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RESEARCH PAPER

Voicing the Imprisonment in Skin: A Critical Study of Hamid's *The Last White Man*

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the racial transformation and emergence of white rage in Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Last White Man*. It focuses on examining how the loss of whiteness affects the characters' social status and interpersonal relationships. It employs Textual Analysis as a primary method, with Critical Race Theory and Du Bois' sociohistorical concept of race serving as the methodological frameworks. The findings reveal that the transformation of the characters from white to brown triggers white rage that leads to social alienation, identity loss, and emotional neglect. This transformation engenders a profound existential as the characters are striped of the privileges they one enjoyed. A persistent sense of loss haunts them; some respond with suicide attempts while other fall victims to racially motivated violence. The study underscores the urgent need to confront racism by fostering a more equitable and cohesive society primarily through education and literature as exemplified in Hamid's *The Last White Man*.

| **KEYWORDS** | Racial, Discrimination, White rage, Color, Privilege, Inequality, Transformation |

Introduction

Race-based oppression is a distinct and systematic form of injustice that black individuals experience at the hands of white people. They have been facing hostility and racial prejudice for centuries. Racial inequality is one of the significant hurdles to the realization of fundamental human rights. Across the world, countless individuals face systematic discrimination that undermines their dignity and inclusion. Besides social and economic impacts, racism affects the emotional and psychological well-being of individuals. It shatters their confidence and diminishes their self-esteem.

Regardless of socioeconomic status, white individuals have never encountered racial oppression because of the privilege conferred by their whiteness. There are many dimensions to consider when assessing such inequalities. Racial oppression is analyzed at institutional, cultural, or interpersonal levels (Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996). Focusing on the context, some frameworks analyze the racial disparities that are reproduced and maintained in academic and workplace environments (McNeill et al., 1996).

The social factor of race causes oppression against black individuals. Biologically, race is defined as "genotypic or phenotypic difference between human beings" (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 253). Its implications are primarily social and ideological. Race functions as a system of classification for human beings based on genetic, physical, and biological traits, leading to the formation of socially distinct groups (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998). As Gates (1992) argues, race is the "ultimate trope of difference," which is used to produce oppression and subordination (Gates, 1992). Discrimination in social relations based on biological and genetic

differences is defined as racism. In other words, racism, therefore, refers to the discrimination practiced in social relations justified by socially constructed biological differences. It perpetuates the discourse that one race is inherently superior to another. Based on the differences in race, people often lead others to believe that one race is superior and the other is inferior. Such discourses, disseminated through ideological state apparatuses such as the media, education, and religion, perpetuate social hierarchies and normalize systematic inequalities.

Literature, as a true reflection of human life, is used as a tool to highlight the racial prejudice against different marginalized groups. Many writers and critics reprimand the racial bias, denouncing it on humanitarian grounds. Hamid, a British Pakistani novelist, has reflected on the problems of marginalized groups in racist societies through his works. Most of his works are shaped by his own experience of living abroad among the white community as a Pakistani Muslim. Most of his characters are shown as victims of discrimination based on their color, nationality, and religion. However, literature also has the potential to inspire change and progress. By highlighting these issues, it can motivate readers to work towards an equitable society.

Literature Review

Being a global issue, the phenomenon of racism and racial inequality has been widely discussed. Wijeysinghe, Griffin, and Love (1997) define race as "A social construct that artificially divides people into distinct groups based on certain characteristics…" (p. 88), such as the color of their skin and their shared hereditary and cultural history. Considering racism as a colonial product, Fanon (1967) unfolds that, in the process of colonialism, white society has attached certain stereotypical traits to black people to prove them an inferior race. He states that "…the black soul is a white man's artifact…" (p. 16). Highlighting its psychological effects, he claims that the self-abasement of black colonized people is a direct result of colonization. Furthermore, he delves into history to uncover how racism has been rationalized scientifically.

Kendi (2016) investigates the history of racial inequality in America and connects it with the current attitude toward discrimination, claiming that ". . . racial discrimination was stamped from the beginning of America…" (p. 4). He suggests various perspectives on the issue of race. One is the 'Segregationist' thought, which declares that black people are essentially lower in status than white people. The other is the 'Assimilationist' idea, which considers black people inferior. He also claims that the inferior status can be improved by incorporating whiteness. The third one is 'Antiracist' thought, which counters racist ideas and discourages discrimination against non-white people.

