

A REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION THROUGH STREET FOOD AND FINE DINING: AN URBAN SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CLASS AND IDENTITY IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *HOW TO GET FILTHY RICH IN RISING ASIA*

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ABSTRACT

The study is an analysis of socio-economic structures, class consciousness, and the moral aspect of consuming in Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) that demonstrates the significance of street food/ fine dining. Theoretically, we would seek to understand how the eating style and consumption of people express social status, aspiration, and marginalization of people through the ideas of cultural capital, habitus, and social distinction that were developed by Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, in his book *Distinction*, published in 1984. At an early stage of the novel, plain community meals present a leading communal habitus to the protagonist, whereas eating in expensive restaurants represents an untouched performative side that is linked to the social movement besides letting the readers themselves see what the writers' teenagers are going through when they eat out (Hamid, 2013, pp. 1, 8, 10, 181). It was found that though there was a lot of rich material and space to work, it does not imply that he/she has fulfillment, legitimacy, or security. This leads to the issue of perpetuation of inequity via taste and also in cultural practice, despite the material well-being or lavish area of the one; therefore, the foreground must read Hamid's text on alimentation as a semiotic manifestation of power, identity, and status in the postcolonial neoliberal modernity.

Keywords: Social Stratification; Cultural Capital; Class Identity; Taste; Urban Sociology; Pierre Bourdieu

1. Introduction: Urban Aspiration, Consumption, and Class Mobility

1.1 The Neoliberal City as Narrative Space

The city of South Asia is a dynamic but highly polarized modernity that is both full of developmental potential and, at the same time, full of inequalities and unequal access to resources. The city is often a symbolic backdrop of modern literature, whereby the modern city is a closed embodiment of class difference, aspirations, fears, and exclusions that shape the essence of the postcolonial capitalist societies. It

is here that the issue of urban change is depicted in a rich ethnographic fashion, as the examples of class mobility are surfaced at the same point as these socio-economic inequalities are barely being shifted under the surface of urban glamour, as it is in this complex and paradoxical space where Mohsin Hamid details *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. Return motifs of street food and eating fine dining in the story give Hamid the chance to change the focus of discussing cultural foodways to a structure, which results in the

manifestation of stratification, cultural capital, and class equality.

Food, as Hamid portrays, is more than a sustenance; it is a means of class identity, dreams, and even cultural identity. The contrasts between street food and gourmet represent the clashing fears of necessity and luxury, authenticity and yearning, survival and acting. By eating, the characters reproduce the status stratification in the society; those who eat in the street are bound to need, and those who surround the dining area are the elite who play their status by ritualistic visceral acts of civility. Food here is a socio-cultural language that articulates the conflicts of contemporary capitalism as well as the transient moral economy of desire in postcolonial urban life.

The analysis is set on the works of Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984), where the theorist conceptualizes the process of social differentiation, taste, cultural capital, and habitus. According to Bourdieu, taste goes beyond individual preference; it indicates socially conditioned perception and behavioral patterns reflecting class positions that he famously sums up with the saying, Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier (6). What Bourdieu tries to make us understand is that consumption acts, such as what, where, and how we eat, are also signifiers of cultural rightness and social membership. Here, the portrayal of Hamid of the differences surrounding food reminds the bigger dichotomy of necessity and luxury, and consumption of food is a kind of language to express identity and establish the social perimeters.

1.2 Food as a Symbolic Marker of Social Hierarchy

The foodscape of the novel, therefore, forms a symbolic system of unequal allocations of power, opportunity, and recognition in the urban social relations. The food culture, as depicted by Hamid, captures the consumption as an act of class envy; the lower classes consume to survive, and the elite to manifest classiness and dominance. These patterns of behavior are not accidental; they are embedded within the

structural difference that is affected by means of cultural practice. Through this symbolic economy of food, Hamid criticizes the myth of social mobility in neoliberal Asia, where there is growing income and development with great moral and cultural fissures.

The rise of the protagonist out of poverty into wealth reflects the concept of cultural capital presented by Bourdieu, that believes that people gain not just material resources but symbolic knowledge, aesthetic values, and other social skills that enable them to reach elite realms. The shift between the communal meals in the poor homeless shelters and the education about the sophisticated practices in fine dining justifies the way cultural capital should be acquired, practiced, and displayed. The city, with its hustle and bustle stalls on the street and its high-end restaurants for the affluent, offers socially productive spaces wherein identity and desire are generated and put to the test. The internalized system of dispositions, about social experience, is revealed in these consumption acts, meaning that such notions as social class modify the concept of value, taste, and legitimacy.

