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Speculative Fiction or Conspicuous Discursive Space: Mohsin Hamid's The Last White Man as Poetics of Disruption

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Abstract

The Last White Man employs speculative fiction techniques to challenge systemic inequality based on racial privileges. A world is imagined by Mohsin Hamid where the white undergo a racial transformation that is as loathsome as Kafkaian metamorphosis into a cockroach. While this speculative aspect describes the racial transformation as fragile because it is something biological, it acts as a tool for social critique exposing the impact that race can have on one's identity particularly in face of the dominant stereotypes about race. Through its form, the novel destabilizes the traditional notions of racial privilege by exposing the socio-psychological and systemic structures based on power dynamics about the privilege of those born white. Simultaneously, it invokes horror by alluding to pandemics or biological conditions that can affect human color through diseases like vitiligo. Discontents of the civilization are conveyed through inexplicable racial metamorphosis that destabilizes the deep-rooted racial hierarchies inviting retrospective reflection about changing a worldview that is based on something fundamentally inherited. In this regard, I study the novel rendering poetics of disruption by becoming a conspicuous discursive space bringing into discussion contemporary social structures that are in need of inversion, an inversion which Hamid renders through the use of speculative techniques.

Keywords: Speculative Fiction, Systemic Inequality, Racial Privileges, Social Critique, Metamorphosis.



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Bodies remain material, but they also become metamorphosed and messy; they hold charged manifestations of personhood, but also leak these conceptions of “person;” they are recognizably human, but also patterned as post human. (Murray, 2022, p.1).

Speculative Fiction

Speculative fiction has the adroitness to disrupt both through form and matter. It foregrounds the contemporary complexities of power dynamics through rendering a unique design that makes readers reimagine and critique simultaneously. Speculative fiction is, in R. B. Gill’s words, “a widely read but ill-defined grouping of works, [that] fits uneasily into our notions of standard literature [...] marked by diversity ... [with] no limit to possible micro subjects and, understandably in such a mixed field, no standard definition” (Gill, 2013, pp.71-72). Speculative fiction, therefore, is a broader category that includes many sub-genres. For example, it encompasses alternate histories that play with the history of the world, apocalyptic fiction, that is based on the end of civilization through catastrophes and modern fantasy fiction, in which the stories are set in our present world but could entail magical realism. It not only includes the subgenre of fantasy but also dark fantasies/gothic fantasies involving vampires, zombies and horror. Similarly, the subgenre of dystopian fiction deals with a futuristic society which is repressive and controlled. On the other hand, cyberpunk fiction deals with the technology cybernetics. The fairy tales showcase folklore characters including fairies, goblins, elves, witches and sorcerers etc. while utopias shape an ideal society. Science fiction projects scientific realism or something that may not happen in reality intertwined with scientific fantasy within this universe but employing futuristic settings with imagined innovations of science and technology.

Speculative Fiction as Disruptive Poetics

As discussed above, speculative fiction is a literary genre that encompasses a body of works that can imagine scenarios and/or worlds that disrupt the existing reality through divergence. One of the key characteristics of speculative works is hypothetical situations, for example, technologies of the future and supernatural, that render alternative realities. By imagining multilayered societies, worlds and futures, speculative fiction has the capacity to subvert existing imaginaries and definitions of borders. Therefore, it has the capacity to become a mirror for contemporary social dynamics. The mirror effect has the capacity to magnify or dwarf the issues of gender, race, politics, and oppression. Through deshaping and reshaping reality, speculative fiction enables readers to reconsider their ideological boundaries. By challenging the stereotypical mindsets, speculative fiction renders freedom to the readers to explore the underlying truths that the existing realities veil. Speculative fiction highlights injustices using allegories and symbols and sometimes even proposes solutions through DE familiarizing the familiar.

