Decentring Whiteness: A Critical Study of Race and Identity in Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man*

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to analyze Mohsin Hamid's The Last White Man through the lens of Deconstruction. The study aims to explore the author's approach to deconstruct the existing ideologies and his attempt to blur the boundaries of existing binaries. The theory of Deconstruction in general believes that the basic ideologies possess no concrete basis as they are constructed on the basis of language that itself is unstable, thus unreliable. The paper intends to explore how author has encountered with the basic stereotypical ideologies about the non-white races and how his work promotes the same racial stereotypes while trying to refute and debase them. The study digs out the embedded stereotypical representation of the non-white in the novel. The paper establishes that although Hamid debases the existing ideologies and implies the fluidity of boundaries of structured binaries, yet his representation of the non-whites is stereotypical and based upon the established perception of the non-whites by the white nations.*

Introduction

The Last White Man (2022) is the latest publication by British-Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid. Being a Pakistani Muslim, Mohsin Hamid himself faced the racial prejudice after 9/11, and he tried to reject the ideologies about racial prejudice and deliberately revealed the sufferings of non-whites due to the racial norms and ideologies in his creative works like '*Reluctant Fundamentalist'* and '*The Last White Man'*. *The Last White Man* possesses the basic theme of rejection of racial prejudice. The novel tends to reveal the disastrous impacts of constructed race system through the use of metamorphosis by transforming whites into non-whites. The protagonist of the novel, Anders, wakes up one morning to witness that his skin

colour is changed from white to non-white. He has to suffer due to the racial ideologies through self-alienation and social alienation. The adversity of alienation does not fall only on the protagonist, but the other members of the town pass through the same conditions of self and social-alienation after getting dark. Anders, the protagonist of the novel is cursed by his boss and an unknown lady he encounters with at the traffic signal, only due to his transformed colour. Although his father sympathises him at the various levels yet he feels reluctance to accept Anders as his son. The novel reveals that the transformed people are treated like zombies, pushed out from their houses or even killed without any feeling of regret. Oona, the other major character of the novel faces the same sort

of alienation from her mother and the society as well. At the end of the novel Anders' daughter also transforms to non-white. Anders feels sympathy for the crucial circumstances she is going to suffer from due to her transformed colour. The present study aims to analyse *The Last White Man* through the lens of "Deconstruction" (Derrida, 1966).

Deconstruction as a literary theory became a major influence on literary studies during the late 1970s. It can improve our ability to think critically and to see more readily the ways in which our experience is determined by the ideologies which we are unaware of because they are "built into our language (Tyson, 2006). Bertens (2014) argues that the idea called "essentialism" that claims we can know the essence of everything is the main target of deconstruction. Derrida (1966), the leading figure in deconstruction, insists that it is not a 'theory' perse, but rather a set of strategies or ways of reading. The theory of Deconstruction is more reliable lens or strategy to understand the multiplicity of meaning at various levels in a text. The theory possesses a great deal to offer the understanding of the text at apparent and deeper level as well. The basic ideologies that are built into the text of the novel through the language can be understood and analysed at both the apparent as well as at deeper level through the theory of Deconstruction. The present study is the analysis of Hamid's *The Last White Man* through the lens of deconstruction.

Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Last White Man* (2022) deals with the racial norms and ideologies that are built into every culture. The research aimed to explore the penetration of ideologies that determine our experiences through the novel. The deconstructive strategy of the analysis may reveal that the text, on the apparent level, itself seems to counter or even refute the basic ideologies, yet a closer inspection is expected to reveal that it contradicts the basic implied theme, which is the rejection of ideologies about racial prejudice. The deconstructive study of the text is relevant in the indigenous Pakistani culture to understand the disastrous impact of constructed ideologies about human existence and superiority of a particular race.

