

# Racial Metamorphosis And Bigotry In Mohsin Hamid's The Last White Man

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## Abstract

This paper aims at studying “Racial Metamorphosis and Bigotry in Mohsin Hamid’s The Last White Man. When a metamorphosis occurs, a person or object grows and transforms into something entirely new and undergoes a change. Thus, metamorphosis refers to a striking alteration in appearance, character, or circumstances. Hamid begins his story by taking the readers to an unnamed place that feels like a small town in America or somewhere in the west in which he depicts the racism and bias that prevailed the society. It is about a white man named Anders, who wakes up one morning to discover that his complexion has changed, and now he has an unrecognizable appearance. The terror of transformation dominates the town. As a result of these changes, there has been an increase in violence and murder. Oona, who was the protagonist's girlfriend, felt uneasy and strange after witnessing his transformation for the first time. She was unable to accept him like this. There was chaos everywhere in the town. The militants became more aggressive as the riots grew less intense. They desired to permanently rid their town of brownness. Thus, Hamid portrays racial biases and discrimination that people went through because of their complexion.

**Keywords:** bigotry, racism, marginalization, metamorphosis, discrimination, changeling

## Introduction

The book, *The Last White Man* by Mohsin Hamid talks about the inferiority that comes with color, in terms of “whiteness”, that vanished. It is about a white man named Anders, who wakes up one morning to discover that his complexion has changed, and now he has an unrecognizable appearance. As more people in the novel start to go through the same transformations, society becomes divided and perplexed over issues like racism, privilege, loss, love, and belonging. The paper aims at studying Racial metamorphosis and Bigotry in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Last White Man*. When a metamorphosis occurs, a person or object grows and transforms into something entirely new thus metamorphosis refers to a striking alteration in appearance, character, or circumstances.

Hamid took that idea from *The Metamorphosis* of Franz Kafka and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* of Lewis. *The Metamorphosis* is a novella that deals with a

man named Gregor Samsa who awakens in the form of a massive insect. The novella explores the serious sentiments of alienation and loneliness. A similar kind of idea prevails in the third Chronicle of Narnia book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, where the character Eustace awakens from a slumber on a rocky island after being magically transformed into a dragon. Hamid’s beginning in this novel purposefully borrows language from Lewis and Kafka, setting the stage for a fascinating story that reveals both significant and subtle changes. The novel falls under the genre of magical realism. If one has to read fiction, one must pay something extra which stands for faith as the work is like a web of spiders that demands trust from the reader. So is with the book of Hamid who demands the reader to jump into his world of fiction while trusting him as he holds the key to his webs through which he connects the dots.

In addition, *The Last White Man* depicts the plight of ‘Blacks’ in contemporary society. The characters are dealing with their

race. On this basis, they have suffered from bigotry and marginalization. The protagonist Anders has gone through a Racial Metamorphosis as a result of which he transforms into brown color. This has developed an inferiority complex in the life of Anders. Even the other people in the society segregated and avoided him. It has developed a crisis in his life as well as for the other people in society.

Also, *The Last White Man* was written in the form of a fable, with a purposefully simple writing style and almost no speech full stops. It refers to centuries of white privilege, the construction of social status and identity based on not being the other, and the pervasive racism that still plagues even the most developed democracies. But since it's a fable, it serves more as a reflection than as a clear teaching lesson. Mohsin Hamid, even after being a modern writer has adopted a traditional style. He divides the novel into three parts. For creating a connection between the characters and the world, he chose a conventional beginning by introducing the characters before talking about their world. He tends to include mysterious elements in the novel along with the use of symbols.

One morning Anders, a white man, woke up to find that he had turned a deep and undeniable brown. This dawned upon him gradually, and then suddenly, first as a sense as he reached for his phone that early light was doing something strange to the color of his forearm, subsequently, with a start, as a momentary conviction that there was somebody else in bed with him, male, darker, but this terrifying though it was, was surely impossible, and he was reassured that the other moved as he moved, was in fact not a person, not a separate person, but was just him... (Hamid 1)

This is how Hamid begins his story by

taking the readers to an unnamed place that feels like a small-town in America or somewhere in the west in which he depicts the racism and biasness that prevails in the society. Anders was in a state of shock and was unable to discover how or why he had turned black. He was in a state of cognitive dissonance as he struggled to accept his dark complexion at first. But as Hamid brings his protagonist in "early light" he gives his mind and the readers the light of truth as the complexion would accompany his whole body. He thought it was his imagination, a collapse in his existence, but he was proven wrong when he took a picture of himself and discovered the same dark complexion. Thus, the camera and mirror symbolize the portrayal of truth through his reflection which depicts the transformation of the protagonist from white to brown which his conscience was not ready to accept. It was frightening and depressing for him since he knew acceptance from society would be the hardest part; therefore, Hamid puts an issue of the desire to be accepted by people more than by an individual himself.

