NOVEL ORIENTATIONS: INNOVATION AND RENOVATION IN MOHSIN HAMID'S "HOW TO GET FILTHY RICH IN RISING ASIA"

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Abstract: This article addresses Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013). The narrative, which imitates a self-help or how-to guide, offers an intriguing textual terrain to engage questions of innovation and renovation. The writer uses a global model of writing, which enjoys high circulation and consumption, to engage in local concerns. Hamid's novel provides a portrait of an entrepreneur as a young man. It engages in a diagnosis of Pakistan's social and political maladies. I argue that Mohsin Hamid is particularly concerned in this novel with innovation on narratological and thematic levels. My investigation of the *novel* orientations in Hamid's text attempts to press the borders of narratology to cultural territories. The narrative provides a pertinent example of the glocal, wherein literature becomes a site of dialogue and negotiation between the local and the global.

Keywords: narratology, genre, South Asian novel, self-help literature, glocal.

You have to find new ways of telling stories […]
We need new kinds of novels
(Mohsin Hamid, The Irish Times*)*

The act of writing is often attended by anxiety over reception, influence, or creative capacity. The term "beginnings", used by Edward Said, accommodates a wide range of these concerns: "innovation, novelty, originality, revolution, change, convention, tradition, period, authority, influence" (Said 1975: 6). This article explores two facets of "beginnings" related to the novel, namely innovation and renovation. I address Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), a novel that remodels the rags-to-riches story, one of the most

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ancient plots in storytelling. The narrative, which imitates a self-help or how-to guide, charts the tribulations of a nameless young boy from a destitute rural area who elbows his way towards a great financial success in an Asian city. Written in a rather rare second person point of view, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* offers an intriguing textual terrain to engage in questions of innovation and renovation.

I argue that Mohsin Hamid's narrative displays novel orientations on narratological and thematic levels. The writer brings a global genre of writing to the realm of the local. His concern with the literariness of the text is amalgamated with a glocalized gesture negotiating a terrain of entente accommodating a rather tense and competing rapport between global pressures and local realities. As the text reflects upon acts of reading and writing, I propose to investigate Hamid's strategies of pressing the borders of narratology to cultural territories. My essay is divided into two parts. First, I examine the dynamics of "innovation" and "renovation" as related to the genre of the novel. Second, I look into Hamid's narrative strategies in refurbishing the self-help genre within a gesture of aesthetic and ethical retrieval and negotiation.

ON INNOVATION AND RENOVATION

Descending from the Latin "novus", "new", the word "novel" is genealogically anchored in innovation and renovation. It was only in the 18th century that both "novel" and "novelist" acquired the meaning in today's current usage. While the word novel "meant something new, and also a piece of news", the word novelist "meant an 'innovator', and retained this meaning even in the mid-seventeenth century when it also came to mean 'a novice', someone without experience" (Schmidt 2014: 11). Even though stabilized, the meaning of the word "novel" still maintains its historical nuances. Indeed, Bakhtin contends, "the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop that is yet uncompleted" (Bakhtin 1981: 2). It is precisely this gap, an interstice of the unfinished, that novelists strive to conquer and claim as a new novelistic territory.

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The words "innovation" and "renovation" used in this essay describe the protean quality of the novel as a genre, that is its capacity of dissemination, contamination, and transformation. Inspired by Marthes Robert's delineation of a vagabond-like genre, Michael Mckeon proposes the following definition:

> the novel is figured as a new comer, an upstart, a commoner made good who verges on the status of heroic outlaw; an imperial invader, usurper, and colonizer, at once totalitarian and leveling; a parasite that cannibalistically feeds off other legitimate forms for its own illicit sustenance (McKeon 2000: 4).

Whether called an "outlaw", a "bastard" (Simensen et al 2004: 3), or a free genre verging on "total anarchy" (Robert 2000: 58), there is a consensus about the agency of the novel in incorporating other genres and especially its capacity of regeneration and renewal. Franco Moretti, for instance, describes the novel as "a phoenix always ready to take flight in a new direction" (Moretti 2006: ix). The novel secures its newness, or its innovative trait, from its inherent process of transformation. Bakhtin refers to this gesture energizing the novel's power of incorporation and contamination as "reformulation" and "re-accentuation" (Bakhtin 1981: 5). While engaging in a dialogue with tradition, the novel seems to have the final word. It operates on the outskirts of innovation and renovation; acts as a middleman between the old and the new; and performs the role of a negotiator of form and content.

