



Research article

Interrogating the Discourse of Racism and Identity Crisis in Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man*

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the concepts of the Discourse of Racism and the Identity crisis in Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Last White Man*. The term 'discourse' is propounded by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in his various books. Discourse is an ideology which produces knowledge and meaning about an object. The knowledge is not the truth about the object. It is the constructed knowledge which is propagated by the dominant power. In the study, the novel *The Last White Man*, will be explored through the discourse of Racism which is a constructed and discursive knowledge that the dark people should be hated and treated as inferior ones. It is beneficial to a certain section of the people (whites) and others (blacks) who go through an identity crisis because of this discursive ideology. In the novel, the characters Anders and Oona go through an identity crisis because of the discourse of racism that blacks are inferior to whites, which is not the reality. It is just the colour which changes, their intelligibility remains the same. Over time the whole neighbourhood is changed. All the people in the beginning feel the identity crisis, but in the end, they accept this change as the notion of racism is all constructed by the dominant white people. It is an ideology (a discourse) which is beneficial to a few. The main idea threaded in the novel is that race should not be given a universal meaning nor be made into a recurrent topic in contemporary writing as biological essentialism is untenable.

Keywords: Discourse, Ideology, Power, Dominance, Racism, *The Last White Man*, Identity Crisis.



[Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions](#)

Introduction

Hamid has lived a significant portion of his life in the West since he was a young child. He attended Princeton and Harvard Law School for his education before relocating there to work as an analyst in the corporate sector. Given his Pakistani origins and exposure to Western society in affluent cities like New York and London, his identity has been hybridized. In the field of current Pakistani diaspora writing and international literary scholarship, Mohsin Hamid holds a unique position. Hamid's stories, which tackle topics of identity, displacement, and the collision of cultural conventions, make a substantial contribution to postcolonial discourses. He has written several outstanding novels that address difficulties facing both the modern world and humanity. Mohsin Hamid has been writing about themes like migration, identity crisis, hegemony, power, subjectivity, and condition of refugees when they migrate, the

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economic conditions of Asian countries in the post-colonial world, the influence of Western countries on Asian countries. These are all the topics which are present in his works like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *Exit West*, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, *Moth Smoke*. These are all the post-colonial discourses. The purpose of anonymous places in his novels is to express that it could be any place in the world where these post-colonial issues prevail. He has himself confessed this in an interview with Natalie Jabbar:

"It's impossible for me to pretend that I belong complete to any group... nationally I've lived in Pakistan, America, and the UK... I've always been resistant to the idea that you can take groups at face value.

He goes on to say that "A lot of what I've been trying to do in my writing is to sort of re-complicate what's been oversimplified" (Hamid 2022: web). One may argue that Hamid's perspective of Pakistan's and the world's socio-political issues is archetypal. Mohsin Hamid is the writer of five novels, including *Moth Smoke* (2002), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), *Exit West* (2017), *The Last White Man* (2022) as well as of a collection of essays titled *Discontent and its Civilizations* (2014). These essays explore a variety of topics, including exile, migration, and his interpretation of Eastern and Western politics.

The Last White Man (2022), Hamid's most recent book, is his fifth. Love, grief, transformation, and identity are the book's central themes. The story of the work that was influenced by magic realism revolves around a white man named Anders who awoke one day to find that his skin tone had transformed and now he became a man who was not recognized by others. Soon numerous people began to go through the same transformations with the effect of splitting and confusing the society with discrimination issues like colour, nobility, loss, love, and belonging. *The Last White Man* (2022) is a new intervention in the arena of literature by Mohsin Hamid. It deals with the issues of the identity of modern man, specifically, the black man. Just as the word lack inside the word black suggests something which is a lack of confidence, trust, and lack of feelings of superiority in the psychological sense while lacking of opportunities, facilities, and recognition in social sense (Chaman, 2022). In his interview with Jeffrey Brown, Mohsin Hamid says,

Jeffrey Brown:

I don't want to give away what happens in this fable of yours, but you are trying to see something different, perhaps even better. You're completely comfortable tackling the big stuff in life in fiction.

