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*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* as Pretty Girl: Characterization, Narration and Female Advancement

Mohsin Hamid submerges his reader into a foreign, unspecified area in Asia where poverty, poor health and lack of cleanliness are inescapable in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. Hamid captivates his reader's attention by writing the novel in second-person narration. The pronoun usage of "you," cleverly places the reader as the impoverished, unnamed character for the remainder of the novel. As a self help book, the story focuses on the unnamed character and his ambitions to climb the ladder to social and economic wealth; however, the plot unfolds with a persistent, untraditional hometown sweetheart love story with a character named "pretty girl." It's in the vagueness of the novel that demands the reader's undivided attention to gather as much details as possible of the plot and setting. In a filth ridden, bootleg setting, the love story develops between the protagonist and pretty girl. Her appearances in the story become an exception to Hamid's chosen point-of-view, namely second person, which would traditionally be "your" thoughts, yet Hamid gives the reader insight into pretty girl's thoughts. Hamid pushes the limitation of second-person narration with pretty girl subtly, and he characterizes her to show how she is an exception not only to the narration, but to the plot. Pretty girl serves as a break from the second person limited point-of-view. The novels theme develops with the usage of pretty girl's known thoughts as she helps develop the protagonist's characterization, becomes the exception to narration and plot, and portrays female advancement in this society. The protagonist and pretty girl are exceptions to the world they live in because they become successful, and they

get filthy getting there. For the sake of clarification, in this interpretative essay the usage of 'protagonist' or 'you' refers to Hamid's main male character, who is narrating.

First, the novel introduces pretty girl in the chapter, "Don't Fall in Love," where the protagonist is a growing young man with harmless, yet inappropriate thoughts of pretty girl. Pretty girl is different than the remainder of the girls because of her unconventional beauty, "Her looks would not traditionally have been considered beautiful. She is also lean, tall and flat-chested, her breasts the size, as your mother notes dismissively, of two cheap little squashed mangoes" (38). The reader immediately notes pretty girl is an exception to what societal beauty is. The protagonist describes his interest for pretty girl as, "Whatever the reason, the pretty girl is the object of much desire, anguish, and masturbatory activity" (38). At first, the protagonist views pretty girl as something to be consumed by her untraditional, physical beauty; however, he learns that she has ambitious to leave this unknown town to become a model. The two exchange friendship through the protagonist's job with bootleg DVD's. Pretty girl doesn't talk much, say thank you or show any initial interest in him; however, she does mention he is skinny like her (43). The protagonist finds it insulting, but as motive to bulk up in muscle tone, so he decides to enhance his protein intake. Again, the protagonist lives in poverty, and the diet consists of, "Chicken is served in your home on the rarest occasions, and red meat is a luxury to be enjoyed solely at grand celebrations...Lentils and spinach are of course staples of your diet" (44). The protagonist desires pretty girl and believe having a better diet and body to enhance muscle tone will gain pretty girl's attention, so he splurges on purchasing milk. Milk is regarded as the protagonist's guilty pleasure because his family does not know he is spending ten percent of his income on a beverage for his own benefit in order to please pretty girl (44).

The protagonist's characterization develops once conversation is initiated with pretty girl. He once lusted over pretty girl, but over time wants to better himself for her. She has been a beautiful enigma until she playfully insults his figure; hence, his willingness to change his appearance to impress pretty girl. The protagonist successfully gains pretty girl's attention and conversations turn into late telephone calls, and later his first sexual experience. Also, Hamid foreshadows the relationship saying, "In you she has made a friend, a person who renders her life in the neighborhood she hates more bearable" (51). Hamid tactfully mentions amidst of the troubling town, "you" are her friend, "you" are a reminder of the society she grew up in. As untraditional as pretty girl is in appearance, so is the love story. The protagonist's characterization steadily changes in this chapter because of pretty girl and the influence she has on "you."

Second, pretty girl is an exception to the narration and plot. In specific parts of the novel, the reader is able to know pretty girl's thoughts. This book is designed as a self help book to carry the plot of the protagonist's life; however, the reoccurring appearance of pretty girl signifies she's an aspect of facilitating the plot. In the chapter, "Don't Fall in Love," Hamid gives pretty girl a voice saying:

Her own feelings for you, she tells herself, are rather different. She thinks of you with warmth and fondness, like a little brother, except of course that you are the same age, and not her brother at all. And you do have beautiful eyes. You are a door to an existence she does not desire, but even if the room beyond is repugnant, that door has won a portion of her affection (51-2).

The reader learns how pretty girl feels toward the protagonist. Typically feelings from other characters are not revealed in second-person narration, but Hamid cleverly gives his reader insight into pretty girl's thoughts and feelings to express her importance in the plot. When pretty girl's thoughts and feelings are told, it almost goes completely unnoticed, because it first appears

as still second-person narration. However, this passage shows how pretty girl, “tells herself...thinks of you...she does not desire,” all key phrases in understanding Hamid is giving her a voice. These are her private thoughts and feelings the protagonist is not aware of, but the reader is. When the reader finally picks up on Hamid’s subtly with narration, they begin to have an understanding of pretty girl’s role and importance in the novel. Hamid does not allow you to understand the thoughts and feelings of every character in the novel; however, the reader is allowed to know the protagonists and pretty girls’ thoughts. This creates an intertwined dynamic between them and pushes the plots development.

In the chapter, “Work for Yourself,” we still see the subtle narration being used with plot advancement. The two characters meet for dinner, catch up on each other’s lives, and have sex. They lay together in silence as pretty girl smokes a cigarette and thinks:

She imagines what a relationship with you might be like, whether you could possibly mix with her colleagues and acquaintances in the great city by the sea. She wonders also...if there will ever arrive a day she is not repelled by the notion of binding herself permanently to a man (112).