The Disruptive Poetics of Hamid’s Speculative Fiction

Mohsin Hamid has employed speculative elements in his novels *Exit West* (2017) and *The Last White Man* (2022). In *Exit West*, he invents magical doors employing magical realism techniques in a war-ridden world to unleash the predicament of displacement through immigration. Through disruption, he highlights issues of identity, race and migration in a globalized world. Therefore, Hamid has emplaced himself into the speculative genre through this novel. In continuation, *The Last White Man* further manifests his disruptive use of speculative devices. While *Exit West* problematizes country-borders like Greece, England and United States, *The Last White Man* excavates the deeply embedded racial segregation made by and for human beings. The novel amplifies the psychological and emotional predicament that one endures in the face of racism and xenophobia. Employing speculative techniques, the displaced reality is sketched to amplify racist

slanders. Ridiculing somebody for belonging to a different race can cause as deep a hurt as slapping somebody on the face. It is through speculative fiction's employment of an imaginative world that a conspicuous discursive space is created to dislodge the clichéd racial biases. Overall, Hamid's use of speculative techniques for his fiction helps him enlighten his readers to reimagine a world through restructuring. He reassures them that the deep-rooted social structures can be dismantled in reality exactly as speculative fiction can dismantle them through make-belief. This intersection between the real and imaginary worlds makes his novel a poetics of disruption. The conspicuous discursive space that Hamid creates in the novel, other than problematizing racial hierarchies, is also a critique of all the capitalist agenda of commercializing the dream of fairness by selling products to reinforce the colonization of mind that dark is inferior and fair superior.

In this way, Hamid problematizes racial imaginaries of the world accentuating the discontent that contemporary civilization creates by rendering privileges to the dominant groups of the global North. The loss of privilege that the marginalized groups of the world, particularly that of the global South experience through the societal roles assigned to them based on their race and color are conspicuously critiqued.

Previous Scholarship on the Novel

Most of the critiques focus on the racial anxieties depicted by the novel. Kapur and Naik (2022) study *The Last White Man* as a representative of a metamorphosis in racial bigotry. They explore a shift in objectification when the metamorphosis occurs as the transformation serves as an agent of change. Ahsen et al. (2022) explore the racial reconfigurations delineated by Hamid with reference to identity. They discuss the consequences of the transformation and its impact on the personal and social life of the characters. Employing Franz Fanon's tropes of identity, culture, race and colonization, the metamorphosis of the characters is placed against the backdrop of the colonization. According to them, the fluidity of racial determination has been established by challenging the racial stereotypes that reign even the contemporary world.

Manzoor & Singh (2023) study the novel as a discourse on racism that upholds identity crisis because of racist stigmatization. They interpret discourse as an ideology that constructs knowledge and meaning. The discourse of racism with reference to the novel is constructed to enslave the darker people who are considered and treated as inferior based on such discursive practices. This discursive dominance makes Anders go through an identity crisis.

Nida et al. (2024) study the novel from the critical race theory perspective. The novel is a counter-narrative to racial hierarchies of the world. The transformation is peculiar because the characters fail to identify themselves as their former selves and are confronted with a threatening other. Thus, the narrative subverts the dominant discourses of whiteness as privilege critiquing racial supremacy that prevails in our world.

There are some studies that interpret the novel from a postcolonial perspective. For example, Rasheed et al. (2024) problematize tropes of race, culture, identity and social positions to study the novel as trauma fiction as the characters are torn between the devil and the deep sea. The protagonist's psychological state is placed against the backdrop of colonial oppression to unveil how contours of colonialism erode the personal and collective identities of individuals even today. On the other hand, Mastoi et al. (2024) employ Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical framework for interpreting the novel as a postcolonial expression of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity. Their study interprets the racism-oriented identity crisis as a colonial legacy which inspires Hamid to probe the ambiguous third space and the in-betweenness of cultural intersections for production of meaning.

John et al. (2023) study the novel from the perspective of transition, transformation and change. They explore how various characters in the novel cope with the change that serves as a force de majeure. They scrutinize the phenomenon of change and conclude that change is inevitable in human life and the strategies to cope with change are of vital significance, particularly for our harmonious existence in multicultural societies.