This transformation of food from a need to food as a sign of refinement indicates the performance of class differentiation and thus as a normalized condition in the logic of the capitalist rise of the Asian region, which is Rising Asia. Street food scenes reflect community and need, whereas the elite restaurant spaces produce a setting of exclusivity and segregation. His changing relation to food space will symbolize the slow change in his habitus as he attempts to acquire access to new social spaces. However, as Bourdieu illustrates, habitus is still passively established in the previous socialization; this shift reveals the lack of correspondence between external success and internal orientation. As compared to spatial theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, who emphasize the urban space as the place of embodying and provoking inequality, the paper focuses on the cultural practices of Hamid's literary city that turns into a depth of (anti)social identities and (anti)exclusions.

3. Literature Review

The story by Hamid, therefore, poses some basic research questions concerning the connection between consumption and inequality. What does the author do to establish the opposition between eating street food and fine dining to symbolize the different classes and social mobility? How do culinary practices and modes of consumption act as cultural capital and identity formation instruments in the city? And in what ways does Hamid critique the reproduction of inequality in the conditions of postcolonial capitalisms through the representation of taste, aspiration, and consumption? Under these questions is the position of the novel, not only as a piece of fiction, but as a sociological commentary on the economic price of human ambition.

Application of Bourdieu's theory as a backdrop, the novel demonstrates that consumption and aspiration, instead of weakening inequality, become a factor in the reproduction of more hierarchical structures. Fine dining, affluence, and acting on cultivated taste become distinguishing characteristics and tempt to accept the reasoning of class reproduction. Although the main character progresses in gaining economic status, the sense of alienation and inner insecurity begs to differ with the weakness of material achievement. Hamid uncovers the irony of neoliberal urban modernity; the more citizens strive to lead a cosmopolitan, refined lifestyle, the deeper they are indulged into exclusion and imitation.

This argument places *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* in the context of the larger communities of urban literary sociology. The novel unveils the way of quotidian acts, whether those are eating, dressing, or talking, as a tool of power and identity in the contemporary city. The paradoxes of postcolonial modernity are most clearly stated, probably not in street-level and elite consumption. Hamid attracts attention to food practices as a sensitive yet strong process by which cultural capital is transformed into a culture of distinction and exclusion.

The work by Hamid, therefore, works on a variety of levels: personal ambition, narration, and a sociological commentary on the reproduction of classes. This deep exploration is also contributed

to by the fact that he uses the second-person narrative voice, drawing the readers inside the mind of the main character and inside the psychological contradictions of social ascendancy. The closeness and distance of the tone is akin to the alienation that the class mobility introduces, whereby the self is in a constant reformation with external confirmation and performance of the culture. In that regard, the fiction of Hamid does not cease at narrating the story, but it is a statement opposing the neoliberal ideology, which identifies success with consumption, identity with possession.

4. Bourdieu Theoretical framework on urban sociology

This paper also connects the novel by Hamid to the cultural theory developed by Bourdieu. Bourdieu singles out cultural capital as a key origin of social movement and describes cultural capital as the instantiated knowledge, instructional qualification, and inclinations that differentiate classes. These capitals in the city imagined by Hamid are subtle characteristics of language, manners, and above all, food habits of an individual. The interaction with the elite foods on the part of the main character is an attempt to assume a new class identity, yet the transformation is not complete, as the cultural capital of his family background does not allow a full re-territorialization.

Since Bourdieu works under the notion that taste is socially conditioned, his concepts introduce additional significance to the conceptualization of aspiration and alienation by Hamid. The informal and social aspect of street food is authentic and mandatory, whereas high-end food is aspirational, exclusive, and domineering. However, the interaction with high-end food to the character is not a sign of belonging. Instead, the involvement reveals the vacuity of the performance of classes. This is similar to his engagement in elite food rituals, where people are successful in economic life, yet when it comes to cultural fluency, there is no comfort to occupy elite situations. This violation of economic movement and cultural legitimacy defends the opinion that inequality still exists even when progress is made.

The city of Hamid is an organism that breathes; food is a map that drives through social mobility. Food stalls and noisy markets are the epitome of the city life that is grassroots, strong, and united, whereas elite restaurants are an emblem of exclusivity, alienation, and artificiality of the elite community. These unequal food spaces represent the sociology of the modern South Asian metropolis, whereby the material and symbolic economies overlap one another. The food and class in the novel reflect not only the social conditions but also, at the same time, criticize the moral emptiness of the society that will make consumption the meaning of human existence. Thus, the research takes the Bourdieu framework to comprehend the functioning of taste as a process of aspiration and exclusion. The performance of cultural capital is carried out in terms of consumption, although the performance is always volatile, showing the instability of social distinction. Hamid tells a story of success and is, simultaneously, a story of alienation. The novel makes daily practices turn into a language of social commentary because it describes food as something that provides food and as a symbol.