Mohsin Hamid:

Yes.

I think fiction is very important right now. We need to find ways to talk about things that allow everybody in, that isn't dependent on, are you from Pakistan or America? Is your skin lighter or darker? Are you of Muslim or Christian background?

And throughout human history, storytelling has been one of the primary ways we have done that. And so I feel very much part of that tradition. It's not something new. I think it's what we have storytelling for, in large part.

The Other of Discourse

An analysis of the novel *The Last White Man* can be profitably undertaken through the lens of the discourse of racism and identity crisis. The characters Anders and Oona go through the identity crisis as they change their colour from white to black and they get to live the life of the blacks and they realize the subjected life of the dark people because of the racist ideology which is propagated by the whites. Hamid's novel is based on racism, which is a constructed knowledge, established by the dominant and powerful group of people of whites for their benefit. It is a discursive ideology, that black people are inferior to the white people and legitimizes the oppression of black people by the whites. When they change their colour from white to black, they get to know what and how the dark people live their daily lives. It is in this context that Hamid is perceived as a spokesman for the age:

In an age aflame with strident tweets, Hamid offers swelling remorse and expansive empathy. Such a story could only be written by an author who is entirely candid about his awkward journey along the racial spectrum... It anticipates that sweet day — not forever deferred, surely — when we finally close the casket on the whole horrific construct of racial hierarchies and see each other for what we are (The Washington Post).

Hierarchies are artificially constructed in language. For Michel Foucault, power and knowledge are twin-born. It was the revelation of the state-sanctioned doctrines in Soviet Russia in the 1940s (Foucault 1980, p. 109) that determined Foucault to embark upon a lifelong hunt for the way networks of power authorize convenient bodies of knowledge across disciplines. His inquiries into the history of criminality, imprisonment, sexuality, and madness, led him to the conclusion that what is generally taken for discourse of truth, for being in the truth is controlled by those invested with institutional power:

The longer I continue, the more it seems to me that the formation of discourses and the genealogy of knowledge need to be analysed, not in terms of types of consciousness, modes of perception and forms of ideology, but in terms of tactics and strategies of power. (Foucault 1980, p. 77)

Knowledge is a sort of epistemic template sanctioning certain discourses as legitimate and pronouncing others chimeric (Foucault, 2019). Based on doctrines, groups are created with a pre-existing norm of belonging: "belonging to a class, a social status or a race, a nationality or a shared interest, a struggle, a revolt, a resistance, or an acceptance. Doctrine binds individuals to certain types of enunciations and in consequence prohibits all others: but, in return, it employs certain types of utterances to bind individuals to one another, and to differentiate them from all others" (Foucault 2019, web). Discourses are strategies of subjectification.

The study of discourse is concerned with the patterns and laws of discourse as well as the analysis of utterances and statements. This kind of analysis of discursive frameworks is known as "archaeology," according to Foucault. Furthermore, according to Foucault, discourses are those collections of approved assertions that have institutionalized power, which means they have a significant impact on how people act and think. As Foucault comments,

Whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functioning, transformations), we will say ...that we are dealing with a discursive formation. (Foucault 1969, P. 38).

What constitutes the boundaries of discourse is very unclear. However, we can say that discourses are those grouping of statements which have similar force, i.e., they are grouped because of some institutional pressure, because they act similarly. As Lois Tyson states, "Discourse is a social language created by a particular way of understanding human experience" (Tyson 2006, p. 281)