By focusing on the form of the novel, Amir et al. (2024) explore how Hamid intersects reality with magical realism. They explore the use of magical realism in the novel analyzing character dynamics and thematic aspects. According to them, magical realism has been employed by Hamid to question social norms, power structures, and hierarchies by fusing supernatural and natural elements.

A study by Saad (2023) explores the novel from a phenomenological-hermeneutic point of view by comparing it to Hamid's 2017 novel *Exit West*. The alienated nonwhite protagonist has been presented by Hamid struggling to escape suffering in a predominantly white western society. According to them, the colored man must imagine inanities as the only way to escape his predicament. The issues like racism, migration, escapism, and alienation are explored through narrative hermeneutics.

Another study by Ashraf et al. (2023) explores the postmodern dimension of the novel based on Lyotard's meta and micro narratives. Tropes of Globalization, multiculturalism and pluralism as well as technology, paranoia and fragmentation have been studied from a postmodern perspective.

While most of the studies have explored the novel from racial, post-colonial and postmodern perspectives, Claire Chambers' article problematizes disease in the novel. According to her, the novel engages with a disease like COVID-19 pandemic and, therefore, she labels the novel as a transnational fable. Although pandemic is not mentioned explicitly, there is a dystopian world shaped by the novel. Also, there are references to disease, bereavement and death. The loneliness and social divisions are also like the situations faced during COVID-19. Chambers also contends that Hamid employs absurdism for exploring the racial classifications while the characters lose their whiteness to move into an unspecified ethnicity for the rest of their lives.

Poetics of Disruption

This study employs a literary analysis approach by employing the theoretical framework of poetics of disruption that integrates speculative fiction techniques and social critique. By poetics of disruption, we refer to the speculative techniques employed by the novelist to deconstruct binaries, be they inside the fictive world or outside, in our original world. By disrupting the prevalent narrative techniques, Hamid also dismantles the deep-rooted social ideologies like racism. The boundaries between the real and imaginary are blurred, to blur the black and white racial binaries. Therefore, Hamid creates ambivalence by introducing the brown race which depicts an experience of liminality by those who exist on a threshold between the white and black. The poetics of disruption is studied as an unsettling principle both in the form and the subject matter. The precarious im/balance is subverted through creating a conspicuous discursive space, we contend. The poetics of disruption contributes to subverting the racial binary through verisimilitude of transforming colours. The imaginary space paves way for coexistence which is not rampant in the contemporary world despite all the enlightened discourses of equality and mutual respect in multicultural societies.

In this study, the disruptive techniques employed by the novelist have been explored. How the genre has been appropriated to social critique has been discussed by dissecting the speculative elements one by one, arguing the purpose they serve to convey societal shifts of race, power and

privilege. The speculative fiction with a particular focus on the genre's ability to address social issues particularly in contemporary times has been emplaced in the history of racism, postcolonialism, and globalization. Thus, the dismantling of present, past and future are problematized in this study.

Innovation Through Transformation

The antinormative embodiment of speculative form for *The Last White Man* has been employed to reveal the potential of variation for innovation through transformation. The novel problematizes the in/capacity of the constructs of race, identity, and privilege through creating a poetics of disruption. To embody the novel with the shifting space of complex ideologies, Hamid employs multiple techniques of speculative fiction. For example, the fantasy element is employed to present a transformation in human colour. In this way, the terrains of being, agency, and vulnerability are reshaped. As the transformation is an overnight transformation, it becomes magical realism. The transformation has, simultaneously, been presented as a dystopian shift because the metamorphosis is uncontrolled as well as repressive for the individuals who confront this change. As most of the action takes place in the urban settings, the elements of urban fantasy are also present in the novel. The multiple elements that Hamid employs form a poetics of disruption by creating space for conspicuous discursive debates on race, class and privilege in contemporary times as well as in the past. In the following paragraphs, each speculative element employed by Hamid as a unit of disruptive poetics is discussed at length:

Magical Realism and Fantasy Elements

The Last White Man creatively engages the readers in the fantasy of the inexplicable metamorphosis of a white race into brown skinned individuals. Fantasy as the central speculative element further incorporates magic realism because the fantastical premise of skin color metamorphosis is presented as an overnight shift. This transformation is treated in a matter-of-fact manner by Hamid rendering surrealistic make-belief while accentuating the real-world issues related to racial identity and identification.