5. Methodology

The study is methodologically based on a qualitative text analysis that is based on literary sociology and cultural theory. The primary source is Hamid's (2013) novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, a piece of writing that is examined using the three aspects of cultural capital, habitus, and distinction proposed by Bourdieu. Close reading makes it possible to search through repetitive patterns of food and evaluate the symbolic restrictions of social hierarchy. These repetitive motifs are thematically interpreted to include the post-colonial urban context. In this qualitative style, I proceed to argue that the way Hamid views food imagery transcends the realist ground to a criticism of the sociological power and inequality of contemporary life.

Urban sociology has evolved into contextualizing the urban city of Hamid using a methodology that determines the literary city of Hamid as a theorization of wider application. The literary portrayal of some food spaces, including street

corners, markets, cafes, and high-end restaurants are used to represent the production of the urban space as economic, cultural, performance, and contextual segregation. The true process of eating within urban space functions as a performative action of belonging or not belonging, as an epistemologically unifying or separating force, as Bourdieu studies taste as an epistemological re-unifier and divider. I blend theoretical sociological analysis with textual or close analysis of the imagery of food presented by Hamid, and fill this gap of textual interpretation and cultural criticism, which eventually shows how literature is a reflection of actual social lived experience.

This scheme of methodology eventually enables the study to address the question of how the literary imagination of Hamid turns the consumption acts into symbolic discourses of power and identity. The changing nature of the relation of the protagonist towards food reflects on his changing place in the social hierarchies, the wobbly basis of the neoliberal dream. The novel, with its emphasis on taste and class, enters into the self-conscious mode of inviting its readers to address the contradictions of modernity and whether or not upward mobility could ever rise higher than the structures that cultivate inequality. The new study is interpretive in nature as the sociological concepts are conveyed to a literary expression by Hamid, especially using the symbolic and material life of food. The development of his protagonist from street-level food to fine food portrays the intersection of individual ambition and inequality in the system. They do not exist as separate cultural gestures, which are a part of the identity formation in urban modernity. By following the pattern of eating habits followed with the economic mobility, Hamid dramatizes the argument of Bourdieu that culture and consumption only reproduce and do not break down the hierarchies of classes.

This paper commits itself methodologically to qualitative textual analysis, which does not focus on the richness of data but on the depth of interpretation. Rather than doing the quantitative analysis of the mentions of food or class, this analysis focuses on the symbolic labor performed by the food depictions in the text. Every food

intake or reference to food is an entry point of a greater web of meaning relating individual desire to common structures of inequality. This comes as Bourdieu himself insists that aesthetic preferences and cultural practices should be historically read, not as per the totalizing assumptions of naturalized structures relieved of contextual worth. Through this, the text by Hamid is then a case study of the way in which literature draws and criticizes the social logics of distinction and hierarchy.

The approach recognizes the literary tools with the help of which Hamid introduces this social vision. The second-person narration is intended to create the effect of familiarity to the reader, yet it fulfills the universalizing action of the neo-liberal ideology, that is, the reader complicitly contributes to the need for prosperity and justification by the main hero. The presence of irony and parody that can be found in numerous aspects of it endangers the developmental dream of progression by signaling the absence of its morality and emotion. These apparatuses are officially supplementing the sociological assumption: the dream of descent, though desirable, is based upon a number of different exclusionary practices of taste, access, and privilege.

Some words about precedent: the literature currently available offers a powerful basis on which to read such dynamics. In the literary sociology discipline, many critics have pointed out that consumption is a social signifier. Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* is still very much part of this tradition and, as such, believes that taste is a category of social production that justifies inequality. According to Bourdieu himself, the classification of taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier (6), embodying the self-reinforcing logic of reproduction of the elite by apparently innocent taste. This analysis was later extended by other sociologists (Alan Warde, Martens, and Olsen 1999) to ordinary practices, demonstrating that even the most mundane activities like preparing meals or the decision to dine are symbolically loaded acts.