He was "trapped indoors", which is a metaphor for he was trapped in the fear of the color that took over his whole existence. He takes sick leave and skips work for a week because he lacked the courage to go outside and face society. However, having run out of food, he drove to the grocery store to buy some stuff. Furthermore, the grocery store clerk did not even look at him or greet him because of his skin color. The attempt to reach his food despite his issues with the color shows his will to survive even though it would become hard, here Hamid agrees with Darwin, as there is only survival of the fittest. In continuation of the story, the grocery clerk reflects on the society where if an individual is suffering from any sort of problem, then the society is least bothered and doesn't care at all. It is just the individual who quests on his own with no ray of hope. The author highlights it as he knew the clerk who scanned his purchases, but he did not know, and Anders had a moment of panic after handing over his credit card, but the clerk did not glance at it, at his name, at his signature, and he did not acknowledge Anders

mumbled thanks and goodbye, did not move or even smile, as if Anders had not spoken at all. (Hamid 9)

Moreover, in the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, when Pecola notices that the store owner does not appear to view her as a human when she enters the shop to buy penny candy. She can only assume that because he doesn't know anything about her, his prejudice is based on her race. Blackness is associated with ugliness throughout the storyline, while whiteness is associated with purity. The store owner has already made a judgment about Pecola based solely on her race. Morrison points it as: "The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes." (Morrison 49)

In addition to that, it is also relevant to Hamid because born in Lahore, Pakistan, he spent his early years in California while his father attended Stanford University for his doctorate. The younger Hamid returned to the United States for his undergraduate studies. After receiving a *summa cum laude* from Princeton, where he studied fiction writing with Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates, he went on to Harvard to pursue a law degree before accepting a lucrative position as a management consultant. Thus, he lived a life of partial whiteness while studying abroad. However, after the 9/11 attack, Americans began to judge him, and he was suspected of being a terrorist. Hamid was detained for questioning at airports and was terrified by fellow passengers on buses and trains. His skin appeared to have turned dark and suspicious in an instant. While he was writing other acclaimed books, "The Last White Man" was sown in the back of his mind by his increased awareness of race and religion. Hence, he highlights how people are judged and marginalized on the basis of their race through this context.

Anders prepares lunch for himself, but he opted to smoke instead since he was feeling anxious. In order to escape his anxiety and agony, he smoked more and turned to the

internet while turning his back to reality. Eventually, he ate lunch at the time of dinner. Therefore, Hamid emphasizes one of the problems in today's society as people prefer to run away or find an escape from their problems rather than find a permanent solution to them and he highlights after taking a hit, Anders held it tight in his lungs. However, it was probably a mistake, since, by the time he was ready for lunch, he was no longer hungry. His anxiety was more strumming, which he knew from experience he needed to smoke through. This is why he smoked more, stared at his phone, wandered around the internet, and eventually, he ate his lunch as dinner. (Hamid 10)

As we enter his psychology, Anders mourns the loss of his mother, who had passed away. Because his mother listened to him and completely trusted him, he longs to talk to her about this issue. He knew that she won't judge him. The author here uses "mother" as a metaphor since she was his safe haven and Anders was pining for it. Anders also desired to remain in a comfortable and familiar position. His best quality in high school was his smile, which disappeared after his mother passed away. When the protagonist's mother was with him, he felt secure in his position, a feeling that this smile alludes to. The writer portrays it as in high school, his smile was often rated as his greatest feature. It was a generous, inviting smile that had originated from his mother's face and had come to him from hers. But now the emotion that made it possible was gone, and Anders was unsure if it would ever come back. (Hamid 12)

Oona, the protagonist's girlfriend, felt uneasy and strange after witnessing his transformation for the first time. She was unable to accept him like this. Anders was desperate for some sort of reassurance that must come in the form of human acceptance, but she was unwilling and befuddled to provide any. Instead, after seeing his conversion, she bluntly expressed what she felt at that moment. Both knew very well that this transformation would never ever be accepted by society. The writer depicts it: as she told him what she thought, flat out, that he looked like another person, not just another person, but a different kind of person, not just

another person, but a different kind of person, utterly different, and that anyone who saw him would think the same, and it was hard, but there it was. (Hamid 17)