Anders, the protagonist of the story gets up one (not fine) morning to find that his skin colour has turned dark. The transformation is not depicted as a gradual shift; it is a sudden overnight metamorphosis. That is what renders it a magic realism touch aligning with the resultant shock Anders goes through. It is difficult for Anders to digest this change, and his perplexity conveyed in the first chapter of the novel sets the stage for the poetics of disruption that Hamid employs. The disruption is going to be large scale because Anders is not the only one to face the predicament, it has to be encountered by his compatriots including those who failed to accommodate Anders' alterity. The deep-rooted constructs of race as a social stigma make the majority relegate a darker/ brown skin. After all the change is enormous:

...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 saw that the face looking back at him was not his at all. (Hamid, 2022, p.9)

It is noteworthy that Anders is many steps darker than he originally was which not only conveys the intensity of the metamorphosis for him but also brings to mind the beauty products' division of skins for buying foundations and powders. This fantastic shift disrupts the stability of the notion of race by emphasizing it as a fluid biological entity. Hamid takes us into a fantastic realm where biological colors can change. The flight of imagination makes readers question what if the blacks can become brown, the browns white and the white browns. After all, how many browns must not have dreamed of becoming white just because they want to be part of the in-group as

diaspora – an in-group that declares itself beautiful and privileged belonging to the powerful hierarchy of the world. It is not only the diaspora with darker skin who want a change of skin under pressure, the color complex (both superior and inferior) is deep-rooted throughout the world.

Dystopian and Post-Colonial Dimensions

While the colored races dream of fair skin, mainly because of the colonization history and its discourses, no white man would ever have dreamed of becoming brown or black. If ever the Freudian unconscious brought the idea to their subconscious, they must have shivered with fright and jerked it right away not wanting to think about it ever again. Therefore, Hamid's imaginary realm with the white turning brown is nightmarish, even dystopian for the white: "Sometimes it felt like the town was a town in mourning, and the country a country in mourning, ... (Hamid, 2022, p.114)". Hamid reterritorializes the whole concept of skin color hyphenating trauma that people go through based on their darker and relegated skin color. In this way, the novel presents a social critique on how one's notion of self-identity is rooted in race and color surrounding ideology of privilege and non-privilege.

The dystopian elements that Hamid employs are reminiscent of the postcolonial history of the globe, especially of the last few centuries. Hamid himself belongs to Pakistan, which is a part of the Indian subcontinent that remained colonized till 1947. The colonization has indelible effects including an everlasting comparison of the brown color of most of the subcontinent people to the fair complexion of the British colonizers. While the concept of the superiority of the white was inculcated by them into the collective unconscious of the Subcontinent inhabitants based on race, Pakistanis still suffer from the inferiority complex of being brown. This complex makes them imagine the white Global North as better than them in skin, at least.

Other than that, Hamid as a diaspora has been a direct victim of this discrimination at the hands of the white during his stay in the USA as he expresses in his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* which was written in the wake of 9/11 foregrounding racial discrimination based on one's skin color. The common American public identified foreigners as allies of those who attacked the twin towers based on their skin color, hence the resultant maltreatment. Therefore, the protagonist of the novel *Changez* encountered racial discrimination. Similarly, *The Last White Man* hyphenates the racial anxieties of the globe through a dystopian framework which is postcolonial in its essence. The sudden metamorphosis of the color white creates unrest and racial anxiety which may result in a dystopian vision. The metamorphosis into a brown man has been equated to the Kafkian cockroach. Society seems to be coping with the changing identities, particularly the ones that they have been undermining throughout their lives as well as disliking themselves as they go through it. Hamid has also experimented with the construct of otherness which is experienced by Anders as an entity against himself. He has become the other not for his white community, but for himself which is shattering his individual consciousness of being white as well as his social acceptability.