6. Analysis and Discussion

Critics like Khan (2020) and Ahmed (2021) have evaluated the novels by Hamid in the light of globalization, ambition, and moral economy in the context of South Asian urban fiction. Khan introduces the notion of how the protagonists of Hamid are represented as the neoliberal subject-maker-of-self, who is always on the move, yet constantly insecure. Ahmed places Hamid in bigger arguments concerning identity and postcolonial modernity. But they are too busy with economics or psychology to provide the sociological fertility of consumption as an identity figure. It is at this point that this paper comes in and states that the focus of food practices on Hamid turns the economic mobility into a drama of legitimacy.

Food practice is linked to social order with other interrelated scholarship. As an illustration, Warde et al. (1999) and Kamphuis et al. (2015) show how individuals choose their food, but in ways that reveal the materialized state in which they exist as well as their idealized hopes through being accepted. Santos, Monteiro, and Fernandes (2017) continue this strategy by highlighting the ethical nature of consumption; in other words, the way of eating is a manifestation of various concepts of respectability, discipline, and virtue. These frames define the conditions of the invocation of street food and fine food by Hamid, which is problematic because every plate of food can be a declaration of the ethics in relation to who we are and where we belong.

6.1 Street Food as a Symbol of Community and Tradition

The initial references to street food in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* identify the main character with the materialistic world of necessity and collective survival. The men are home out in the fields, and the family, with all but you, have dined together in the courtyard. You can hear the gurgle of the water pipe in your doorway, and can look at what portion of the light of the coals you can see one of your uncles inhale (Hamid, 2013, p. 1). The scene, in terms of its sensory details, sound, light, and most significantly the proximity in the home, lures us into a social world that is more

characterized by interdependence rather than independence. Food is the symbol of perseverance and sustenance here, and it relates people to the family, work, and place. Remarkably, the initial habitus of the main character, who questions scarcity and makes cooperation possible, persists throughout his life, and preconditions its further interaction with the world of wealth and culture.

The elements of alienation used by Hamid throughout the course of the story reflect the rise of the main character. When he starts to eat in classy areas, the text notes, "You have felt like you have only gone through the motions of your life, it is all by habit, you have no actual purpose, just as a water meter left over by a legacy run (Hamid, 2013, p. 10). Mechanical imagery accentuates the empty nature of habitual consumption without meaning. This phenomenon is explained by the Bourdieu theory: though the protagonist is gaining the objective attributes of success, he does not have the embodied cultural capital—the naturalness and self-confidence—that the real insiders have in comparison to aspirants. His involvement in high society rites of eating turns into imitation, not an art.

This performative nature of consumption demonstrates the affective price of social increase. As Gurler and Bozlu (2022) have mentioned, the state of performative consumption in question is when the internalization of elite tastes without physical belonging is transformed into the state of alienation and moral dissonance. Hamid uses the detachment and irony of the protagonist to capture this experience. Every meal reminds him of what he has lost emotionally and constitutionally. The very elite he tries to pursue reveals how weak his identity is by demonstrating that there is no movement on classes that can wipe away hereditary boundaries—it solely hides them.

This criticism is continued by Hamid in the aspect of power relations at the workplace that is addressed in the novel. "Your deputy has started talking to you more and more in tones that border on the aggressive... You do not know. In this case, social tension is exuded both in the workplace and between people. The deputy, with the economic and social capital, as well as the inward hierarchies of the capitalist order, is represented by him.

The discomfort experienced by the main character implies his weak status: he is vulnerable economically, but culturally. He does polish at tables in restaurants as he does power in business, but they both are false. Through Bourdieu's framing, one can observe a convergence between the two places: taste, speech, and action are all vessels of sharing symbolic power.

6.2 Fine Dining and Social Elitism

Further into the text, Hamid dwells upon the ethically false character of eating the elite. The paradox of excess is reflected by having less because having less is having less to numb you to your life (Hamid, 2013, p. 181). An excess produces a feeling of comfort, which is out of touch with reality. When the main character feels his financial downfall, his brother is gone abroad, and you are now, with you technically the arrested one, when you find out that your company is now bankrupt, and so is your birth mark as well (Hamid, 2013, p. 8). At this point, the symbolic order is destroyed; fine dining, luxury, and refinement make no sense anymore. The nothingness of consumption is made evident in destruction.

In such a case, Hamid demonstrates that economic mobility does not ensure cultural legitimacy or emotional satisfaction. The sociological logic of distinction is designed to guarantee that elites are not only able to maintain their superiority regarding wealth, but also in other mechanisms of taste, which are less accessible to quantification. Ultimately, where the protagonist is concerned, though he may be successful in his material life, his inability to feel comfortable does not do his roots justice. The novel steps Bourdieu in his concept of habitus, that once it is formed, it is impossible to unlearn it; social mobility alters situations but not dispositions.