Literature Review

The available scholarships on Hamid's *The Last White Man* mostly deals with the issues like racial alienation, identity crisis, and the impacts of racial metamorphosis, but it lacks in investigating the deconstruction of basic racial ideologies and societal norms. Baqar et al. (2024) explored racial alienation in Hamid's *The Last White Man* by applying Fanon's theory of race. The study was conducted to investigate the mistreatment of non-whites in the white dominant societies and the impact of their mistreatment on their feeling of being alienated. Moreover, the study explored the physical and mental sufferings of the colored people only because of their colored skin. The study also explored alienation of the protagonist from the self, from significant and general others, and even from the culture by providing textual evidences under the conception of Fanon. The study revealed that Ander's transformation from white to dark brown not only led him to hate himself due to the fear of social stigma but also it made him vulnerable to the society of whites. It was concluded that the racial transformation may snatch the right of living from the masses and make them an entity that can be wiped out without any consequences.

Manzoor and Singh (2023) explored the discourse of racism and identity crisis in the novel. The study emphasized that the conception of race is socially constructed phenomenon. Under the conception of power discourse by Foucault (1980), the study explored that the conception of white as superior is existed due to the discourse made by stake holders of society i.e. the whites to maintain their superiority over non-whites. The study clearly elaborated by providing textual evidences from the progression of narrative that the socially constructed ideology about superiority of the whites was demolished when everyone became dark in the town. It was emphasized that the power discourse creates havoc not only in inner self of the people of dark races but also creates the disaster and anarchy in the outer world as well. However, the study failed to answer the question whether the power was completely

demolished at the end of the novel or the masses of the town were suffering from trauma even after they accepted one another after being transformed.

Kapur and Naik (2022) explored the impact of racial metamorphosis to explain how the skin tone led the protagonist to be alienated not only from the society but also from his dear ones. It was explored through the underlying concept of metamorphosis that the change in race was totally unacceptable. Moreover, it also revealed that the non-whites suffer not only in the hands of society but also in the hands of immediate relations. It was concluded that in the newly transformed post-racial society, "whiteness" was not a matter of skin color but mentality.

Preston (2022) in its article in "The Guardian" praised the novel for its unconventional narrative style. The article emphasized the importance of the name of the protagonist of the novel "Anders" that itself shows the concept of othering which is suitable for the narration of basic theme of the novel. Charles (2022) in his review of the novel in "Washington Post" considered the novel as a supplement for social enlightenment. He emphasized that the novel may lead the masses to end up the racial prejudice. David Gates (2022) in his review published in "The New York times" asserts that through its unconventional premise, the novel aims to challenge traditional notion of fiction and pushes the readers to re-generate their understanding of race and humanity under the threshold of the conception asserted by the novel.

The Last White Man gained a significant prestige in the literary as well as in journalists' circle. It shows that the work calls for more research to be done in its domain. The available scholarship on this literary text shows that there is need to apply other frameworks to explore the themes of racial alienation and identity crisis. As Deconstruction has not been applied by scholars on this work for exploration of its themes, this study intends to fill this gap.

Theoretical Framework

Deconstruction has gained a significant attention as a revolutionary theory in literary studies since it was proposed by Derrida (1966) in his paper "Structure, sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" presented at John Hopkin university on 21 October 1966 (Klages. 2006). By rejecting all the previously existing assumptions about language, Derrida (1966) is focused to believe that language is not a suitable or reliable source of communication. According to him language is unable to convey the meaning as the meaning is fluid, unstable slipper, somehow dependent upon the ambiguous domain of complex experiences which are programmed within the minds through the language. In this domain. Klages (2006) argues that "one signifier could have more than one signified" which shows the instability of meaning; the relation between signifier and signified is both arbitrary and conventional. "Signifieds often function as signifiers" (Bressler, 2011) which asserts the multiplicity of meaning. By enhancing the structuralist claim that language is non-referential as it doesn't refer to the things rather to the concepts, Deconstruction claimed that language is non-referential as it refers neither to things nor the conceptual images, but only to the play of signifiers of which a language itself consists. Moreover, by proposing the radicalized vision of activity of thinking Deconstruction proposed that language consists of conflicting ideologies operating at any given point in time in any culture. Derrida (1966) largely deconstructed the structuralist ideology of binary opposition and proposed that binary oppositions are hierarchal in nature. While commenting on the hierarchal nature of elements of binaries, Klages (2006) asserts that one part of the pair is always given a "higher cultural value" than the other. Similarly, Klages (2006) proposed that unlike structuralist view, the two members of the binary pair are not completely opposite to each other rather they overlap or share something in common which means that the existence of one part is dependent on the other. Bressler (2011) believes that Derrida has refuted the structuralist ideology based upon the assumption that every ideology in the universe possess an underlying structure and put forward the idea that as each ideology is based upon our conception that is again based upon the language and language is