While this sort of transformation reflects conspicuous human insensitivity towards those who get victimized by such changes or sudden calamities. Hamid creates a discursive space that makes the readers travel back to colonial times. During the colonial times, there were people with colored skins who became party to the colonizers and oppressed their colonized fellows. However, a colonizer was a colonizer for everybody and by being party to them, the brown color could never win the white status. Similarly, the brown immigrants who live in the USA mistake themselves being equal to the white, never get equal privilege exactly as *Changez* at one point in time considered himself equal to the Americans but was thrown away by the incidents of 9/11 despite

his western education and excellent work performance at his company. The discursive space becomes conspicuous through The Last White Man's poetics of disruption when Anders, the first brown man, is maltreated at the hands of his own people. Also, savagery becomes the talk of the town as it is associated with the darker newbies who seem to resuscitate cannibalism.

The poetics of disruption employ dystopic transformation that nurtures paranoia in everybody when they confront the bleak brown skinned cockroach future. The tensions between early victimized and late victimized makes the novel's discursive space conspicuous by criticizing how human beings react in face of a calamity. Therefore, the dystopic world that Hamid creates is a world with disrupted order, no longer stable, also reflecting the disrupted unity amongst the white as a superior race.

Biological Terror and Global Apocalypse

The disruptive poetics of the novel create a transformation that is apparently mysterious but widely uncontrollable like the COVID 19 pandemic. Therefore, it has the apocalyptic vibes which the coronavirus created, the time when Hamid was writing the novel. The changing of skin color could be a biological disorder, the cause of which, like vitiligo, could be body's autoimmune system attacking back. Exactly as the coronavirus caused biological death and disease turning the world into a dystopia because the whole world was at risk, brownness is a disease out of control. The color transformation spreads all around society, and everybody is condemned to face it. The speculative society that Hamid creates is the one where our society's autoimmune system attacks back, we contend.

Coronavirus initially instilled a fear of those who were infected so much so that burial rights were not done. Similarly, an aversion towards browned people is shown by the society although it is because of racial infection. Next apt comparison is the isolation that the Corona patients were condemned too, so are the brownness infected, although once again the cause is racial stigma. The isolation of those who got infected reflects the binary of superiority and inferiority which Hamid disrupts through the speculative technique. Those who got brown earlier were discriminated by the ones who were still white but were fated to be infected by the brownness like coronavirus. Therefore, brownness is an equalizer in the novel exactly like the uncanny disease was, which, however, was not devoid of biological conspiracy theories. The brownness also creates a discursive space that is fraught with bioterror.

Urban Fantasy Elements

Another significant disruptive aspect of the novel's poetics is the emplacement of fantasy elements in urban settings like our contemporary times. While the bodies transform, the affiliations and the landscape remain the same. The novel is set in an unnamed city but the very unnamings of the city opens up a global discursive space. The racial shift in the novel spreads beyond the immediate surroundings engulfing the world as a virus. Thus, the transformation is made conspicuous by not keeping it confined to any one place rather the whole world becomes the theatrical space for the brown spectrum. Speculative fiction presents the transformations as global by reflecting the interconnectedness of people irrespective of their nationality. Anders' struggle after his color-change makes him navigate through personal and professional crisis. Thus, the novel offers a mindscape of toppled hierarchies because the brownness has not brought any physical pain to the affectees.

Hamid renders a global touch by making his poetics encompass the latest technologies like the internet and online connectivity across countries. The global spread of brownness altering identities further problematizes the racial politics of the globe by being relatable to the globalized

individuals of our contemporary times instead of being a specific text for any place, nationality or culture. By including this global spread, Hamid positions *The Last White Man* as a critique on alterity, because race and identity are not confined to national borders. The speculative element, racial transformation – the new world order, becomes a tool to explore how globalization challenges existing social orders, including how race is experienced across different cultures and nations.

