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“If I were you, what would I do?” —Whiteness Study on Mohsin Hamid’s *The Last White Man*

Bin Zhao*

Qingdao University, Qingdao 266071, China.

*Corresponding author: Bin Zhao, 2523504240@qq.com.

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Abstract: Mohsin Hamid, a contemporary Pakistani-origin novelist, engages in broadening the interpretation of race with rich themes and varied writing techniques. His latest novel *The Last White Man* (2022) takes the change of skin color as a pointcut and develops a narrative around the magical discoloration from white to black both individually and collectively. Hamid locates his perspective as an outsider, stepping out of the impasse of the black-white dichotomy and thinking about the future direction of race relations. By analyzing white ignorance, white privilege and hegemony presented in the novel, exposing and countering whiteness, interpreting the racial empathy generated by Hamid’s ‘white to black’, revealing the unjust racial relations between black and white races, and exposing the hidden rights and discourses controlled by the white man, it is intended to create the conditions for the realization of true racial equality.

Keywords: Mohsin Hamid; *The Last White Man*; Whiteness Study; racial empathy



1. Introduction

Mohsin Hamid (1975--) is a Pakistani-born writer known for his five novels. In his 2022 book *The Last White Man*, Hamid explores themes of racism. Oprah Magazine praises the book for its “romantic and concise depiction of a post-racial world, aiming to enhance empathy between races and explore the path to racial coexistence”. *The Last White Man* portrays a story set during a period of racial upheaval, where a collective transformation of white people into black exposes the invisibility of white privilege and disrupts the white-dominated power structures. Hamid uses a perspective of racial idealism, employing a fantastical skin color change to force whites into experiencing the life conditions of black people, thereby gaining insight into the racial privileges enjoyed by whites and the discrimination faced by blacks. This aims to foster inter-racial empathy and reflect on the damage racism inflicts on racial coexistence. This paper uses the study of white identity as a lens to analyze *The Last White Man*, revealing the pervasive yet invisible racism between blacks and whites.

2. White privilege and hegemony

The novel depicts the transformation of white individuals into a collective black identity, detailing their shame and resentment after losing the racial privileges associated with their skin color, and revealing the true nature of whiteness hidden behind privilege and hegemony. White privilege and hegemony are closely related to whiteness; they are specific manifestations of whiteness, with whiteness being the core of these privileges and hegemony. On the surface, the change in skin color represents a forced shift in racial identity, but at a deeper level, it signifies the loss of white privilege and hegemony. The sudden change in skin color disrupts racial identities, lowering the previously elevated position of whites and allowing them to experience the racial discrimination and oppression faced by blacks due to their darker skin. “White privilege refers to the various social advantages, benefits, and privileges enjoyed by members of the dominant race” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). In the novel, the protagonist Anders is humiliated by a stranger on the street and “he



did nothing, neither retorting nor smiling to dissuade her, doing nothing as if he had a mental deficiency” (8). His reluctance to respond due to his skin color reflects the deeply ingrained image of blacks being unable to speak up in front of whites. The sudden change in skin color traps Anders in the ideological cage of racism, losing his protective shell as if a turtle had lost its shell. His once-revered racial identity vanishes overnight, transforming a privileged white into a black who sacrifices white privilege. Anders, as a white male in the past, was blinded by the long-standing advantages of whiteness and did not actively consider the existence of racial privilege and hegemony. It is only when he is transformed into a darker-skinned individual, with no turning back, that he comes to realize the existence of white privilege and the discrimination and oppression it inflicts on people of color.

Racial hegemony represents white people’s dissatisfaction with the racial privileges they have and their emergence of more aggressive forms of racial injustice based on those privileges. In the novel, the spread of the “blackening” phenomenon in the town causes increasing numbers of white people to turn black, creating panic among the townspeople. Those who have not turned black form armed militias to clear out black people in an effort to prevent the spread of the blackening. “Violence occurs frequently in the town, with fights here and shootings there... Armed militants start appearing on the streets, their skin pale, some dressed almost like soldiers in combat gear, or partially like soldiers, but all militants are clearly fully armed” (24). The essence of white identity, deeply hidden behind racial privilege and hegemony, is thus fully revealed. “White hegemony in a racist society is akin to male hegemony in a patriarchal society; it is dominated by whites, serves white interests, and is continually regenerated and reinforced through repetitive daily practices. As long as its existence and regeneration mechanisms remain unchallenged, even removing visible white privileges from daily life will not alter structural racial differences, and thus, racism cannot be fundamentally eradicated” (Chen and Ma, 2020). White people’s disregard for their privileged status and their habitual sense of racial superiority, combined with black people’s suppressed anger and acquiescence, fostered the development of white privilege into racial hegemony.