not reliable, so, there is no centre to our understanding of existence. For the deconstructive analysis of the literary texts, one has to focus to reveal the undecidability of the text to explore that the meaning of the text is undecidable, fluid and conflicting array of the possible meanings, therefore have no stable meaning in traditional sense. Deconstruction of a literary text may also be done by revealing the complex operations of the ideologies of which the text is constructed. More precisely unlike the new critics' approach to look for the meanings in the text which are in conflict with the main theme through reading "against the grain" (Tyson,2006). Bertens (2014) believes that for the deconstruction explores that the text is "far more complex than it initially seemed" and possesses multiplicity of meanings.

Textual Analysis

This section analyses the primary text *The Last White Man* through the lens of Deconstruction. The analysis has been done on many layers including deconstruction of basic ideologies and binaries. Textual evidences have been quoted to support the arguments.

Deconstruction of Basic Ideologies

The novel *The Last White Man* seems to be deconstructing the basic ideologies, binaries, societal norms, conceptions about human existence, and the concept which claims the autonomous nature of human being. The progression of the narrative in the novel indicates that there is no stability in human existence and the ideologies of self- reliance. Thus, the narrative seems to indicates that nothing in this world is logical, universal, and objective. Every ideology existing in the world is dependent upon the social and cultural values, more precisely upon the collective unconsciousness of a particular group of individuals. Moreover, the traditional concept of race is also refuted by the novel. The novel seems to imply that the race is more a psychological phenomenon rather than a genetic and geographical phenomenon. Furthermore, the boundaries of the binaries are also blurred by the novel. The story seems to demonstrate that there are no clear boundaries between have and

have not's, privileged and suppressed, centralized and marginalized, evil and virtue, and objective and subjective in the psychological realm of human mind.

The ideology about autonomous nature of human being has been challenged through the characters of the novel. The characters of the novel are unable to control the circumstances that are going on in the town. Anders, the protagonist of the novel and his girlfriend Oona, are unable to revive their white skin after getting dark. Similarly, an anonymous character in the novel shoots himself in the agony of being dark.

"…the message that had been sent, and the experts weighed in, and sum of it all was clear, in other words that 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. 23)

Furthermore, the protagonist of the novel fails to save his father's life despite all of his efforts. Similarly, Oona could not save the life of his beloved brother. Although, Anders and Oona love their daughter yet they could do nothing to save her from the adversity of getting dark. Anders sympathises her at the adversity that fell upon his daughter.

", this image of his daughter many years hence, and he placed his brown hand on the side of her brown face, soothing her, his brown daughter, his daughter, and miraculously she let him". (p. 85)

The described incidents of the novel implies that the circumstances are beyond the human control and the power of human being is limited in every way. So, the ideology of autonomous nature of human being is just an illusion with no concrete basis.

