. P. 158). For this purpose, Hamid's (2000) Moth Smoke provides the data as this text involves female protagonist's struggles to resist the forces of power through the use of leisure behaviour and practices. Purposive sampling technique has been employed to analyse data that have been investigated using qualitative method as this method suits to interpret and understand the complexity of ideological discourses involving power relations and power struggles.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Wearing's (1998) leisure theory provides framework for the analysis of data. Wearing, who is a renowned post-structuralist scholar, views gender as relational, i.e., it is constructed and reconstructed in relation to individuals within the contexts of society, culture, and history. She contends that the lives of men and women cannot be simply seen as gendered in relation to one another, but beyond this, their lives are also differentiated in terms of race, class, sexual orientation, age, and cultural background leading to the impossibility and irrationality of trusting them into essential categories of "man" and "woman". Instead, the stress is laid on the diversities that are perceived between women and men, between women and other women and within each woman. Thus, she promotes the concept of multiple identities and subjectivities by deconstructing a fixed notion of identity. She argues that the subject "woman" is not a unitary quintessence as presented in traditional thinking but the one that involves multiple, complex and often overlapping and contradictory experiences. She does not view postmodern deconstruction of self as necessarily destructive but rather one that can provide many potentialities for liberating the self through involvement in self-recognition and self-actualization activities and leisure potentially plays an important role in this regard.

According to Wearing (1998), leisure practice can be conceptualised as resistance when "it takes the form of acts of refusal and disruption of the limits that are produced and normalized through everyday action and

behaviour" (p.146). It is the process of what, according to Wearing, Butler (1990) calls "unbecoming subjects" (p.146), a process of "undoing of self" (p.146) and moving beyond what a subject can be or what it is told to be. Such a process, Wearing notes, provides access to unlimited creative possibilities.

Wearing (1998) is critical of traditionally held concepts of leisure, whereby it is viewed in terms of (1) free time, (2) activity or recreation, and (3) individual experience, contending that although such categorization of leisure is useful and provides particular insights in understanding the concepts of woman and gender, however, these concepts may essentialise, de-contextualize, and de-politicize leisure. The concept of time and the opportunities available differ from person to person that affect the degree of enjoyment. Similarly, the concept of leisure as activity has different meanings for different people depending on the availability of activity, time and level of enjoyment. In the same way, the concept of leisure as individual experience which takes on a state-of-mind perspective and assumes the exercise of free choice and a sense of control should not be taken at face value because of the gendered construction of women and freedom of choice is seen in ration to this construction. As opposed to the traditional concepts of leisure, Wearing describes leisure in terms of "personal spaces" or 'heterotopias" that a diverse range of women are able to create and explore in their unique contexts. These can include personal strategies that women employ to create "mental spaces", "time spaces", "money spaces", "activity spaces" or "pleasure spaces" so as to break free of what is expected of them and enter a world of "may be" (p. 147). Taking up a Foucauldian notion of power, Wearing views power originating from multiple points that can be exercised not only for domination but also for resistance. Leisure, in this regard, is seen as a domain of social life which is not "innocent" but, like any domain, a sphere of power struggle.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This paper analyses the leisure resistance strategies that Mumtaz, the female protagonist of Moth Smoke (2000), adopts to break free of the suffocating limitations of femininity imposed upon her by the patriarchal forces. Her journey is the journey from submission to resistance - from acceptance of the assigned roles to deviation. It is a journey towards self-healing and self-recognition. The novel revolves around three major characters, Mumtaz, Ozi, her husband and Daru her lover and Ozi's friend. Mumtaz, who has been described as "the wife, mother, and lover" (p.27), shares a three-year-old son, Muazzum, with Ozi. Despite having a life of luxury and opulence, she feels dissatisfied with her traditional roles as mother and wife and transgresses the social and cultural boundaries by developing an extra marital affair with Daru. Through the two chapters that have been devoted to her, the reader is made to look at the world from her perspective. She describes how her marriage to Ozi was not merely the result of her deep love for him but also the consequence of the societal pressure that tried to impress upon her the ideology "that an unspeakable future awaits girls who don't wind up marrying, and marrying well" (p.140). The charm that she initially felt in marriage starts diminishing when she is made to adjust and continue with the unintended pregnancy. Her initial acts of sacrifice and "martyrdom", such a giving birth to a child against her wish just because her husband felt "ecstatic" and her devotion to take care of the baby day and night soon give way to aggression and resistance. She feels herself coerced into submission by the patriarchy with her husband as its archetype. She remembers with regret how after the birth of Muazzam, Ozi always came back home from work exhausted , "much too exhausted for … a quiet conversation over a glass of wine, but not too exhausted to play with Muazzam until he went to bed" (143). This made her "felt neglected, resentful at being the one left at home" (p.143) and denied of any access to leisure. As Butler (1990) says, gender is performance with clearly punitive consequences... those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (p.522), so Mumtaz is rebuked by her husband