Even though etymologically steeped in innovation, the novel secures perpetuity and power in renovation. "No poet, no artist of any art", maintains T.S Eliot in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, "has his complete meaning alone" (Eliot 1932: 38). The novel, like other literary genres, engages in an act of recycling and reproduction. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Boyle argue that a "poem, novel or play that does not in some sense relate to previous texts is, in fact, literally unimaginable" (Bennett, Boyle 2004: 6). Renovation works on the compositional side, that is technical matters, as well as the thematic one. The novel enacts a dialectical relationship be-

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tween innovation and renovation; a dialogue that incorporates other elements such as "originality" and "invention".

The debate around the relationship between innovation, originality, and invention is far from being conclusive. Derek Attridge, for instance, distinguishes between "mere novelty" and originality, to which he attributes a higher position. Originality, he contends, "entails a particular kind of difference from what has gone before, one that changes the field in question for later practitioners" (Attridge 2004: 36). He makes a further distinction between originality and inventiveness. The inventiveness of a work of literature is easier to trace than originality for "inventiveness is always inventiveness *for the reader*" (Attridge 2004: 45, italics in original). According to this classification, then, originality necessitates a more expert mode of reading. Inventiveness, on the other side, is at the reach of any reader. Such a taxonomic stratification disappears in other critical approaches to this issue. Michael M. Boardman, for instance, amalgamates "originality, invention, the 'new'" in what he calls "innovation" (Boardman 1992: 1). Richard Walsh, on another hand, claims that "innovative fiction is characterized by the prominence and inventiveness of its forms". The "originality" of this "innovative" fiction, he continues, lies "in its *argument*" (Walsh 1995: x).

Despite the differences in the conception and use of these terms, there is a consensus, between these three critics at least, about the meaning of "innovation". What Walsh calls the "argument" of a novel "includes the imaginary, the interrogative, the aesthetic and especially the emotional qualities of the novel" (Walsh 1995: xi). Attridge's definition of innovation chimes with Walsh's; it means "searching for new modes of expression to exploit, new facets of human life to represent, new shades of feelings to capture" (Attridge 2004: 2). As for Boardman, innovation implies "the discovery of a form perfectly expressive of some new way of seeing the world" (Boardman 1992: 1). Innovation, in other words, testifies to the fact that our vision of the world is not conclusive. Storyfying the world shows our persistent need to understand our lives. Innovation is an act of capturing new experiences, while

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renovation reminds us that we cannot reach to the future if we do not incorporate the past in our present.

NEGOTIATING INNOVATION AND RENOVATION IN "FILTHY RICH": TOWARDS A GLOCAL MODEL

> *A novel should do something which it has not done before. Create something fresh and new, unusual and yet traditional, play with form and yet entertain at the same time. We as authors owe this to the reader*
> *(Mohsin Hamid,* The National*)*

While keeping an eye on a traditional model of writing fiction, Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (hereafter *Filthy Rich*) reaches for innovation. One way of creating "something fresh and new" in this novel is to emulate the self-help genre. The origin of this type of writing is ascribed to Samuel Smiles' text *Self Help* (1859). In *Samuel Smiles and the Genesis of Self-Help*, R.T. Morris claims that Smiles' book has been associated with "an effective publicizing of the Victorian myth of upward social mobility and the self-made man which 'seduced' the working class to middle-class ideals" (Morris 1981: 91). The global circulation of this type of writing has facilitated the spread of neoliberal ideology across the world. Hamid's story of a young entrepreneur who strives alone to carve a place in a jungle-like market owes much to the ethos of individualism, self-reliance, and survivalism propagated by self-help guides.