The novel refutes the generally accepted notion about parental love; that is, it exists in all circumstances, thus is selfless and condition less and implies that the parental love is restricted to specific conditions and bound to specific societal norms. The novel seems to indicate that the parental love is conditioned and determined by the societal norms. The change in skin tone leads the characters of the novel to face the hatred not only from the society but also from

their parents as well. The parents of both main characters feel it hard to accept them after the transformation in their skin colour. Anders' father feels a trauma when he comes to know about the transformation of his son from white to non-white.

"Ander's father, a cigarette in his mouth, one hand holding on to the fabric of his son's sleeve, the other rigid at his side, and he wept, he wept like a shudder, like an endless cough, without a sound, staring at the man who had been Anders, until his son took him inside, and they both at last sat down". (p, 14)

Similarly, Ander's father becomes biased when he sees Oona kissing his son. His hateful expression was not because of his son making love with a girl Infront of him; rather, it was due to his association with racist norms, that are determined by the society. To conform to the societal norms, he adores whites rather than his own darkened son. The racism in Ander's father makes him blind about the love for his son.

"Anders' father, headed to the kitchen, glimpsed them and immediately looked away, and Oona thought he was being considerate, but Anders saw something else, he saw the discomfort on his father's face, the discomfort at seeing this white girl kiss this dark man". (p. 52)

Similarly, the expression of Oona's mother when she witnesses her daughter's transformation reveals her hatred toward her darkened daughter. She finds herself unable to eat the meal made by the darkened hands of her daughter (p. 62). The narration of the story is evident that after the transformation the parental love does not remain the love at all. Rather, it largely changes to prejudice and hatred, and it suggests that the conception of self-less love is vague and fake as it is dependent upon the constructed psychology of humans by the societal norms.

Hamid challenges the concept of race that it is a static and geographical in nature and asserts that the concept of race is fluid, dynamic and a psychological phenomenon. This contradictory perception of the racist ideology is done at various levels. Firstly, Anders feelings of inferiority after getting non-white reveals the

psychological impact of racial ideology on the people. Secondly, the feeling of loss of genetic identity is another determining factor of disastrous impacts of racist ideology. Thirdly, the lack of acceptance of the characters by the society after getting dark implies the perception of concept of race by common masses. Lastly, the feelings of loss in the characters indicate the reality that the concept of race is dependent upon the psychology rather than the geography, so it is dynamic in nature.

Ander's consideration of change in skin colour as a criminal act and loss of genetic identity is evident that the race is determined by psychology rather geography. Anders, the protagonist of the novel, feels himself inferior as if he has lost everything and considers the transformation as a robbery which has even robbed his identity from him.

"Anders waited for an undoing, an undoing that did not come, and the hours passed, and he realized that he had been robbed, that he was the victim of a crime, the horror of which only grew, a crime that had taken everything from him, that had taken him from him". (p. 02)

Similarly, Anders feeling of loss of genetic identity due to change in colour again indicates that the race as a psychological phenomenon. Anders feels that his self has gone along with his colour and he is left with nothing except repentance.

"In high school people had always said that his best feature was his smile, an easy with myself and easy with your smile, a let's do this smile, generous, inviting, which had come to him from his mother, from her face to his, and now it was missing, the feeling that made it possible missing." (p. 05)

Furthermore, the novel indicates that if the race was the matter of colour or geography it would definitely be acceptable but it is not the case. The story implies that the race is determined by psychology and so, dependents upon the impressionistic perception (if a person dislikes some particular race implies that race must be evil). The lack of acceptance of the characters of the novel from the society after getting dark clearly demonstrates the dependence of concept

of race upon the psychology. Anders faces social alienation and hatred after getting dark. His boss does not accept him and deliberately shows his prejudice by saying that he would have killed himself if he had been Anders (p. 17). Similarly, other members of the society refuse to accept the people who have been transformed. They kill them and force them to leave the town. This unacceptability is not only from the end of the society but also by the transformed people who feel self-alienated and realize that they have lost each and every thing they possessed. They do not even accept themselves after the metamorphosis in skin colour. Oona feels the same psychological trauma after getting dark.