Another aspect of urban fantasy is paranormal romance. Although there is not explicit paranormal romance in the novel, the intimate scenes between Anders and Oona have been rendered a paranormal touch. Exactly as Anders finds his reflection as other, the other is paranormal for Oona who is still courteous towards Anders when they are intimate. Like urban fantasy, Hamid incorporates a romantic storyline but disrupts both the form and the social realities. Therefore, most of the scenes of intimacy between them reveal Oona's struggle to overcome discomfort of developing an undefinable relationship.

Hamid employs the speculative form for disrupting the racial norms of our times. Through Anders, Hamid addresses the discomfort that a brown man can feel in face of the majority white men in a globalized world especially in countries that are labelled as multicultural places upholding equality for all. This is expressed by sketching the enormity of dislike for the other:

He wanted to kill the colored 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. (Hamid, 2022, p. 10)

The metamorphosis of Anders becomes a powerful metaphor for the loss of previous privilege and discomfort of becoming something new which results in redefining oneself. The journey of redefining oneself is not an easy journey as problematized by Hamid in this novel. This journey of redefining is mostly faced by the diaspora who leave their homeland for settling in host countries. It is not the economic aspect that makes the resettlement difficult but the identity that one is associated with that makes existence cumbersome. Hamid creates a poetics of disruption by making readers question: what if the racial identities become fluid; what if the privileged ideologies framework of the world becomes destabilized; what if the superiority-inferiority binary becomes ambivalent; what if one becomes superior based on one's performance and work, and not on the basis of one's color or appearance? This is how the technique of speculative fiction helps question the stability and fairness of the systems that make racial distinctions supersede individual qualities. The speculative rupture takes the reader into a realm where they, for a moment, imagine themselves getting up in the morning with a different color. Imagine how would a brown man conceive getting up in the morning as a white man - he would be happy, but what about a white man imagining turning dark the next morning - he would definitely not be happy and that renders a poetics of disruption to the novel. Simultaneously, the unleashing of a whole new category of imaginaries about racial identities fabricates conspicuous discursive space. This is how the arbitrariness of the racially constructed imaginaries is countered by Hamid through employing speculative techniques.

By the end of the novel, everybody has accepted the change because life has the capacity to render humans with resilience as Ahsen et al. (2022) interpret coping with change. Hamid presents a world where normalcy is restored after all the white wake up to explore the darkening of their skins. In this way, the speculative trajectory of hope is emplaced. What is problematized with the

first brown man is resolved with the death of the last white man. Brownness is normalized with Anders and Oona's grown-up daughter. While metamorphosis seems to be fantastical as premised to explore the racial determinants of superiority as the basis of systemic inequalities, biologically it is not an impossible phenomenon exactly as vitiligo can change the color of skin. Therefore, biological determinism is also disrupted to create an intersection of speculative fiction and sociopolitical dynamics of the contemporary world. No wonder, the speculative sketch of future societies is rendered wherein bodies and their meanings may be unruly.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored how *The Last White Man* emplaces itself in the broader speculative tradition of storytelling by imbibing elements like displacement, disfiguration and dream-like dystopian framework and disrupts existing realities through speculative techniques like magical realism and urban fantasy. The racial norms envisioned from a globalized perspective are subverted to pave way for transformation of societal norms based on racial privilege through a poetics of disruption. It is concluded that Hamid uses speculative fiction to address deep societal issues surrounding race, identity, and privilege. Through the fantastical premise of people's skin colour changing overnight, Hamid offers a pinching critique of the social structures that define race and the experiences of those who are subjected to these constructs. By combining fantasy, magical realism and dystopian elements, the theme of racial determinants in globalized times, Hamid positions himself within the speculative literary tradition as an author who employs the genre to provoke reflection on contemporary social issues, challenging readers to question the nature of race and the systems that uphold it.

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