when she expresses her desire to resume her editorial job at a magazine that she had to leave after conception:

"Ozi was shocked. He said Muazzam was too young. I said if he felt so strongly he could ask for paternity leave. But he won the argument. He won it with a low blow. He looked at me like I was a stranger and asked if I loved our son at all" (p.143).

According to Freysinger et. al (2013), "one's biological sex leads to a lifetime of relationships and expectations, opportunities and constraints, based on gender" (p.12). Expectations of femininity and motherhood associated with women prevail in patriarchal discourses and viewed as 'common sense' as is evident from the speech of Ozi above. The motherly exceptions of Mumtaz imprison her in "immanence" restricting her to achieve "transcendence", a sphere, that de Beauvoir (1949) views to be, vastly available to men to transform them into active, creative, productive and powerful beings.

Once fully disgusted with the patriarchal norms, Mumtaz adopts many leisure strategies to resist the male dominance and creates unique personal spaces that act as "heterotopias" to undermine and disrupt the male status quo. In so doing, she rewrites the script of her identity as a woman. Khatoon & Fatima (2019) view Mumtaz as a deviant voice who attempts to break the stiffing circle of oppression through acts of defiance, yet, according to them, her defiance has limits as "she is fearful of her family, husband, and other acquaintances" (p. 53). Her limited power, therefore, makes her adopt covert acts of resistance that are reflected through leisure practices and behaviour. While in New York, when she is unable to resume her job due to her husband's pressure, she resorts to writing on miscellaneous topics for a women's magazine as a freelance writer from home. Besides earning money and appreciation, she is able to give vent to her feelings through the process of writing creating "imaginative space" for herself. Talking about the money she earned, she remarks, "The income was important to me… [as] the idea of taking pocket money from my husband had begun to grate on me" (p.144). Thus through the writing process, she is able to create physical

as well as metaphorical/mental spaces for herself that provide her a sense of independence and transcendence. The writing acts as a healing process for her.

Her leisure resistance strategies become stronger once she leaves New York and returns to Pakistan with her husband and son. She employs a nanny for Muazzam who proves to be "a blessing" as the child adjust very well with her. Mumtaz remarks, "For the first time since he was born, he wasn't completely dependent on me, and that was liberating. I started thinking about what I wanted to do with my time" (145). She starts her journey towards self-actualization and demands time and freedom from wifely and motherly duties imposed on her. When Ozi "starts to hand Muazzam to Mumtaz" (p.31) so that he can get Daru, who arrives as a guest, some drink, she resists and "stands up. 'I'll get it,' she says"(p.31). She does not want to "perform" her gender anymore, instead, she indulges in such leisure activities as smoking and drinking. Daru notes, "Her drink is stiffer than either of ours"(p.31).

Wearing (1998) mentions the use of leisure-based smoking and drinking that can be seen as form of resistance. Hooks (1993) discusses the use of alcohol and other drugs as spaces that women create for pleasure and escape in a painful world. Such spaces, however, according to Hooks, may hinder the process of self-healing producing counterproductive result. In order to record her resentment over the lack of attention and loneliness that she has to go through during the first year of parenting, Mumtaz starts taking stiffer drinks as she says "I started drinking Scotch, neat, during the day… It was a new experience for me" (p.144). From stiffer drinking, she then turns to drugs. She starts consuming joint and heroin and enjoys these along with smoking in the company of Daru. Through these leisure acts, she tries to record her resistance. Salma & Fatima (2019) view the drug addiction of Mumtaz to be the result of the forced suppression of her deviant voice that she has to suffer at the hands of patriarchal forces. They note that suppression leads to aggression that is reflected through drug addiction.