"Oona did not know where it come from, but a feeling of melancholy touched her then, a sadness at losing of something, and perhaps it was her attachment to the old Oona she was mourning". (p. 58)

In the same way Oona's mother tries to harm herself after getting dark. The narration of these incidents may be seen as the rejection of traditional concept of race as a static entity and the implication of the race as a psychological phenomenon.

Moreover, the novel can be seen as an epitome of blurred boundaries of the existing binaries. The previously existing binaries are rejected through the story. The novel indicates that there is no difference between the whites and the blacks from the aspect of virtue. Thus, the generally accepted notion of association of virtue with the white race is rejected by the novel by implying that the evil has no connection with skin colour. The reluctance of the white people of the town in accepting the transformed people even as humans shows the evil nature of white race as well. The abusive use of language of a white woman when she encounters Anders at the traffic signal shows the evil nature of the whites. On the other hand, Anders reaction to her abusive language refutes the stereotype of association of the evil with the non-whites.

"…and the woman behind him swerved to overtake, and rolled down her window, and cursed him, furious, cursed good and hard to sped off, and he did nothing, nothing, not shout back, not smile to disarm her, nothing…". (p. 04)

Similarly, the killing of transformed people by the whites and their expulsion from their houses add to confirmation the evil nature and rigidity of the whites (p. 43). Anders is also threatened by the whites to leave the town.

"They spoke, and Anders listened, and in the end the men said he had better be gone when they got back". (p. 44)

The conceptual binary between the east and the west is also broken in the novel by implying that the racist phenomenon does not belong to a specific binary element. For this purpose, Hamid set the novel in the anonymous town. It cannot be deduced whether the town belongs to the east or the west. The anarchy that broke out due to the racial norms in the town cannot be considered as either the Eastern or the Western. So, the deliberate putting of undecidability of the setting of the novel blurs the line between conceptual east and west to indicate that the racial ideology may penetrate in both of the binary elements. Moreover, the binary between us and others is also blurred by the novel, firstly through the names of the characters and secondly, through the progression of the narrative. The name of the main characters of the novel are significant to understand the concept of blurred binaries between the typical terms us and the others. Oona can be considered as the projection of the word "one" meaning unique. On the other hand, Anders can be considered as the projection of word "and" meaning the others. The significance of this use of names of the characters in the novel lies in the concept that the sufferings of the both elements of the binary pair are same so, there is no clear difference between this binary pair. Moreover, the progression of the story reveals that the privileged "us" is not privileged in the typical sense. So, the privileged may also suffer from the norms they set because of their sense of superiority. The novel reveals the reality that the sufferings of transformed people is due to the racial ideologies they set for the existence of their superiority.

Deconstruction of the Implied Themes

The novel *The Last White Man* can be

considered as paradoxical in nature. At apparent level it appears to be rejecting the racist norms and ideologies but at the deeper level it asserts the same ideologies. The narration of the story is evident of assertion of racial norms at various levels. The novel possesses the racial stereotypes rather than their rejection. The story deliberately claims that the anarchy and lawlessness start in the town after the people start getting dark. It seems that the novel tends to indicate that the condition of the town would be peaceful if the adversity of the darkness had not fallen upon it. Moreover, the lack of patience, jealousy, sense of crime, and massive killing of the people also came in the town with the darkness of the people.

At the deeper level seems to clearly demonstrate that there is a vital connection between darkness of skin and the darkness in character. The people in the novel become violent just like the cannibals after getting dark.

"There were flare-ups of violence in town, a brawl here, a shooting there, and the mayor repeatedly called for calm, but militants had begun to appear on the streets, pale skinned militants". (p. 29)

The novel explains the reason of lawlessness through the conception of Oona's mother. She stereotypically indicates that riots and the killing of people is being done by the non-whites.