In the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), the term "Discourse" is the most frequently used in Foucault's literature, and at the same time, it is considered as one of the most paradoxical terms. Foucault states it in a numerous style all over in his text. Here he says that he has used Discourse to refer to "the general domain of statements, sometimes as individualisable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements" (Foucault 1969. P. 80). By 'the general sphere of statements', he indicates that all comments that have been uttered, have significance, and have a significant effect on others can be referred to be discourse. He has used the phrase to describe 'individualisable groups of assertions', or utterances that appear to form a grouping, such as the discourse of racism or femininity. The idea of exclusion plays a significant role in Foucault's conception of speech, especially in *The Order of Discourse*. Although man may be able to utter an unlimited variety of phrases, it is astounding that he is forced to talk within severely constrained parameters. This is something Foucault emphasizes when he examines discourse. Therefore, when selecting whether to speak on a given issue, a speaker must carefully consider that topic before deciding whether it will be pertinent and suitable to do so. During this process, we undoubtedly improved our ways of thinking and speaking on that topic. Additionally, Foucault stresses that discourse is always structured and governed in his examination and analysis of it. In this regard, he makes the following observation: "In every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers" (Foucault 2001, p. 52).

In *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault emphasizes the interconnectedness of the formation of discourse and the assertion of power. Power is thus produced and exercised through discourse that can be heard and spoken. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault claims that discourses are extremely structured clusters of assertion with inherent laws, not only utterances clustered around a theme or issue:

Discourses are at once and for all subservient to power...Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it. (Foucault 1976, p. 101)

It is well known that Foucault's early conceptions of power were largely "negative," emphasizing oppression, forbiddance, and dominance. Despite this, discourse analysis benefited greatly from this idea. It inspired studies to learn how those in positions of power utilize discourses to maintain, perpetuate, and even exercise their authority. The voice of the subalterns is always subject to censorship and exclusion by the king. However, Foucault's uniqueness rests in his attention to the dynamics of power that function when several discourses compete with one another and the oppressive force ultimately wins out.

The discourse weaves the ideas of knowledge and power together. Relations of power "cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of discourse which operates through and on the basis of this association" (Foucault 1980, p. 93). Discourse is that specific, well-organized

assertion with some substance behind it. Communication is not universally consistent and varies from person to person and from location to location as nothing in communication is everlasting and it is always changing and growing.

The definition of a discourse, according to Hall, is a system of representation, but it also includes language and actions that generate meaning. "What interested him were the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements and regulated discourse in different historical periods... Discourse constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge." (Hall 1997, p. 29)

The Last White Man, or Re-writing the Other

It is evident now that discourse is a knowledge of something which is constructed and which gives meaning to objects. Sara Mills argues, "objects exist and events occur in the real world but we apprehend these events within discursive structures and we are not always aware of the way that discourse structures our understanding" (Mills 1997, p. 56). It gives benefits to the group of people who generate it. It establishes power and marginalizes the people at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Discourse is an ideology which gives meaning and produces truth on the superficial level, but the truth remains hidden. Foucault has used the phrase to describe 'individualisable groups of assertions', or utterances that appear to form a grouping, such as the discourse of racism or femininity. Racism is like a discourse which symbolizes black skin as inferior, while white people are considered superior. This knowledge about racism is the constructed one which is propagated by the dominant white people. Mental capabilities are not valued in dark people, they are judged based on their black skin colour. Discriminated and marginalized, black people have no identity of their own. Social statuses and privileges are thrust upon those having a white identity and these people "get tangible benefits, including the best jobs, the best schools, and invitations to parties in people's home." (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p.17).

While analysing the novel, when the protagonist Anders changes his colour stranded in the mix of reality and fiction which characterizes magic realism, he starts becoming alienated as he knows what it is to be dark in colour, "One morning Anders, a white man, woke up to find he had turned a deep and undeniable brown" (Hamid 2022, p. 3). When Anders comes to know that he has changed his colour to dark he feels that there is somebody else with him in the room. At first, he does not believe it.

But above all the face replacing his filled him with anger, or rather, more than anger, an unexpected, murderous rage. He wanted to kill the coloured man who confronted him here in his home, to extinguish the life animating this other's body, to leave nothing standing but himself, as he was before, and he slammed the side of his fist into the face, cracking it slightly, and causing the whole fitting, cabinet, mirror, and all, to skew, like a painting after an earthquake has passed (pp. 4, 5).