Yet again, the reader understands pretty girl’s private thoughts. The reader almost has to separate themselves from the second-person narration to better interpret pretty girls role in the plot. The passage serves as an example of pretty girl’s narration as she ponders if the protagonist can fit in with her fame lifestyle. It also shows how she is disinterested in being someone’s wife because it would ‘bind’ her to them. Hamid’s intention of second-person narration intentionally develops the plot between the two characters, and shows how pretty girl is a key factor in moving the plot. Pretty girl reoccurs in the novel because she is similar to the protagonist and her sexual relationship with him allows the reader to know her private thoughts. She is same in age, grew up in the same neighborhood and is striving for success. The result of the foreshadowing from the Chapter, “Don’t Fall in Love,” appears when the two characters begin to have sex,

saying, “There is a wiff of home about you, emotionally, but also physically, in for example your lack of deodorant, and for her home carries with it connotations of sorrow and brutality...”

(111). The reader understands this as pretty girl’s point of view, as she feels reminded of her hometown because of the protagonist’s heavy, soiled scent. Pretty girl may have escaped her hometown, but it’s almost inescapable with her sexual relationship with the protagonist.

Also, there is still mild development with characterization with the protagonist within the same chapter. He still feels as if he needs to impress pretty girl, so before a dinner date he prepares yourself, “That evening you get a haircut, opting for a buzz... You purchase extravagantly priced tight jeans and a nylon jacket with words “Man Meat” on the back from a boutique with impressive cars parked outside” (103). He feels inclined to make these expensive purchases because pretty girl is now an established model, and the dinner will be an upscale location. The desire for pretty girl, and the over arching need to impress her, develops the protagonist’s characterization.

Lastly, pretty girl is portrayed as the female advancement in this society. She sleeps with her manager at the beauty salon, in hopes that he will introduce her to agents or photographers in the model industry. Pretty girl is subject to physical favors with her marketing manager:

Initially these were kisses and permission to fondle her body. Then oral sex was required. This was followed by anal sex, which she believed much to his surprise and delight would allow her to preserve her virginity. But as months passed, she came to doubt this logic, and eventually she permitted vaginal sex as well... Her goal is sufficient funds to afford the rent of a place of her own, a goal she is now close to achieving (50-1).

This passage shows the “filth” she has to endure to achieve her goals. At a young age, pretty girl understands what she has to do to gain the connections to the industry. Her body is an object of desire to her physically manipulative marketing manager, but she views it as the pathway to a modeling career; thus, giving her income to have a place for herself. It can be

assumed; pretty girl is aware of her beauty and uses it to her advantage to escape poverty. Pretty girl advances in society by sleeping with lousy men, like her marketing manager, not because she wants to, but because she understands it is her way out of poverty. With age, pretty girl understands her young beauty will fade, and she will no longer be the object of affection. In this society, most women are subject to their men, pretty girl imagines her life after her modeling career is over, “She is aware that her future is shaky, that she could well end up impoverished, aged and solitary, an elderly lady in a single room...or, no less frightening, the wife of some cocaine-snorting man-child...prone to picking up teenage girls at parties in his muscular European limousine and to sobbing unpredictably when drunk” (111). Pretty girl fears the solitary, lonely life or being the wife of a rich, irresponsible; however, they are both realities that could happen to her. She is not keen to the idea that she could be alone one day, but she also rejects the notion of being a wife; which was also previously mentioned.

As expected, pretty girl quits modeling and owns a furniture boutique. She has her own assistant, a factotum, but still lives in the smoggy environment—as if poverty is escapable, but not the filth of the world (192-193). Conveniently, at this point in the novel, the protagonist’s hotel is near her home she has secured for herself, “She owns a small townhouse, of which she is landlady, renting her two spare rooms at below market rates to a pair of women...Between her savings and this rental income, the pretty girl gets by” (202). Pretty girl lives rather comfortably, and has wisely saved her money and makes a side income by renting rooms in her home. She is not lonely or poor with a home full of women, who are seeking advancement in society. She is a pillar of women’s advancement in society because of the long trek she had to endure to get to where she is. As a woman, she understands she would initially be subject to men, but she always

keeps in mind her goals. Pretty girl may have had to get filthy with men to be where she is, but she now owns a home, a goal she initially had.

Pretty girl has no desire to return to her hometown because, “In her mind, her return to the region of her birth marked a decisive break from days gone recently by. Any yet whether because of her advancing age or the strange echoes this city sustains thought its associations with her childhood...” (203). Again, the reader is given her narration with the phrase, “in her mind,” and understands even though she has no intention to visit her hometown; the city serves as a quiet reminder. Pretty girl knows she is a lucky woman who has advanced in society, met her goals and is no longer subject to a man’s physical favors.

Hamid gives his readers an interesting and easy read, because of the interactive second-person narration; however, he pushes the boundaries with the content of his writing and narration. The novel is a bit stomach churning at certain parts, and the reader is given intimate details about sexual encounters pretty girl undergoes, but it is all part the suggestion to the novels theme. In *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Hamid subtly breaks the rules of second-person narration with pretty girl to further the overall theme. It can be assumed, Hamid wrote pretty girl as a character to merely influence the protagonist, but with the evidence provided it can be assumed she serves a greater role. It is reasonable to conclude, Hamid created pretty girl to develop the protagonist’s characterization, serving a break in second-person narration and to portray female advancement in this filth ridden society. Her character keeps the reader wondering when, and if, she will appear in the plot.

Works Cited

Hamid, Mohsin. *How to Get Rich in Rising Asia*. New York : Riverhead Books, 2013. Print.