Later on, the protagonist experiences an emotional breakdown, as the author later describes. He wanted to cry because he felt inferior similar to the brown race but was incapable of doing so in front of his girlfriend. He was once again using joint in the company of Oona, as an escape rather than dealing and confronting his emotions. Hamid has focused on the issues of modern society through the character of Anders, and he depicts it as his eyes welled up with tears, but he managed to hold them back in his lashes while blinking and pursing his lips. and then asked if she wanted a joint, even mustering a smile, to which she smiled back, a smile being a risk but slipping out of her anyway, and replied that, hell yes, she did. (Hamid 17)

Anders experienced terrible suffering and felt in danger. He has been scrutinized by his own friends. His boss claimed that if he had been at his office, he would have committed suicide. The dark color is unambiguously linked to evil and immorality in this context of the text. Additionally, his boss stands for the same society that is insensitive to the suffering of others but yells in silence. They disparage that person rather than offering them comfort. The author highlights that the boss looked him over and said, "I would have killed myself." Anders shrugged, unsure how to reply, and his boss added, "If it was me." (Hamid 35)

By presenting the character of Anders, the writer has appropriately portrayed the plight of every individual who suffers from these issues, be it racism or existentialism whereas he takes the society as a whole in the next part of the novel as they tend to suffer through the same sudden metamorphosis.

The chaos that the people went through after their transformation is portrayed by the author. The terror of transformation dominates the town. As a result of these changes, there has been an increase in violence and murder which simply present the hatred of one against other. Guns were being used by

individuals to purge their brownness. But nobody made a move to stop this situation. The atmosphere of the town has been shown to changing. Due to their fear of being killed because of their skin tone, people stopped getting out of the house. Nearly no one was in the stores or on the streets. There was complete silence and serenity all around. As a result, the author attempts to illustrate the prejudices that people were having against transformed people. Darkness is therefore unmistakably associated with evil. It also occurs to be a paradoxical situation as Hamid intended on showcasing darkness as a part rather than being evil, but he comments on darkness being treated as evil in the psyche of people. Even a black woman fled with her two children to avoid being killed by the white man who was pursuing her. The author shows this as the store shelves were empty, the roads were more deserted at night, and even the days were shorter and colder than they had been recently. However, the mood was changing. (Hamid 48)

Men who knew each other began to ignore one another. The protagonist's personality also undergoes a transformation after turning brown. He becomes less social and does not like to interact with people at the workplace because of his inferiority complex. Hamid discussed it as it appeared as though Anders had been recast as a supporting character on the television show where his life was being enacted because he had become quieter than he used to be and less certain of how any action of his would be perceived. (Hamid 48)

The dark color spreads hate and ultimately ignites turmoil among familiar folks. Dark skin is associated with Barbarian, second-class, or third-class status. Anders had now assimilated into the prejudice of the collector culture. He understands and experiences what colonization is all about. With this experience, Hamid responds to the saying, 'as you sow, so shall you reap'. He sees the cleaning guy, at his gym, who has been portrayed as a small man working with large bodybuilders. Anders did not like the fact that even that guy started looking at him differently after his appearance changed. He sees himself

as a dark, inferior man who is an animal-like social construct. Hamid had discussed it as:

Anders said that there was a dark-skinned cleaning guy at the gym, he worked nights, and Anders had always been nice to him, but the cleaning guy had started to look at him in a new way after Anders changed, and Anders had not liked it, but it got him thinking, and he had realized that the cleaning guy was the only guy at the gym who never exercised there.. (Hamid 54)

Anders' transformation strengthened the father-son relationship. After his mother passed away, Anders used to avoid visiting his parents' home because it was full of memories of her. However, when he went to see his father, after the transformation, he could see that his father's health was getting worse. He was in excruciating pain. Even though he disliked seeing his son in this way, he didn't express it. He held his hands and listened to his issues instead. He kept his illness concealed while providing his son with the best care possible. He picked up a rifle and a box of ammunition and handed it over to his son for his safety, giving him some other essentials and money too. The author points this as "and he went through his cupboards and helped his son load some essential supplies in his car, or handed them to his son, anyway, the boy would have to do the work, standing was hard enough, and he ignored his pain, for it was a part of him now, constant not remotely bearable, but also not avoidable, and so put up with, like a nasty sibling, and he retrieved a rifle and a box of shells". (Hamid 66)

Even Anders was aware that his father would soon pass away. This made him feel guilty because he realized his fault for leaving him at his last stage when he would yearn for his support the most. He consequently began to spend more time with him. He didn't want to lose him as he was afraid for his mother, which caused him to be deeply hurt internally as he took the place of comfort in his life.