Hamid, however, has meant his narrative to be a subversive critique of this writing industry. His novel, which has generic lineage to Smiles' serious work, especially in its economic and social concerns, criticizes the reification of this genre, which forms now one of the most proliferate markets in the book industry. "Recycling texts, documents, or ideas", claims Jean-Jacque Chardin, "is a way of modifying, transforming, even bowdlerizing, or impoverishing them". While imitating self-help guides, Hamid also levels a critique to a global intellectual indigence caused by "consumerism" and "mass-commodification" (Chardin 2012: 1). Such an anxiety

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accounts for Hamid's sardonic introductions to each chapter in which he warns the reader that this self-help guide will provide no help unless the reader changes his/her reading strategies and expectations.

Self-help guides inhabit an ambiguous terrain. While voraciously consumed, they are readily ridiculed. In his essay *In Defense of Self-Help Books*, Alain de Botton, writer and editor of how-to guides, explains this contradictory position. "Anyone wanting to damage their intellectual credentials at a stroke", he opens his essay, "needs only do one simple thing: confess they read self-help books". As these books rely on the gullibility of the reader, often naïve sentimentality, it is assumed that only stupid people consume them. De Botton, however, ends his essay with a vindication of this genre: "a culture which gives a role to guidance and the self-help book stands a chance of making at least one or two fewer mistakes than the previous generation in the time that remains" (De Botton 2012).

Mohsin Hamid deliberately positions his narrative midway between a serious narrative and a mock self-help guide. The title of each chapter imitates the often-patronizing tone adopted by how-to guides in announcing the different steps towards achieving a goal: "One: Move to the City", "Two: Get an Education", "Three: Don't Fall in Love", "Four: Avoid Idealists", "Five: Learn from a Master" and so on. The introduction to each chapter, however, turns the self-help guide into ridicule by showing its shortcomings or by announcing that this self-help guide does not function like the other how-to guides. The introduction to Chapter One sets the ironic tone maintained in the whole book: "look, unless you're writing one, a self-help book is an oxymoron. You read a self-help book so that someone who isn't yourself can help you, that someone being the author. This is true of the whole self-help genre" (Hamid 2013a: 3).

While innovation in *Filthy Rich* acquires power from the aesthetic recuperation of a rather popular non-literary genre and its recycling into a literary work, renovation is manifest in refurbishing the whole genre and redefining its objectives. It's probably at this level that the whole narrative acquires its glo-

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cal gesture. Indeed, instead of the traditional manual focusing on the individual and leading to ultimate happiness, the narrative showcases an insight into a collective local misery. The book, claims Massoud Ashraf Raja, is a "sort of manifesto for the most disenfranchised and the most exploited constituency in Pakistan: the rural poor, or what are called the muzaraa or the haris, in other words bounded labor, in the local languages" (Raja 2014: 87). If innovation tampers with the aesthetic, renovation presses the boundaries of the aesthetic to the ethical. Both writing and reading become responsible acts of social, political, and cultural critique.

With great acumen, Hamid penetrates Pakistan's heart of darkness. His narrative is an astute diagnosis of the economic and cultural maladies of his country: poverty, corruption, nepotism, fundamentalism, foreign intervention, and the list runs long. The idea of disability is wretched from its narrow clinical scope and ascribed to an ill nation that badly needs help, or self-help as a matter of fact. As he dissects Pakistan, Hamid interpolates an ancient strategy of narration, namely scatology, which serves the purpose of criticism and ridicule. Scatology, which refers to obscene language or literature, especially the one dealing pruriently or humorously with excrement and excretory functions, serves as a nod to great scatologists like Chaucer, Rabelais, Boccacio, Montaigne, and Swift. The title of the novel *How to Get Filthy Rich* already announces this scatological gesture. The conjunction of writing dirt and dirty writing is clearly present in the opening chapter. Dirt dominates the destitute village, which "you", the narratee-protagonist, needs to leave in order to become rich. Hamid's play on words is obvious here: from dirt-poor to filthy-rich. The scene describing the narratee's father defecating, "squatting low and squeezing forcefully to expel the contents of his colon" (Hamid 2013a: 6), or the scene describing the stream where villagers "relieve themselves", wash their clothes, and drink (Hamid 2013a: 6), are meant to confront the readers with a shocking reality. Those squeamish readers, easily offended by what may seem unscrupulous details, are forced to confront the question: which is more shocking and unscrupulous, poverty or defecation?