DiAngelo (2018) discusses ingrained racial prejudice in America. She asserts that race is a social construct rather than a biological phenomenon. She used the term "White Fragility" to describe white people's self-defensive attitude towards the issue of race. According to her, white fragility is a hurdle in the way of a proper understanding of racial inequality. She stresses the need to acknowledge systematic racism and white supremacy in America because "White people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality" (p.1). Wijeysinghe, Griffin, and Love (1997) define white privilege as "The concrete benefits of access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society which Whites receive, unconsciously and consciously, due to their skin color in a racist society." (p. 97)

Alexander (2010) examines the new form of racism in the United States. She focuses on the American judicial system to highlight the "mass incarceration" of color people. She avers that "…we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals…" (p. 2).

According to her, this new system marginalizes black people and deprives them of their basic rights. She suggests acknowledging the racial bias of the new system and putting efforts into eradicating it. Anderson (2016) focuses on white Americans' enmity toward black people's advancement. She uses the term "White Rage" to describe the hostility against black people's betterment. She discusses different historical efforts by African Americans to achieve freedom and equality, such as the Civil Rights Movement, the struggle to end slavery, and the Great Migration. However, these efforts are always opposed by white Americans. The backlash against the racial advancement of black people exposes white Americans' racist attitudes.

Combs (2018) investigates unattended everyday racism in America. The researcher develops a theoretical framework, BOP (Bodies-out-of-Place), to uncover ongoing racial intolerance in America. She asserts that in the past, as well as in today's America, "blackness is seen and conceptualized in negative, stereotypical ways that support white paranoia and are used to justify pre-emptive violence against black bodies" (p. 38).

Hong (2020) focuses on the racial injustice against Asians and their ultimate neglected status in America. She shares her experience of living as an Asian among Americans with 'minor feelings.' Asians are seen as emotionless foreigners who need to become white by working hard. However, their struggle to be accepted within American society results in self-loathing. She avers that "When I hear the phrase "Asians are next in line to be white," I replace the word "white" with "disappear." Asians are next in line to disappear…" (p. 24)

Different researchers have employed racial theories to analyze various literary texts. They attempt to examine the racial and anti-racial attitudes of different writers incorporated in their works. Yuntri, Rajeg, and Maharani (2019) study the treatment of racism in Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*. They find that the novel presents a realistic picture of racial attitudes in America. Hafizh (2016) employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate Woodson's novels, exploring racial issues. They examined how Woodson portrayed "... white's prejudice toward black people to maintain white supremacy..." (p.177), how this discrimination is expressed, and black people's reaction against this racial inequality.

Sarvan (1980) studies Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to examine it in the light of Achebe's charge of racism against it. The study concludes that Conrad's representation of Africans is not entirely free from his racial prejudice. However, he also tries to break it by attacking British colonialism. Indriani and Wahyuni (2021) examine Stone's *Dear Martin*, utilizing Feagin's concept of systemic racism to explore issues of racism. They find that African Americans are still experiencing different forms of racism even in the post-civil rights period. Akbar, Ahmad, and Mehmood (2021) study Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* using Fanon's concept, as outlined in "*Black Skin, White Mask*" as a theoretical framework. They analyze different characters, such as Desiree, Stella, Jude, and Kennedy, and unveil the effects of racial prejudice on their lives. They find that the characters struggle for identity and self-determination.

Hamid's works have also been examined through various postcolonial perspectives. Chaudhary and Ahmed (2019) study "*Moth Smoke*" and "*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*" to investigate the issue of identity when encountering male characters. They employ Bhabha's concept of Mimicry to examine the characters of Changez and Daru. They find that the characters lose their true selves in pursuit of mimicking others' cultures. Narzary (2021) studies Hamid's novels to examine his contribution to the postcolonial field, challenging the islamophobia that emerged after 9/11. He meditates on the tension between Pakistan and India. The study concludes that "Considering all these visible Postcolonial concerns in his writings – Hamid's role as a mediator between the East and the West cannot be undermined" (p. 80). Sadiq (2022) critically analyzes Hamid's novel, *The Last White Man*, and finds that it

offers a nuanced perspective on the issues of political, racial, and social injustice in America. Besides the issue of race, it also focuses on human relations, identity, and love.

The preceding discussion highlights the concept of race and racial discrimination along with their unending historical presence. It also underscores how theories of race have been applied to interpret literary texts. Likewise, it highlights that Hamid's works have been examined through various critical lenses, but *The Last White Man* remains relatively underexplored in terms of its transformation and repercussions, particularly white rage. This gap establishes the relevance and justification for undertaking this study.