Additionally, it concerns a shared understanding of a black and white man, much like Anders and his father do. The last remaining unbiased white man was his father. He doesn't take racism to the level of transformation which do show the purity he holds in his bosom. The author highlights as "Anders could hear his muffled grunts and his low-pitched swearing, the battle being waged inside, the battle his father was losing, and it made Anders guilty for not being a better son, for having left his father abandoned," (Hamid 97)

Moreover, everyone except Anders' father turned brown. He was the only white man who loved and accepted him. He is aware that Anders' heart, mind, and soul are unaffected by the changeling. Unfortunately, he was the last white man to accept this.

Order and law were disturbed, the system wasn't functioning correctly and even the police were not doing their duties properly; they are unconcerned about the safety of the public. People were not obeying traffic rules as Oona noticed that no one was stopping at the traffic lights or stop signs, so she decided not to either. This situation suggests the urge to go against the system for the system itself was failing everyone in the society. She did, however, slow down and look both ways. Oona also expected to hear the sirens of police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances, but she was unable to hear them which shows the negligence from the system. (Hamid 79)

The riots and other acts of violence simultaneously worsened the social and economic situation. The protagonist prefers to stay in his father's home. He lost his job when the gym where he worked caught fire. He only used his father's and his own savings. Oona's mother believed that all of the violence taking place in their community was premeditated. Even white people were killed as saboteurs attempted to kill everyone. She believed that non-whites and whites should be kept apart. Non-white people ought to have their own space and be free to do whatever they please. It's a serious issue since innocent white people have also lost their lives. Therefore, she wishes to oppose that movement. Hamid illustrates

here the prejudice and inequality that non-white people experience; also, the situation if white were to be in the shoes of black, they would have been terrified with the treatment as occurs in the novel. This portrays how the distinction between white skin and non-white skin includes how society defines whiteness as sociable, serene, and sophisticated, while dark skin can be perceived as immoral, incompetent, and inhuman. He depicts it through the character of Oona's mother when she says since there were so many of us in trouble, and even though we were better than them, how could you deny it? We need our own spaces where we could take care of our own, and the dark people could have their own spaces or do their own evil things or whatever; we wouldn't stop them, but that had to stop. (Hamid 88)

The militants became more aggressive as the riots grew less intense. They desired to permanently rid their town of brownness. As a result, many people died, and bodies started piling up in the fields similar to the extra baggage we carry in our unconscious minds. People buried a lot of dead bodies. Here, the author paints a vivid picture of the tremendous death toll and bloodshed that racism has caused in this situation. A similar kind of situation is pictured in the poem, "A Far Cry From Africa" where Derek Walcott uses animal imagery for the black to showcase their plight as death comes to them by the whites who came there to colonize the blacks,

"... Kikuyu, quick as flies,

Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt" (Walcott)

Hamid illustrates it as white people were turning darker, the militants were becoming more aggressive despite the fact that the riots had subsided, bodies were turning up in the fields, and people were burying them. Walcott in the same poem calls both white and blacks as beast, absolute power corrupts absolutely. In further part, it was rumored that the bodies were dark, though not exclusively dark, and that among the dark ones were some who had not always been so. Commentators disagreed and argued about the precise

number—was it two, three, or six—and that people were burying them. (Hamid 85)

Anders used to keep a rifle with him that was given to him by his father, wherever he was or whatever work he did. He sometimes feels as if the rifle is asking him questions like how much he wants to live. He could easily relate to his condition and felt empathy for dark people and wondered how they were handling this transformation. In spite of the fact that he had brown skin, he was determined to live. He was ready to live for the soul that he owned since his birth. Even though the changing color of skin was affecting his mind, he was not ready to give up. He knew he has to own it for to survive one needs to be the fittest and surreal in his own body. Here author highlights the plight of transformed people due to biasness and how they have insecurities for their lives and Hamid highlights it as Anders wondered what was happening to other dark people, how they were coping, and whether they were killing themselves, fast with guns and slow with drinks and pipes and pills, or hanging on, and he did not consider himself a particularly violent man, nor well suited to these times, and his mother gone, and his father would soon be too, and with them the people he would betray most by leaving, and so if he stayed it would not be for them, need not be for them, but for himself. (Hamid 86)