In the novel, Anders’ changing skin color makes him aware of the existence of white privilege and the psychological and physical oppression it imposes on black people. As the proportion of black individuals in the town increases, cases of white people turning black become more frequent. The remaining white residents,



accustomed to their privileges, vent their anger over inexplicable instances of their racial peers turning black onto the black community, using violence to drive black residents out. Thus, white privilege evolves into white hegemony—white people gain the power to determine the fate of races and control the future direction of racial relations.

3. White people's ignorance

In the state of invisible white privilege, white people often display ignorance about the true conditions of black people and use this ignorance as a pretext for enjoying racial privilege and even hegemony, placing themselves outside the racial structure while hypocritically maintaining and perpetuating racism. The novel's portrayal of white ignorance aims to reveal the hidden whiteness behind racism. White ignorance has two aspects: first, it refers to white people's lack of awareness about the real situation of black people. Influenced by racial prejudice and misleading pseudoscientific discourse from history, they often view black people as incomplete, barbaric, intellectually inferior, emotionally numb, and physically strong, suitable only for servitude. The second aspect of ignorance is different; it is not just a misunderstanding or blindness but an intentional avoidance of the real situation—“an ignorance they deliberately cultivate” (Sullivan and Tuana 3). Ignorance is a prerequisite for white people to become accomplices and beneficiaries of racism. By remaining unaware of racial exploitation, they protect the unjust racial system from scrutiny while comfortably benefiting from it. In *The Last White Man*, many white individuals are unable to tolerate changes in their skin color. To preserve their precious whiteness, they prefer to die rather than submit to the black race. This stems from their ignorance about black people, which has fostered long-standing racial stereotypes and prejudices. Ultimately, this ignorance of whiteness becomes the fundamental reason driving them towards death. It is thus clear that white ignorance is a double-edged sword, causing harm to the opposing race while also deeply wounding the self.

The ignorance of white people regarding the true situation of Black individuals reflects a long-standing sense of racial superiority among whites. Their self-satisfied state in racial relations blinds them to reality. In the novel, the white community habitually ignores the Black community, seeing themselves as racially superior and



enjoying racial privileges. They take it for granted that Black people are naturally meant to serve white people. It is only when white skin turns black and they experience the same physical and psychological oppression as Black people do that, they begin to see the inequality in racial relations. Anders's boss, upon seeing Anders turn black, openly mocks and humiliates him by saying, "If it were me, I would kill myself" (16). The boss' cruel and mocking reaction to Anders's transformation highlights his belief that being black is a fate worse than death. His ignorance prevents him from taking the time to truly understand the Black experience; his white skin is his pride. When the wave of blackening sweeps through the entire town, even the gym owner, who had previously been boastful, inevitably experiences black skin himself. "His boss was hurt; perhaps something had broken, but he tried to muster a smile at Anders, as if it were all a joke" (46). The differing attitudes of Anders's boss toward blackening, depending on who it happens to, reflect the extreme bias whites have toward Black people versus themselves. What is deemed unforgivable when it happens to Black people is somehow understandable and acceptable when it happens to oneself. When whites are in the position of racial superiority they have constructed, their elevated stance prevents them from accepting equality with Black people, much less actively seeking to understand the true situation of Black individuals, making coexistence between the races difficult. However, when the myth of white supremacy is shattered and white racial status equals that of Black people, they begin to realize the depth of their prejudice against Black individuals and start to learn about the Black experience, seeking ways to coexist. Through the depiction of narrow-minded and racially ignorant white characters who are unaware of the real situation of Black people, the novel satirizes ignorant white racists—whites go from being ignorant perpetrators to becoming victims of ignorance themselves, experiencing the suffering and torment caused by ignorance through the lens of racial role reversal.

In this all-Black town, the racial divide between Black and white disappears, blending all residents into one race. With only Black people remaining in society, white individuals no longer enjoy racial privileges and the invisible advantages of skin color. After this reversal of racial identity, whites fall from a position of racial superiority to one of disadvantage, realizing that their former privileges came at the expense of Black people's rights. Through magical realism, the author details both individual and collective transformations, providing an opportunity for racial role



reversal and critiquing white ignorance. This role reversal ultimately strengthens the critique of racism, creating a positive feedback loop against racial discrimination.

4. Retaliation on Whiteness

The Last White Man exposes both intentional and unintentional white ignorance, the exclusive racial privileges and hegemonic power of white people, and delivers a powerful blow to white identity through a fantastical change in skin color. Hamid's narrative, featuring a collective transformation of white people into Black, dismantles the myth of white identity. As a Pakistani writer living abroad, Hamid has witnessed the unsettling racial conflicts of the present. As a perceptive outsider and observer, Hamid moves beyond binary racial oppositions, delivering a strong critique of white identity, deconstructing white supremacy, and advocating for racial role reversal. His clear expression of ethnic demands—breaking down the binary opposition between Black and white races, achieving mutual communication between different races, and fostering empathy across racial lines—is evident.