Material and Methods

As a qualitative study, Textual Analysis is employed to explore the effects on the characters who undergo racial transformation in the novel. Critical race theory and Du Bois' sociohistorical concept of race provide a framework for the study. It is significant in understanding the deep-rooted racial prejudice against blacks and browns in white societies. This study can increase awareness about racial inequality based on skin color and ethnicity.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was initially used to analyze the relationship between racism and the US law system. However, it is currently used in several field studies, such as education and sociology. Parker and Lynn (2002) state that there are three primary purposes. Firstly, CRT is used to tell stories about racial inequality. Secondly, it is used to raise voices against racial subjugation, considering race a socially constructed phenomenon. Thirdly, it addresses other forms of discrimination, such as class-based injustice. As a conceptual framework, it helps us to understand that racism is interwoven in the very structure of American society. CRT argues that racism is not confined to specific individuals but is present throughout the entire social structure. It also helps to understand the concept of white privilege.

Du Bois's theory of race focuses on the harmful effects of white supremacy on ethnic minorities in America. His theory can be divided into two main concepts: the biological concept of race and the sociohistorical concept of race. The sociohistorical concept of race focuses on the relationship between racism and culture as politics designs the social system, which divides society into dominate and subordinate groups. He introduces the concept of "double consciousness," which he defines as "…sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. . ." (2007, p. 8). He claims that "There are no races, in the sense of great, separate, pure breeds of men, differing in attainment, development and capacity" (2021, p. 56).

Results and Discussion

Hamid's works deal with issues like cultural alienation, hybridity, identity, and other problems faced by racial minorities. His characters oscillate between two different identities. The minor racial and ethnic groups strive to fit in with the popular and influential groups. In this part of the study, the discussion centers on Hamid's *The Last White Man*, examining racial transformation and its impact on the characters' lives.

Anders is the first one who has transformed into an "undeniable brown". The narrator informs that "*One morning Anders, a white man, woke up to find he had turned a deep and undeniable brown... the face looking back at him was not his at all*" (Hamid, 2022, p. 1*). His first reaction to his identity shift is full of hatred and rage, "…. the face replacing his filled him with anger…. murderous rage" (p. 2). He wishes to kill the black man who has robbed him of his whiteness. He hides himself as blackness is considered a symbol of shame. His uneasiness with new

black skin brings to the surface his deep-rooted preconception about black people. He cannot go outside freely without any shame and face the world without hesitation. While going out, he covers his face with a hoodie and hides his black hands in his pockets. At the grocery shop, the clerk ". . . he did not acknowledge Anders's mumbled thanks and goodbye" as though Anders had not spoken at all." (p. 4). It reflects that, with the loss of whiteness, he loses regular human contact. He has a sense of impending danger and feels like a stranger in his town. Predominantly, white societies often impose such treatment on black and brown minority groups.

Anders desperately misses the lost whiteness. His new identity makes him miserable, alone, and vulnerable. It seems that it is the punishment that he is receiving for his blackness. While returning home, he is cursed by a woman in a car. However, he fails to respond to that behavior. It seems that he has lost the right to speak or confront people who are doing wrong to him. Anders retreats from social life, remaining primarily indoors, and "People who knew him no longer knew him" (p. 12).

Anders contacts his girlfriend, Oona. She tries to be kind to him, but "…a detachment had settled upon her…" (p. 6). The first word that comes out of Oona's mouth upon seeing Anders's black skin is "Damn." The inherent racist ideas stop her from being in touch with the "dark-skinned stranger" (p. 8). However, she cannot help but meet him. The noticeable awkwardness in their relationship suggests a change in the status of Anders' relationship. She starts ignoring his messages. She tries to maintain distance from him, though she does not stop meeting him.

The reaction of Oona's mother to the transformation of white people is highly racist. She emphasizes that "our people" are changing. It shows that she owns white people, but she is not ready to accept them with a brown color. Thus, black minorities are excluded from white societies. She is very proud of her white race and considers the transformation threatening to the white race. According to her, the racial transformation is an effort to overpower white people and must be controlled to save the white race.

Anders's remarks about black people at the bus stop are also racist. He looks at them as ". . . a group of animals, not like humans, being transported from one task, one site, to the next ..." (p. 12). As a former white man, he inherits the racist ideas that outbreak unconsciously. However, whites are reluctant to admit their racist behaviors. When Anders tells about his transformation, his father thinks that Anders is playing some sort of trick or "... his son was trying to call him a racist…" (p. 13). After looking at his son's black skin, Anders' father weeps. It indicates his apprehension of the troubles that Anders has to face.