He thinks that he is dreaming and it is not possible to be brown. After some time, he realizes that this transformation has taken place. He looks at him by taking a picture on the mobile and is shocked to see his face colour. When he looks at his replaced face, it fills him with anger. One can imagine the image of coloured people living in and around white people. They are, undoubtedly, unacceptable for white people due to their physical appearance. Due to the dark colour of these people they are destined with dark destinies and unfortunateness. These

people are kept at the margins in terms of everything with the least opportunity to even think about coming out of this situation. The novel is loaded with such things through which we can understand the situation of these dark-skinned people. They are less apparent due to their skin colour and physical features in society. So, Anders "wanted to kill the coloured man who confronted him in his home." (p.1). In the presence of the coloured man Anders feels disturbed although both men are same. We can understand the meaning of the presence of the coloured man around the white man as they are unrecognized and their existence is meaningless. If someone wishes to kill these coloured people it is normal because they are different from the other people, these white people are the victims of self-claimed superiority.

There is a sense of superiority within the white man as when Anders sees himself in the mirror "he realized that he had been robbed" (p.2). He feels it because the "white man consider themselves superior to black man" (Fanon, 1993, p.3). He is unable to accept his transformed situation and refers it as a bad memory. He tries to eat something although he is not hungry but is unable to eat anything, even his favourite dishes. He tries to become "calmer, steadier and told himself that it would be all right, although he was unconvinced." (Hamid, 2022, p.3). He feels and acts in this way because coloured people are less recognized in society and most often they are not accepted. This situation leads to the "juxtaposition of white and black races which creates a massive psycho-existential complex" in society and the minds of millions of individuals. (Fanon, 1993, p.5).

As the novel progresses, we come to understand that the psychology of the coloured man is deeper and darker than the white man just like his colour and in this way more disturbed and complex. They remain in doubt about their existence and just like the same way Anders referred himself to as a "sea creature that should not exist" (Hamid, 2022, p.3). Fanon's clinical approach to the psychology of the black man reveals that "for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white." (Fanon, 1993, p.4). The black man wants to exist as a white and if it not possible then life is not worth living, especially, when someone is living in or around the white people. It is because the discourse of racist ideology is so ingrained in the minds of blacks that they cannot think about their existence. The white superiority has been internalized in the minds of the people; they cannot think beyond that. They are under the siege of power of the white racial dominance. As described by Foucault, discourses are at once and for all subservient to power...Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, (Foucault 1976, p. 101). The same is the case of Andres and it is merely not a fictional phenomenon but multiple things are associated with white identity. These are the people invited in parties, ceremonies, celebrations, and public gatherings where most of the black people serve these white people at such kinds of occasions.

Anders' father and Oonas' mother were proud that they were among the dominant white people. They didn't easily accept this transformation. When Anders' father came to know about his (Anders') change he says, "his father hung up the first time, and the second time asked him if he was high, if he thought this was a joke, and when Anders said no to both, he asked, with steel in his voice, a steel familiar to Anders, if his son was trying to call him a racist," (p. 27). It was not easy for Anders' father to accept the reality of his son that he has become a dark person who, he thinks, is inferior to the whites. Oonas' mother also looks down upon the idea that people are changing their colour. She thinks that dark people are being killed when she sees the violence. If discourse, as Foucault thinks, constrains our perceptions and views, can't