"… if there was a violence it was because there were paid aggressors on the other side, saboteurs, and that they were trying to kill both our defenders and our people in general, and they were sometimes killing their own kind, to make us look bad……, and the dark people could have their own places, and there they could do their own dark things". (p. 42)

In the same manner, novel puts the idea that the evil characteristics like impatience and envy in the people of the town are followed by the darkness in the skin colour. The humanistic values decrease with the increase of darkness in the skin colour. Moreover, the novel asserts that the people become savages and act like cannibals. This evilness is considered to be the part of darkness in the skin colour.

"…., and the gym was increasingly tense, and men who had known each other for years now acted like they did not know each other, or worse, disliked each other…., there was greater violence, and less caution, and self-induced injuries from excessive loads…". (p. 34)

The representation of the non-whites as criminal and irrational brings may also be seen at other points in the progression of the story. Symbolically, the novel presents the non-whites as thieves. Oona's action of locking her bike to make it safe from theft, after the people getting dark indicates the basic ideology implanted in the novel about the non-whites as thieves or robbers. Through her action the novel promotes the basic stereotypes about the dark races while trying to reject them.

"…, and then he saw Oona approaching and dismounting from the bike and chaining it to the fence, double-chaining it with a thick chain and heavy lock, for bikes were, as always prone to theft…,". (p. 73)

Furthermore, Oona starts to play with her pictures by editing them and making them dark. The result of this editing is the symbolic representation of racist ideology by asserting that the universe is getting dark with the darkness in the skin colour. This representation foregrounds the racist ideology; The ideology that assert that the existence of universe is due to the presence of white race in the world. The novel seems to implant that the world would leave with nothing but chaos if the white race tried to be demolished.

"… she began to play with these pictures, to darken them further, but this darkened everything…." (p. 47)

In the similar manner, the novel implants the racist ideology by making Oona's mother a prototype of the racist ideology. She deliberately represents from her action of stop seeing the television channel in which the black hosts are being presented. Through her action the novel represents that the blacks are not reliable and there must be no room for them to present themselves on the television channels or in radio transmission.

"… and there were dark hosts mixed with the white hosts, and they were awkward with each other…., they discussed the circumstances that were bleak, and one of her favorite radio personalities had changed color, and changed brains it felt like too, and what he said now made no sense, as if he was an imposter, a fraud…" (p. 53)

The title of the novel itself seems contradictory to the implied theme of the novel. The meaning of the title is undecidable between the assertion or rejection of the racist ideology. The title seems to have both of the contradictory meanings. The meaning of the title is undecidable, so, cannot be claimed as either it shows the concept of the end of white supremacy or it asserts the concept that the at last the only existing entity would be the white race.

Conclusion

The study has applied the theory of deconstruction on Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* with an aim to explore the aspects which deconstructs the existing ideologies. The study reveals that the basic ideologies about autonomous nature of human being, the condition less existence of parental love, the geographical existence of race, and the association of the evil with the non-whites, are socially constructed; thus, have no concrete basis. The study suggests that the mankind is not autonomous, the parental love is not condition less, the race is a psychological phenomenon, and the instinct of evilness cannot be associated with merely the non-whites. The study concludes that the crucial circumstances and the protection from adversity are beyond the human control. The parental love is always associated with socially constructed norms. While conforming the societal norms, it cannot be selfless. The race is a complex psychological phenomenon that leads the people to disown one another and make the non- whites the homo- sacers under the socially constructed psychology of people about particular races.

Furthermore, the closer inspection of the text has revealed that paradoxically the novel promotes the racist ideologies and stereotypes while opposing them. The text of the novel is evident of having the stereotypical elements in the narration of the story. The study has highlighted the embedded stereotypes about the non-whites. In the novel, they are presented as violets, savages, and conspirators. Although, at apparent level the novel seems to be sympathizing with the non-whites, yet at the deeper level it seems to be representing the stereotypical existence of concept about the races in the human mind.

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