Anders's post-transformation confrontation with his boss is significant to understanding whites' perception of non-whites and the black community. His boss reveals overt racism when he suggests that death is preferable to living with blackness. He tells Anders that "I would have killed myself" (p. 17). Being unable to confront the boss's ideas, Anders is overpowered by him. Here, he symbolizes a racialized subject who cannot challenge white people's racist ideas but remains silent because of fear and societal conditioning.

At the gym, Anders faces "…quick, evasive stares…." (p. 18). Previously, he was a popular and respected figure at the gym. However, all the privileges are associated with whiteness, which he cannot enjoy now as a dark-colored man. After finding himself out of place, ". . . he began instead to mirror the others around him..." (p. 18). Anders misses his old status and wants to regain "… his old centrality, or if not centrality, then at least a role better

than this peripheral one…" (p. 24). Here, the marginalization of inferior racial groups by the dominant racial groups is starkly evident in this context.

The situation in the town changes. More and more white people are turning into black people. A man kills himself after his transformation. It reflects that the loss of whiteness snatches his right to live. The novel also questions the construction of race. Anders often speculates about the reality of changing identity. He thinks that "… the way people act around you changes what you are, who you are…" (p. 26). It is pretty much evident that race is a social construct rather than a biological factor.

After his transformation, Anders comes to certain realizations. He thinks about the dark-skinned cleaning staff member at the gym and his treatment of him. He realizes how racial minorities are ignored and hired for odd jobs. He calls into question his interaction, which was "…treating the cleaning guy like a puppy, a dog…" (p. 27). He imagines an alternative world where he can share a regular mutual companionship with that black guy.

The militants start attacking the black community. The town becomes a place of uncertainty and chaos. Militants warn Anders to leave his place. He takes refuge at his father's place. However, he "…felt imprisoned, doubly, triply imprisoned, in his skin, in his house, in his town…" (p. 53). Oona's mother appreciates the riots, considering that "...wrongs would be righted..." (p. 30). She promotes violence openly. Anders's position becomes more vulnerable. His father gives him a rifle for protection. The black people are treated like criminals; their crime is their different skin. Oona's mother declares the butchering to be self-defense. For her, white people are in trouble, and black people are troublemakers.

The prejudice against black people can be observed in Oona's mother's thoughts. She says that "...the dark people could have their places, and they could do their dark things…" (p. 43). That is the typical reflection of white minds who consider black outsiders and symbols of evil. When Oona applies dark makeup, her mother criticizes her, saying, ". . .you should be ashamed of yourself…" (p. 50). Oona's mother's favorite radio personality also turns black, and her perception of him also changes. After transplantation, "…he was an impostor, a fraud, and Oona's mother could stand to listen to him no longer" (p. 54).

Oona's mother is obsessed with the media. The media feeds certain troublesome ideologies against black people, which she has inherited. She thinks of black people as savage and violent. Here, it can be observed how racism is promoted and even constructed politically and culturally to privilege one group over another.

At the end of the novel, after the death of Anders' father (the last white man), everyone turns dark. It is a complete racial transformation in the town. Some embrace their new identities, like Oona, but others mourn the loss of their whiteness, as seen in Oona's mother. The situation starts to become normal. People return to their regular routines with mixed feelings; "Sometimes it felt like the town was a town in mourning..." (p. 83), and at other times, it seems that "something new was being born…" (p. 83). It feels like "…while memories of whiteness receded, memories of whiteness lingered too. . ." (p. 84).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the novel portrays a racially divided society in which one privileged group marginalizes another. The novel draws our attention towards inequality experienced by racial minorities like browns and blacks in white societies. Privilege is associated with whiteness. Race is socially and politically constructed by attributing certain stereotypical traits to one group. In the novel, racism is promoted through the media, and it becomes part

of white people's consciousness. In the novel, the loss of whiteness significantly impacts the characters' lives. Their racial transformation drastically changes their status in society and personal relationships. They are suddenly deprived of the privileges that they enjoy as whites. At the end of the novel, the picture of the completely racially transformed society is a mixture of pessimism and optimism. People are trying to accept their new selves, but at the same time, they are haunted by their lost whiteness. This novel can be further explored to examine the phenomenon of memory and nostalgia, identity, and family relations. To sum up, Hamid presents a utopian world where there is no racial difference and everyone looks the same. By presenting an alternative world free from racial biases, He tries to expose the racial injustice that has been practiced for years.

Recommendations

Anti-racist literature such as *The Last White Man* should be included in educational curricula to challenge the dominant racial narratives. Such text may foster empathy, develop an understanding of multiracial realities, and promote critical thinking on social hierarchies. At the tertiary level, academic research should engage with the issue of racial transformation using an intersectional perspective and explore how gender, class, and cultural identity intersect to marginalize minority groups.

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