Mumtaz's love affair with Daru is another leisure resistance act that involves power struggle. Her involvement can be seen to be the reaction of the neglect that she has to suffer at the hands of her husband. Rafique & Mukhtar (2019) consider sex and drugs as tonics for Mumtaz's desperate self. The affair provides her physical as well as mental spaces to give vent to her suppressed and erotic feelings. Though she tries to keep the affair private, yet she derives pleasure out of this secret as it provides her a sense of control over her body and mind. She remarks that her courtship with Daru declared her "independence from the united state of marriage" (p. 147). Mumtaz is well aware of the power she has over Daru. Rafique & Mukhtar (2019) note Mumtaz's subverting gender role who tries to blur the boundaries of femininity and masculinity by exerting a masculine control over Daru. Daru clings to Mumtaz, viewing her as a symbol of elite class, to satisfy his psychological needs. Similarly, Mumtaz views him as a symbol of patriarchy whose power she can exploit, undermine and subvert.

The most significant leisure practice through which Mumtaz tries to undermine the oppressive patriarchal structure is by working as a secret investigative journalist under the pen name Zulfikar Manto. Like Saadat Hasan Manto, she writes about taboo topics such as prostitution, honour killings, love affairs etc. The writing process has a liberating effect on her as she remarks: "As soon as I began, wings that had been growing for years stretched and pushed and I found myself flying" (147). The name 'Zulfikar Manto' has twofold significance: firstly, as Khatoon and Fatima (2019) note her "non-conformist journalist" (p.52) role symbolises her gesture of defiance against all the oppressive restraints and restrictions, secondly, the male pseudonym signifies that she avoids to come into open confrontation with the powerful societal forces due to the fear of "the coercive force of silence" (P.52). Her bold non-conformist role as journalist has a healing effect on her as she declares, "I was finding myself again, and I was being honest about things I cared for passionately. Childbirth had hurt me inside, and I was finally starting to heal."

The pseudonym provides her a safe outlet to subvert oppressive patriarchal control. She remarks, I wrote about things people didn't want seen, and my writing was noticed. Zulfikar Manto received death threats and awards" (p. 147). She is bold enough to go to Heera Mandi (Red Light area) to visit prostitutes and write about their untold stories about patriarchal oppression that dragged them into this dirty business.

The writing process not only helps her in achieving transcendence but as Khan, Inayatullah, & Khan (2018) remark, she also becomes the voice of the week and the oppressed in the society. Her insistence on keeping her journalist profession a secret from her husband stems from her desire to be independent as she says, "I wanted to create a life that he knew nothing about" (p.147). Thus, through unique leisure behaviour and practices, Mumtaz is able to create many personal spaces for herself to move beyond the role traditionally assigned to her gender. Through leisure practices, she invents a new identity for herself where she can have maximum control over her body and mind.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the data indicates that Mumtaz, the female protagonist of Moth Smoke (2000), finds herself trapped within the oppressive patriarchal structure that denies her access to transcendence. This oppression comes from multiples sites: from "every aunt, sister, cousin, friend" (p.140) who tells her that the ultimate goal of her life is to marry and marry well; from her husband who decides what she can or cannot do; and from the larger societal structure that determines what roles she can or cannot "perform" according to her gender.

The text shows her journey from ignorance to enlightenment, from passive acceptance of the assigned roles to their rejection. Once she becomes conscious of her individual self, she adopts many covert strategies in the form of leisure to showcase her resistance and tries to create physical and metaphorical spaces for self-healing and liberation. As a writer for a women's magazine and later through her secret job as an investigative journalist, she is able to create "a money space" "an

imaginative space" and "a pleasure space" for herself which besides providing her a sense of independence help her to carve a new identity for herself. Her leisure-based smoking, drinking and sex outside of marriage, though not ideal for self-healing, indicate her resistance and aggression against the oppressive structure that wants to coerce her into submission. Thus, through her unique leisure resistance practices, Mumtaz goes through a process of "unbecoming" and "undoing of self" (Wearing, 1998, p.146) and moves beyond what she is told she can be.

