

Review: The Last White Man by Mohsin Hamid

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A novella about more than race relations, this is also a tender love story and an examination of parent-child relationships



Black lives matter: Protesters in Houston, Texas, USA, rally against the murder of George Floyd in this picture dated June 2, 2020. (Adrees Latif/REUTERS)

ByMaaz Bin Bilal

“One morning Anders, a white man, woke up to find he had turned a deep and undeniable brown” — Mohsin Hamid’s novel opens with a Kafkaesque overture, where a white man transforms, not into a giant bug as in *Metamorphoses*, but to a deep brown. Like Kafka’s giant bug that is the new Gregor Samsa, the first thoughts of Anders (literally man/-ly) include not great panic, but, after a passing murderous rage, he works through the problem of going to work — he calls in sick.

As is quite typical of Hamid, this short novel too gives us no place names. Still, it is clearly set in the USA, with a background of Black Lives Matter, and as Hamid has owned up in interviews to Sky News and The Observer, the novel is his response to changed race relations he faced in America following 9/11. *The Last White Man* is a thought experiment in how white people may react if and when they become the other. Because unlike *Metamorphoses*, but like Saramago’s *Blindness*, the change is restricted not just to Anders but gradually envelops all white citizens. Thus, we are witness to how the city, if not the country, responds to losing its white superiority.

Initially the responses are muted, although Anders (man — Everyman?) does have an urge to kill his changed self. But he, and later others like him, grows to sympathise with other coloured people. At the gym Anders works at, the only previously coloured person was the janitor, often ignored by all the whites. Anders, having changed colour himself, learns to look at him and himself newly following his transformation. There is strong materialistic insight offered by Hamid when Anders, in his newfound sympathy, offers to train the janitor, but all that the janitor says he wants is more pay.

The novella works like a parable — ‘man’ finding his way of being across racial lines of colour. Unlike *Metamorphoses*, the transformation is not bestial. Yet, it is different enough to provoke — it is a problem with the chauvinistic whites; it is also possibly the ultimate solution. Racial hybridity — brownness — takes over. And it is here that, unlike *Metamorphoses*, *The Last White Man* is not a dystopian novel but a thought-provoking read with a utopian ending.

But things are not hunky dory throughout. There is a whole period when the white militia are out taking control, killing and forcing migrations, paranoid as they are of the spiralling growth in the number of brown faces, of being left a minority and so on. A tone and behaviour that is all too familiar with fascists not just in the US but also closer home. Yet, complete hybridity, in this case presented as all people becoming brown, seems almost like the Ambedkarite solution.

The novella is about more than race relations. It is also a tender love story, and an examination of parent-child relationships. In times of anarchy, reduced to staying indoors, in hiding, having tentative lovers — Anders and his childhood mate, Oona — confirm their feelings for each other. This is a gradual process surpassing the initial state of shock at the turn of events, of discovering the true selves of each other beyond physical looks (as the change of colour also seems to be accompanied by change of features), and finding each other’s humanity.

Anders’s retired working class, gun-wielding father, suffering from cancer, accepts his son’s predicament calmly, and offers him sanctuary and protection. Here, Hamid explores father-son relations and an attempt at dying with grace with great empathy. Oona’s fraught relationship with her mother forms the other axis, as the mother reacts in a far-more reactionary manner, chasing up right wing forums online, believing in a conspiracy against white people. There is also the issue of drugs and suicide in the family background.



Author Mohsin Hamid (CAMERA PRESS/Jillian Edelstein)

And yet, most of the characters come out better at the end. The novella progresses at a moderate pace towards what seems like a better future, providing hope that is much needed in our dire times.

Hamid has always been formalistically inventive. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* gave us a gripping dramatic monologue between nameless characters in a nameless city, while the Booker-shortlisted *Exit West* used the magical trope of portals for migrant travel. *The Last White Man*, a tight novel with long sentences that gives us an insightful view of the potential of multiculturalism against a racist society, gestures towards peace.

I remain curious particularly of white responses to the novel, and I have read certain reviews that call it insipid and comment that it provides no reason for the racial transformations. Should this even be a question?

Maaz Bin Bilal is a poet, translator, and cultural critic. He teaches literary studies at Jindal Global University.

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