we say that our knowledge of the world is not necessarily true or objective? In response to such a question, Foucault insists that our knowledge of the world does not necessarily reflect the world as it is, but as it is understood within the frames set by discourse. Being black is not easier to survive and bear in a society which is based on false assumptions and stereotypical mindsets. This is the reason Anders feels shame being black and when he calls his girlfriend Oona after days of his transformation "she heard the panic and anguish in Anders's voice." (p.4). After talking to him, Oona goes to meet Anders and she surprises herself to see him in his new appearance. She is surprised due to his unfamiliar tone on the phone and "surprised herself even more by actually going". (p.5). It shows it is not easier to accept black people as a partner or friend. It is very hard to continue with such kind of person. This is the reason Oona returns instantly to her home without talking to Anders. She is reluctant to accept Anders in this transformed version. After some days when she meets Anders again she is reluctant to touch him but when she touches she "discovered a jarring and discomforting satisfaction" which stops her from doing so. (p.7). When she goes home, she does not pronounce a single word to Anders and moves away from there as quickly as she can. After that, she receives plenty of messages from Anders but she does not respond to the messages. This shows the real attitude of white people in society when it comes to treating and engaging people of dark skin. This is the effect of the dominant discourse on the minds of the people. By implication, therefore, our understanding of the world is not a pure reflection of reality, but a mere effect of discourse. Sharing Foucault's opinion, Sara Mills affirms: "Discourse does not simply translate reality into language; rather discourse should be seen as a system which structures the way that we receive reality" (Mills 1997, p. 55). Therefore, far from being a mirror reflecting the real image of the world, discourse is, as Foucault contends, "a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them; and it is in this practice that the events of discourse find the principle of their regularity" (2019, p. 229). Accordingly, it can be said that universal truth and objectivity in Foucault's theory of discourse are just illusions. Our perceptions of material objects can never be objective or disinterested. They are always "filtered through discursive structures which assign particular meanings and effects to them." (Mills 1997, p. 56) Therefore, it can be argued that discourses do not just describe objects, but construct them. They, Foucault insists, "systematically form the objects of which they speak [...] discourses are not about objects, they don't identify objects, they constitute them and in doing so, they conceal their own invention" (p. 49). In the case of the novel *The Last White Man*, the minds of Anders, his father, Oona and Oona's mother are so preoccupied with the racist ideology, that they are unable to accept that darker people are in any way equal to white people. They are not ready to accept this change and they go through an identity crisis. Mother of Oona's claims:

It was not that we were better than them, although we were better than them, how could you deny it, but that we needed our own places, where we could take care of our own, because our people were in trouble, so many of us in trouble, and the dark people could have their own places, and there they could do their own dark things, or whatever, and now there was no time to wait, now they were converting us, and lowering us, and that was a sign, a sign that if we did not act in this moment there would be no more moments left and we would be gone. (p. 88).

Oona transformed, and she anticipated it, although it took longer than expected, "and so she lay in her bed taking it all in with her heart beating fast but without panic, looking at her arm, touching her skin, feeling her stomach and her legs, and then using her body to stand, and

her body worked as it had before, there was no sense of her balance being off, or of proportions being any different," (pp. 120, 121). Oona was aware of the shift and that it was on the horizon, yet she did experience a surge of sorrow at losing something

The discourse about the dark people as being inferior was so much internalized in the minds of the people that after seeing Anders changed to a dark person, Anders' boss says, "I would have killed myself" (p. 35). He will kill himself if he were changed. This was what the mental setup of people was like; the people were so indifferent to the dark people. "Anders told himself the stares were natural," (p. 38), he was seen differently afterwards, and he was not treated well by the white people. He stopped talking much and worked silently as a gym instructor.

Discourse is that specific and organized statement which has some influence, force and authority. When there were reports that more men were changing Anders became confident that he was not the only one who had to suffer an identity crisis, inferiority complex and the gaze of the white people. One of the white guys who had undergone metamorphosis had committed suicide rather than becoming a person of colour. Anders left his home and went to live with his father in his house for his safety because militants were searching for the dark men and were killed. The dark people were found dead on the roads and were killed by the whites. There were riots and violence all around but after the majority of people changed the riots subsided a bit.