REFERENCES

Aitchison, C. (2000). Poststructural feminist theories of representing others: A response to the "crisis" in leisure studies discourse. *Leisure Studies*, 19(3), 127–144.

Aitchison, C. (2013). Gender and leisure policy discourses: The cultural turn to social justice. In

V. J. Freysinger, S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, & M. D. Bialeschki (Eds.), *Leisure, Women and Gender* (pp. 521-540). Urbana: Venture.

Braidotti, R. (1993) 'Embodiment, sexual difference, and the nomadic subject. *Hyaptia*, 8(1),1-13.

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham: Duke University.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Coalter, F. (1999). Leisure sciences and leisure studies: The challenge of meaning. In E. L. Jackson & T. L. Burton (Eds.), *Leisure studies: Prospects for the twenty-first century* (pp. 507–522). State College : Venture.

Delamere, F. M., Dixon, S. (2013). Gender and digital-game situated play: Women, girls, and the multiple constructions of play. In V. J. Freysinger, S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, & M. D.

Bialeschki (Eds.), *Leisure, Women and Gender* (pp. 491-502). Urbana: Venture.

Freysinger, V., Shaw, S., Henderson, K., & Bialeschki, D. (Eds.). (2013*). Leisure, women and gender*. Urbana: Venture.

Frisby, W. (2013). The politics of taking action: Women, poverty, and leisure-access policy. In V.

J. Freysinger, S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, & M. D. Bialeschki (Eds.), *Leisure, Women and Gender* (pp. 409-424).

Gibson, H. J., Jordan, F. & Berdychevsky, L. (2013). Women and tourism. In V. J. Freysinger,

S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, & M. D. Bialeschki (Eds.), *Leisure, Women and Gender* (pp. 229-344). Urbana: Venture.

Hamid, M. (2000). Moth Smoke. Mumbai: Penguin.

Henderson, K. A. (2006). False dichotomies and leisure research. Leisure Studies, 25(4), 391–395.

Hooks, b. (1993) Sisters of the am: Black Women and Self-Recovery. Boston: South End Press.

Howard, S. (2013) Let your soul glow: The intersections of race, gender, health, and leisure. In V.

J. Freysinger, S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, & M. D. Bialeschki (Eds.), *Leisure, Women and Gender* (pp. 357-368). Urbana: Venture.

Khan, T., Inayatullah, & Khan, R. N. (2018). Gender issues in Mohsin Hamid's Moth Smoke: An Analysis of selected excerpts. *Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language*, 4(2), 28-39.

Khatoon, S., Fatima, N. (2019). Spiral of fear and silence in Mohsin Hamid's Moth Smoke and The Reluctant Fundamentalis. *Journal of Research (Humanities).* Retrieved June 11, 2022 from: http://pu.edu.pk/home/journal/10/Current-Issue

Parry, D. and Fullagar, S. (2013). Feminist leisure research in the contemporary era. *Journalof Leisure Research,45*(5), 571-582.

Rafique, H., Mukhtar, A. (2019). "Reading gender: Negotiating the subverted feminine self and gender in Moth Smoke." *Journal of Gender and Social Issues*,18 (2), 17-33.

Roster, C. A. (2013). Women's transcendental experiences with motorcycling. In V. J. Freysinger,

S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, & M. D. Bialeschki (Eds.), *Leisure, Women and Gender* (pp. 193-202). Urbana: Venture.

Shaw, S. M. (2001). Conceptualizing resistance: Women's leisure as political practice. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 33(2), 186–201.

Sullivan, A. M. (2013). Becoming a mother: Where does leisure fit? In V. J. Freysinger, S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, & M. D. Bialeschki (Eds.), *Leisure, Women and Gender* (pp. 279-310). Urbana: Venture.

Wearing, B. (1998). *Leisure and feminist theory*. Thousand Oaks : Sage.