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Renovating the self-help genre also offers an occasion to revisit two major questions often linked to our relationship to books: why do we write and why do we read? To the question why "you molded the text after self-help books?", Hamid answers: "The idea began with the question, 'why do I write novels?' I'm a 42-year old man who sits by himself in a room and writes. To do this for hours and days and weeks upon years, it must be doing something for me. So maybe the novel is self-help for the writer" (Hamid 2014). This idea is clearly stated in different places in the novel, such as the introduction to Chapter Four: "such self-help books are numerous, and yet, it's possible some of them do help a self, but more often than not, the self they help is their writer's self, not yours" (Hamid 2013a: 57). Hamid's ironic playfulness addresses mainly an alert reader who is ready to question the act of reading.

In the same interview, Hamid continues his explanation of this generic choice: "and then I thought maybe fiction can help readers. So, it started off as a kind of joke, as I wrote, it became more and more sincere and earnest" (Hamid 2014). Hamid's concern with the act of reading is manifest in his fascination with the second-person narrative. "Amazed by the potential of the 'you'", Hamid announces in an essay, he has meant *Filthy Rich* to show that "novels are a way for readers to create, not just for writers to do so" (Hamid 2013b). Reflections on the act of reading and the role of the reader as a co-author cross the whole narrative. "This self-help book is a co-creative project", the narrator announces in the opening of Chapter Six, "Work for Yourself". The playful title of this chapter both admonishes the you-narratee to start his own business, and encourages the reader to work for a creative reading process. Indeed, "when you imagine", the narrator addresses the reader,

> you create. It's in being read that a book becomes a book, and in each of a million different readings a book becomes one of a million different books, just as an egg becomes one of a potentially a million different people when it's approached by a hard-swimming and frisky school of sperm" (Hamid 2013a: 97-98).

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The act of reading becomes an act of fertilization, a performance of reproduction. Such a "transactional" model, which Louise Rosenblatt identifies as constitutive of the text-reader interaction (Rosenblatt 1978: xi), finds resonance in Wolfgang Iser's reader-response paradigm. Indeed, only the reader is able to set "the work in motion", and "unfold its inherently dynamic character" (Rosenblatt 1978: 280). The text is brought into "existence" through a dynamic "convergence of text and reader" (Iser 1972: 279). In Hamid's text, reading does not stop at the level of reproduction; it becomes a process of production, which Hamid fuses and confuses with the urge to get filthy rich. "Readers don't work for writers. They work for themselves" the narrator continues his reflections in the same chapter; herein "lies the richness of reading" (Hamid 2013a: 98). The whole book, therefore, becomes a guide explaining that wealth resides in reading novels.

Since the publication of Michel Butor's *La Modification* (1953), the second-person narrative has acquired more visibility and critical attention. Monika Fludernik's work on its narratological significance is quite enlightening and aims to fill in a gap in what she describes as a rather "neglected mode of narration" (Fludernik 1994: 304). Considered by Mieke Bal as "a particularly difficult mode of writing" (Bal 1996: 180), the second-person narrative is often described as experimental. Hamid started his exploration of this mode of narration in his second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), which unfolds as a monologue in which Changez, the narrator-protagonist, addresses a silent American man. Hamid acknowledged in his interviews and essays that he was very much influenced by Albert Camus' *La Chute* (1956). The second person narrative used in *Filthy Rich* is probably inspired by Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979). While Italo Calvino figures on the list of Hamid's favorite writers, he has never made, so far, any reference to Lorrie Moore, one of the most prominent American writers of self-help fiction. Whether he read Lorrie Moore or not, Hamid does not seem to be concerned with any anxiety of influence. "I don't think that it's negative to be influenced by other writers", he states, "it's entirely natural, and in a way, to be open

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to influence is quite a healthy state for a writer" (Hamid 2015). Hence the book's gesture of renovation.

