

Book Review

Hamid, Mohsin. *The Last White Man*

Riverhead Books, 2022, pp. 192.

Essentially focused on the phenomenon of “race”, Mohsin Hamid’s *The Last White Man* (2022) also deals with human relationships, loss, love, connection, and identity. Peeling away our outer layers, Hamid exposes our inner selves grounded in bigotry as the novel seeks to envision a new world of self-identification and empathy. *The Last White Man* illustrates the social, racial, and political injustice that reverberates in American society and the characters’ journeys of survival when confronted with the former. One devastating morning, Anders finds himself to be a stranger to himself when he discovers that his white skin turned dark overnight. First, he tries to confirm his transformation by checking himself again and again in his cellphone and the mirror; however, once certain about the change, he experiences murderous rage at the ultimate robbery of his whiteness and the infliction of the crime. Anders apprises Oona, a friend and lover, who is also “taken aback” at first, “not merely because he was darker, but because he was no longer recognizably himself, beyond being the same rough size and shape”. The same happens across the region as they witness the daunting upending of a conventional system that is challenged with people becoming undeniably brown. Racist people develop into self-racists, and race becomes only a matter of color difference. Oona, Oona’s mother, and all unknown individuals become brown with only one exception, that is, Ander’s father who dies soon; yet the relationship between them excavates the reality of racial prejudice.

An allegorical love story of Anders and Oona in an unknown place like Hamid’s *Exit West*, *The Last White Man* surpasses the magical realism of the previous work. In his latest novel, the magical doorways of the last one work in the form of doorways of the minds of people who see race as something essential and

Book Review

important. Characters' mental pathways show that race conditions Americans' behavior toward others and their conceptions of themselves. The characters of this short novella pass through a rigorous process of "gazing", "wondering", and "realizing" to mutate into a form that corresponds not only to their physical alteration but also a thought-provoking metamorphic change. People who turn brown including Anders suffer from violence, threats, and ostracization on the part of the community and often quarantine themselves indoors because agitating disruption prevails outside on the streets. The violence is about the segregation of black people to make life comfortable and livable for the remaining white people.

However, things start to change after more and more people transform from white to black. Oona's description of the beauty of the clerk, a friend to her brother, as a charming man possessing brown eyes and brown hands reveals her evolution from a white girl reluctant to accept Anders as a brown person. Accepting the change eventually, Oona and Anders develop a deep bond, so the relationship between them acquires a peculiar shade of acceptance in a transfigured situation, modified from white to black. Hamid narrates this short novel using extraordinarily long sentences, clauses running over several pages, and multiple commas instead of periods, that give a sense of continuity to the narrative. Towards the end of the novel, "[w]hile memories of whiteness receded, memories of whiteness lingered too"; characters' lives continue in the direction where humanity eventually might lead us. In an interview with Tim Adams, Hamid noted, "when the political pollen gets high, I am going to sneeze"; this novel is thus a reaction to the violent persistence of systemic racism in the twenty-first century.

Nayab Sadiq