This text puts Hamid in a wider context of postcolonial neoliberalism as a discourse. The city life in the novel by Hamid is entirely flooded with inequality as well as aspirational feelings, and portrays the structural inconsistencies of the present-day South Asia. The mere presence of the street food carts that are adjacent to the high-end

restaurants visualizes the state of being on the street, being both abundant and deprived. The elite eat because it is a form of signifying social status; the poor eat because they have to feed. But the poor and the elite share the same systemic capitalist appetite, which is commodification value. The inconsistency of the novelist to romanticize either of the two also implies, at the same time, the sociological atonement to the text: both authenticity and aspiration are materialized by the normative logics of market sensibility.

6.3 Globalization and Urban Food Transformation

The implications of such analysis extend to the literature. The analysis of food as a symbolic language of class shows that the cultural practices reinforce the social stratifications even during economic modernization. The city is a theatre in which the residents of the city are continuously acting their belonging in the aspects of taste and clothes, speech and gesture. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital expounds how they generate real power through such performances that generate scenarios where the people who control the rules of good taste exercise power over others who do not have any choice but to imitate them. The main character, Hamid, is not a failure due to his inability to become a successful businessman or become ambitious, but to his misjudgment of the contribution that culture could make to the perpetuation of social injustices.

The recognition of this dynamic contributes to explaining broader objectives of the analysis. The analysis seeks to demonstrate how food and dining are depicted by Hamid to demonstrate that there remains the existence of stratification in postcolonial capitalistic societies. It is analyzed that culinary practices of the novel are a serious way of life, not frivolous or decorative, and, nonetheless, a significant precursor to moral and psychological facets of class. The process of consumption is an allegory of being a member of a universal machine of aspiration in which the aspiration to be recognized replaces the actual feeling of satisfaction.

Although the frames of the study are narrowed to one novel, its interpretive structure provides the

direction of comparison within the framework of South Asian fiction. The work of Hamid represents a local trend: the urban space and consumption are used by writers to address the issue of identity in the era of globalization. Nevertheless, this is not an empirical but a textual or interpretive analysis; it is based on close reading as opposed to fieldwork in sociology. Such limitations, however, do emphasize the point that literature offers a rare, creative form of sociological inquiry and emotional truths that quantitative research may fail to capture.

7. Conclusion and Findings

There are several wider implications of the findings of this study. This is because urban food practices, despite their triviality, according to them, reflect profound inequalities inherent in contemporary life. Trying to demonstrate that aspirational consumption cannot assure belonging, Hamid is inviting his readers to doubt the rightfulness of the culture that posits success based on accumulation. Through his story, it was revealed that money without a cultural or emotional basis leads to alienation, but not freedom. Such an acknowledgement helps in the realization of postcolonial neoliberal societies where individuals are urged to fashion themselves in the process of consumption despite the systemic restrictions that are present.

The present reading, therefore, supports, on an academic level, the growing significance of literary sociology as an interdisciplinary methodology. Using Bourdieu to read Hamid, the paper bridges the gap in understanding the use of narrative analysis and social theory through the example of how one can use fiction to describe social processes. In the context of urban policy and cultural studies in general, this should serve as a reminder that inequality is not merely material, but also that spaces of leisure and consumption are what define the sense of identity and self-worth among citizens. Pedagogically, the argument has the capability of adding to teaching about urban sociology, modern fiction, and cultural capital through offering a particular example of how a literary text can offer access to sociological concepts.

Ultimately, this paper contends that food in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is a metaphor and a means of comprehending concepts of classes. Where the consumption at the street level can be interpreted as genuine, shared, and stable, consumption in a fancy restaurant or the glares at a dinner table can be interpreted as aspiration, a sense of sophistication, and marginalization. The story of Hamid shows that wealth will never substitute for the lack of any cultural legitimacy or coherent sense. It is in his irony and the second-person narration that Hamid makes the story of one man becoming successful something that we can all comment on as well: inequality. The enduring legacy of the book is a discourse of consumption as a moral economy, a system of feelings and morality that embodies the contradictions of the society, which the book narrates.

In such way the paper proves its thesis: in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, the plotting of street food and high-end restaurant food by Mohsin Hamid portrays a critical and imaginative interrogation of how social stratification, class identity and cultural capital are employed as symbolic indicators of aspiration, exclusion or inequality in postcolonial urban South Asia in the everyday practices of consumption.

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