What is relevant to my analysis here, is not to make a catalogue of the writers who have influenced Hamid, but rather to explore the way he renovates an old tradition of addressing the reader. In a brief survey of second-person fiction, Fludernik traces back this tradition to "Saint Augustine's early fifth-century *Confessions*" (Fludernik 1994: 293). Her survey points out the burgeoning use of this mode of narration in medieval texts, as well as its development in the nineteenth century fiction, namely in Nathaniel Hawthorn's short story *The Haunted Mind* (1835). *Filthy Rich*, however, falls in the category Fludernik designates as "innovative fiction" that molds itself on the "guidebook imperative" (Fludernik 1994: 302). Indeed, Hamid's text adopts a slippery "you", an unstable narratee that often merges with the reader. The metafictional impulse in the narrative enhances authorial intrusion and consequently the breaking of the fourth wall. Even though used now as a postmodern technique, authorial intrusion is an old strategy of narration that dates back to the 18th and 19th centuries novelistic practices. Mary Frances Rogers argues that novelists' artifices, such as addressing directly the readers, served social and literary functions (Rogers 1991: 130). Such interjections, like Charlotte Bronte's famous "Reader I married him" in *Jane Eyre* (1847), had the aim to socialize and earn a more intimate relationship with the reader. A self-reflexive mode of writing and commenting on how and why to read was used by Fielding, Trollope, and other novelists. In *Joseph Andrews*, for instance, Fielding devotes the first chapter of Book II to lecture his readers on the significance of dividing his book into chapters which serve as inns for the reader-traveler. This tradition of socializing with the reader is reactivated by Hamid in *Filthy Rich*: "I wanted to earn that 'you' by the end of the book. To start with a 'you' that was more of the standard self-help version, and then, by the end of the novel, to achieve a relationship of real intimacy with the reader [...]. It's a bit like meeting somebody at a bar" (Hamid 2017). Hamid reactivates the same spirit of sociability described by Rogers.

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This tradition of showing readers why to read and "instructing them about their roles" (Rogers 1991: 133) is clear in the introduction to Chapter Two:

> It's remarkable how many books fall in the category of self-help. Why, for example, do you persist in reading that much-praised, breathtakingly boring foreign novel, slogging through page after page after please-make-it-stop page of tar-slow prose and blush-inducing formal conceit if not out of an impulse to understand distant lands that because of globalization are increasingly affecting life in your own? What is this impulse of yours, at its core, if not a desire for self-help? (Hamid 2013a: 20)

In this excerpt, the slippery second-person narrative shifts to the reader. Reflecting on the act of reading, Hamid is not only conversant with 18th and 19th century novelistic tradition, but also with literary criticism. This "impulse" or the "desire" energizing the act of reading was a major concept in theorizing a reader-oriented criticism. Roland Barthes' model of a libidinally-driven act of reading, explored in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), is further developed by Peter Brooks' investigation of "the conjunction of the narrative of desire and the desire of narrative" (Brooks 1984: 48). Hamid, however, locates desire in a more encompassing cultural model of reading.

The renovative gesture in Hamid's novel resides in remodeling the socializing tradition of 18th and 19th century novel as well as reworking classic narratology by promoting a global model of reading. Such a model unfolds as a "non-linear, dialectical process in which the universal and particular, the similar and the dissimilar, the global and the local are to be conceived, not as cultural polarities, but as interconnected and reciprocally interpenetrating principles" (Beck 2006: 73). What drives us to read foreign literature, like Hamid's novel, is a desire to know the other. This desire becomes even more urgent if one's life or one's country is affected by a specific other country. Hamid's subtle insinuation at the growing interest in the literature produced by Pakistan or the Middle East, especially after 9/11, should not be overlooked here. Providing a new cultural model of the driving force in the act of reading is enhanced by Hamid's recycling and retrieval of

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the western anthropological accounts of the rest of the world. Indeed, the writer reclaims the role of the ethnographic observer in providing an inside record of the poverty and backwardness of rural areas as well as the desolate condition of a developing Asian city. Hamid's text also participates in the heated debate around postcolonial writers, who are accused of "a comprador Western-style, Western-trained groups of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery" (Appiah 1992: 149). The narrator's answer to the question "why do we read foreign novels?" is an indirect critique to the reductive view relegating postcolonial writers to the role of brokers, cultural facilitators, and informants.