Anders's change in skin colour overthrows the listless predictability of the couple's existence. The first response is violence. From Anders: "He wanted to kill the coloured man who confronted him here in his home." From his boss at the gym, who tells Anders that he would have killed himself if it had happened to him. Oona's mother, who is horrified to find that her daughter is in a relationship with a dark-skinned man seeks solace in increasingly strident and paranoid right-wing forums online. (Preston, 2022)

A paradoxical situation looms in the minds of the people whether they are black or white. This is described as when a coloured man "a white man had indeed shot a dark man, but also that the dark man and the white man were the same." (Hamid, 2022, p.21). Anders is deeply affected and becomes quieter than he used to be and less sure about his actions because he does not know how these actions will be perceived by the other people around him. He "felt imprisoned, doubly, triply imprisoned in his skin, in his house, in his town." (p.51). People were unable to recognize even their blood relations due to this unfamiliar change and there exists a mixture of black and white people in the gatherings as "there were dark hosts mixed in with the white hosts, and they were awkward with each other, awkward and unnatural." (p.52). It happens because of self-constructed notions of the white man about black as an anxious man and a symbol of evilness which in turn is the influence of the discourse of racism as a constructed knowledge in the society that blacks and whites are different races. Anders uses back roads when going to meet his father and proceeds hesitatingly, stopping at regular intervals. The people who have known each other for a long time now ignore each other like they do not know them, or worse, feelings of disliking each other are present among them. Anders alienates himself from the rest of the society and when thinks he finds himself "like a bird perched next to lions, like a vulture, or not a vulture, maybe a crow, belonging to another element." (p.34). In reality, he is "battered down by cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, and racial defects." (Fanon, 1993, p.84). He encounters numberless difficulties in developing his bodily schema because everything associated with dark colour goes in a negative direction or is shaped in the negative sense. Complexities are the part of human life. They are attached to

both the white man and the black man but the second one suffers in his skin and body completely different from the white folks. It is more rapid and intense in the man of colour in contrast to the white man.

Towards the end of the novel, we come to know that both the parents of the central characters, the mother of Oona and the father of Anders, have been moved away from this world. Anders accepts his coloured identity, Oona also turns black and they decide to live together. They accept this reality as all the people turn black and there remains no man of white colour. The Last White Man is forcing us to examine the way that race conditions our reaction to others, and our conception of ourselves. (Preston, 2022). So, Hamid does not only present the dark side of the racial traumas, disturbed psychic structure, repressed desires, and conflicts but also gives a way out of these crises in the form of acceptance in a way of becoming conscious of the unconscious which is important to live a comfortable life.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that Hamid has rightfully presented both the external and internal psychic conflicts of the coloured man which is an ultimate reality of the contemporary world. The psychological facts are based on reality and reside within black men. It is right to say that racism and colourism are constructed phenomena by the superior and dominant power. This discourse of racism is invented by the self-claimed civilized white man and then associated with inferiority, fragmentation, conflicts, and devaluation. Also, because of the discourse, power subjectivity still is one of the burning issues in contemporary society because of which the dark-coloured people suffer and become alienated and go through the identity crisis. These are the consequences of this socially constructed phenomenon of racism. The novel is a mouthpiece of the black humans who suffer in every instant and Anders is representing these things accurately. Hamid does not only present these realities but also gives a way out of these things as he suggests that to overcome these things one must be conscious about the dominant discourses around them and try to come out of these powerful discourses. Secondly, the fact of acceptance is key to avoiding conflicts and overcoming crises. One must accept his reality to live a peaceful life and the same happens with Anders at the end of the novel. He embraces his coloured identity and abandons his associations with whiteness and it does not trouble him more. Everything is all right when one acts as a man who questions and thinks logically. This leads Anders and other characters to emancipation from these sufferings at the end of the novel. There is further research which can be done on the novel *The Last White Man*. It can be analyzed through the theoretical stances of existentialism, psychoanalysis, gender theories, and racial metamorphosis so that new knowledge can be established from the novel.

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