Oona also used makeup to paint her face. She did this in order to see how she appeared as a dark woman, which she later presented to her mother over dinner. Her mother was irritated by this because she abhorred the color black. And she had never anticipated her daughter would do such things. There was absolute silence at the time of dinner. Oona thought she and her mother would enjoy it, but things didn't work out as she had planned, and her mother had an entirely different reaction. She wasn't prepared to view her daughter in that way. Oona was therefore dejected and immediately took off her extensive makeup. The author's highlights areas Oona's mother was startled, then stony in her response, telling her, "You should be ashamed of yourself." When Oona responded, "I am ashamed of myself," her mother countered, "Oh no, you're not, but you

should be," and Oona at once realized as the silence increased that she had thought a victory of some sort might be hers, but she did not relish it and there was no victory for her here. (Hamid 101)

Thus, Hamid draws the reader's attention to the fact that people have an internalized and primarily externalized hatred of black people and how the dark color is considered shameful for people who are born with white color.

People began looking for a treatment to stop this transformation. There were many concoctions or miracle drugs that were created so that could turn them white again. Due to this, some people who consumed it became ill, while others died. Here, Oona's mother is a metaphor for a society that had given up on changing the current circumstance. "Oona's mother could not go, and most others could not either, and so the general buzz was about progress towards discovering a way to undo the horror, but for every story for a miracle drug or concoction that made you white again, there were three or four of someone who had grown terribly sick from imbibing it or had even died, and Oona's mother was losing hope." (Hamid 110)

Oona felt devastated when she changed because her own mother couldn't accept her earlier even in the makeup, so the fact that it was no longer her extensive makeup but her new self-tormented her. She laments the old Oona, who was a young child, content with her family, as previously suppressed emotions come to the surface. However, the passing of her father and then her brother left her with a lasting internal wound that completely altered her. The author highlights that though Oona's mother had a very strong dislike for dark skin, regardless of that, she supported her daughter later and understood her pain just like Anders' father. For the sake of her daughter, she consoled her and forgot all her hatred for dark color. Throughout his commentary, Hamid seems to be emphasizing the fact that parents are the only well-wishers for their children, are able to do anything and everything to protect them and when it comes to us we ought to understand the misery after

that.

## Conclusion

The book offers an intriguing glimpse into a post-racial society in which whiteness is a distant memory. The book is strengthened by the human connection it promotes, despite the fact that it is largely a fable about race and prejudice. After their transformation and changing dynamics with their parents bring them closer together, Anders's friendship with Oona, a yoga teacher, and friend with benefits, deepens. Both of the characters are struggling with loss in different ways. Both of them have already lost one parent, and they are about to lose a second. Oona is in mourning over the overdose death of her twin brother.

Each character responds to the racial transformation that is occurring in a unique way. Readers get a first-person account of what it's like to become "othered" overnight through Anders. Anders understands that changing your color causes other people's behaviors to change, which in turn alters who you are. He becomes acutely aware of being watched while at the gym. He attempts to "act undeniably like himself," but because it feels awkward and forced, he begins to imitate those around him instead, "echoing the way they spoke, and the way they walked, and the way they moved, and the way they held their mouths." This will strike a chord with immigrants who believe that blending in with a foreign culture would protect them from unkind looks. Oona was already mourning the passing of her father and brother. She could not wait for the transformation to occur. It will be a clear sign of the internal change she already senses. She could shed her skin like a snake sheds its skin, not coldly or violently, but rather let go of the restrictions of the past and grow freely once more.

The story also looks at how the dynamics between people change as a result of a person's skin color. This highlights the fact that "whiteness" and prejudice are not just a matter of skin color but rather a mentality. Anders observes how the gym pulses with seething tension as the number of white people begin to decline. The men there right now are awkward around other people and appear to be

holding grudges against one another for losing their whiteness. Even the most racist people are given the chance to change their ways as Hamid concludes the book on a cheerful if idealistic, note. The Last White Man offers an intriguing look at a post-racial society in which whiteness is a distant memory.

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