Hamid's narrative about Pakistan, written in a language that facilitates a global circulation, has a direct relevance to the tension surrounding local literary production and global reception. Criticism of one's own culture is immediately charged of not only exhibiting the self to the voyeuristic eyes of a global readership, but also reinforcing the stereotypes about a backward third-world culture. To Pakistani readers, Hamid's fictional representation of the country functions as "a symbolic act of hanging Pakistani dirty linen on a global clothesline" (Raja 2014: 84). Hamid, however, makes a playful use of local cultural exhibitionism and global interpretive voyeurism. As he subverts roles, the local exhibitionist act becomes a way of appropriating an ethnographic gaze at the self, while the global voyeur's inspection is rerouted towards an ethical confrontation.

Such an ethnographic examination of one's own country is displayed as a defying gesture to the American military infiltration of Pakistan. In an episode showing "you" and his sister playing near "an uncovered sewer" (Hamid 2013a: 27), which they call a river, the narrator attracts the reader's attention to the "presence of an orbiting reconnaissance satellite" (Hamid 2013a: 27) which records the minute details of the two children's game. As the satellite detects the two moving bodies, the narrator describes the horrid condition of this urban space: the sewer is "a trickle of excrement of varying viscosities" (Hamid 2013a: 27). Western ethnography, based on vo-

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yeurism as a strategy of scientific knowledge and cultural production, is now replaced by a technological surveillance. Even though criticized for exhibiting the dirty laundry of Pakistan, Hamid's ironic gesture of displaying the poverty and filth of his country to the voyeuristic eyes of the reader transforms reading into an ethically-charged global operation. For shocking "events or acts are the moments in narrative when the text confronts the voyeur, the reader, the 'me' of the narrative, and forces 'me' to blink. Roles are reversed; I am being read, and ethical reading begins" (Ledbetter 1996: 25). Contrary to the western ethnographic accounts, which function as a reminder of the western superiority, Hamid's indulgence in an inside ethnography serves to reorient reading strategies and functions.

CONCLUSION

How to engage the text as both an aesthetic pursuit and a cultural practice is a key question in a glocal-oriented literary criticism. If we venture into a catachrestic use of the terms "local" and "global", we may propose a spatial definition of literature, wherein the local aspect of a literary text corresponds to its aesthetic side, while the cultural dimension matches its global scope. The study of literature is often fraught with a constant tension between these elements. This strain is clearly manifest in strategies of reading and teaching literature. Harold Bloom's claim that reading "does not teach anyone to become a better citizen" (Bloom 1994a: 519), or his contention that "the aesthetic is an individual and not a social concern" (Bloom 2018) isolates both reader and text from the world. Bloom is not unique in this orientation, as he belongs to a group of scholars who believe that teaching literature has nothing to do with the outside world. Stanley Fish's *Tip to Professors: Just Do Your Job* offers another case against going beyond the aesthetic in classes of literature. Fish believes that the teacher's job is not "to cure every ill the world has ever known – not only illiteracy, bad writing and cultural ignorance, which are at least in the ballpark, but poverty, racism,

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ageism, sexism, war, exploitation, colonialism, discrimination, intolerance, pollution and bad character" (Fish 2006). For moral and political issues, he proposes to "regard them as objects of study", rather than to confront them as ethical concerns. Hamid's narrative is particularly concerned with this rupture between a "localized", aesthetic approach to literature and a more global vision of the act of reading. I have tried in this essay to bridge the gap between the literariness of a text and its cultural anxieties.

Filthy Rich continues Hamid's attempt at providing a new model of the acts of reading and writing, one based on cultural negotiation. He manages to refurbish the confined limits of the self-help genre focused on the individual and transform it into a textual space of local and global critique. The global model of self-help guides is tested to a local geography; the result is a narrative that writes/rights both self and other, home and globe. While innovation functions on the level of the aesthetic, renovation is more concerned with an ethical recuperation of traditional patterns of writing. Both innovation and renovation intersect at promoting a responsible model of reading and writing. If there is an ethical bearing to acts of reading and writing, it resides in the willingness to go beyond closure and toward fenceless glocal modes of dealing with a text.

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