Firstly, Hamid employs a technique of white people magically turning black to deconstruct the long-standing racial stereotypes of white people as the racial center and to decentralize and counteract whiteness. While novels where black individuals disguise themselves as white to explore racial issues are common, Hamid takes a different approach in his new work by using the magical transformation of whiteness into blackness to prompt white readers to engage in self-reflection. This leads them to reconsider the ignorance and privilege that have caused psychological and physical harm to black individuals, countering the aloof and superior nature of whiteness. Often, when black people turn white, they do so by hiding their true identity and background, striving to achieve a higher status and the prestige they crave. The Last White Man depicts the collective transformation of white people into black, losing their inherent light skin color and thus their historically privileged racial position. Previously, white people positioned themselves at the center of racial relations, controlling racial privilege and hegemony, sacrificing the interests of black people and oppressing and discriminating against people of color. Now, with the reversal of status, white racial status plummets, becoming the subject of the very oppression they once inflicted, experiencing firsthand the sacrifices black people made for white people's racial privileges and reflecting on the severe harm caused to disadvantaged races.



Secondly, Hamid meticulously orchestrates a color-changing storm, transforming all the town's residents into Black people, simplifying the racial binary opposition into a single-race society, thus alleviating the struggle of either-or racial relations. The sudden color change prompts both Black and white races to empathize with each other's perspectives on achieving racial equality. The novel concludes with the author's idealistic vision of race—where the town's residents collectively turn Black, merging the Black and white races into a fully Black society—achieving, to some extent, the ideal of peaceful coexistence between Black and white races. The novel fictionalizes a town where everyone turns black to confront racial opposition and critiques the harm of racial ideologies to racial harmony. From the white perspective, the irreversible transformation to Black is a humiliating and robbing experience. Whites, who were once in a superior racial position, suddenly become despised Black people, leading to a painful and unacceptable psychological torment. Adapting to a Black identity gradually shatters the notion of white racial superiority. This color-changing storm brings whites down from their constructed superior racial status and makes them personally experience racial inferiority and discrimination. From the Black perspective, the author's deliberate collective transformation to black is not aimed at enhancing Black racial status or seeking racial privileges for blacks.

Finally, Hamid breaks the deadlock of the black-and-white racial binary in the novel by constructing a harmonious society from the impartial perspective of an outsider. As a Pakistani writer living in the West for many years, Hamid does not directly criticize the prejudices and discrimination brought about by racism. Instead, he writes about the self-conscious transformation of white racial collectives into black, satirizing the persistent racial discrimination and oppression in contemporary Western society that prides itself on democracy and equality. Hamid, as a clear-sighted outsider and observer, abandons the racial binary opposition and writes in a decentralized manner to pursue racial equality. In the novel, the author consciously avoids using extreme racial terms such as “white” and “black”, instead opting for more nuanced terms like “deep”, “brown”, “dark”, and “the colored man”. Hamid attempts to dismantle the black-and-white racial dichotomy, seeking strategies for racial equality within the novel, deconstructing white-centric views, and achieving a state of equal and harmonious coexistence between blacks and whites. Through this novel, Hamid also warns both races: for whites, it is crucial to empathize with the black experience, abandon past racial superiority, and view blacks with equality; for



blacks, it is important to resolve racial conflicts peacefully rather than exacerbating them or using social pressure to gain privileges.

5. Conclusion

In Hamid's *The Last White Man*, the successful skin color transformation prompts whites to engage in racial role reversal, making them realize the racial privileges and hegemonies they have enjoyed due to either intentional or unintentional ignorance. As Hamid succinctly summarizes in the concluding letter to his readers: "To have a future not shackled by nostalgic pasts, we must imagine our future—or more precisely, we must allow our imagination to work in the future." Hamid's fantastical skin color transformation, driven by racial idealism, encourages whites to empathize with other races, reflect on the immense harm inflicted on blacks by past racial bullying, and thereby challenge white supremacy. This transformation experiment helps whites move beyond the black-and-white racial binary, empathize with the other race, and actively consider the future of racial relations. It also strongly criticizes the extreme racial ideologies that contribute to racial discord. *The Last White Man* not only challenges white supremacy and removes whites from their racial pedestal but also alerts both races to maintain a balanced coexistence, eliminate the harm of racial ideologies, and strive for racial equality.

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