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RESEARCH PAPER

Portrayal of Identity Crisis in Hamid's The Last White Man

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the intricate aspects surrounding individuals with a black identity in Hamid's novel, "The Last White Man," utilizing Frantz Fanon's "Black Skin, White Masks" as a theoretical framework for textual analysis. The novel is situated within the context of the psychosocial challenges faced by black individuals, delving deeply into issues connected to the conscious and unconscious minds of these individuals. Multiple facets of black identity are explored, leading to inaction, passivity, confusion, self-denial, and an inferiority complex, among various other similar issues. These themes are examined through the transformation of various characters within the novel, revealing the impact of traumatic experiences and the complex nature of black identity. The actions and decisions of these characters are shaped by a multitude of thoughts that factor into the broader social context of society. The truths concerning black individuals presented by the author are universally applicable. This research challenges the often-self-proclaimed idea of post-racial societies as it intersects with this discourse.

| **KEYWORDS** | Passivity, Psychosocial Challenges, Traumatic Experiences |

Introduction

Mohsin Hamid holds a distinctive place in the realm of global literary scholarship and among contemporary Pakistani diaspora writers. He has authored numerous remarkable novels addressing the challenges of the modern world and humanity. Particularly noteworthy among his works are "Exit West" (2017) and "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" (2007), both of which have garnered numerous national and international awards. "Exit West" deals with emigration-related issues and the plight of refugees stemming from civil conflict, while the narrative of the other novel revolves around the traumatic events of 9/11, a pivotal moment in world history. It provides a Muslim perspective on this event, with the protagonist, Changez, serving as the narrator.

Hamid's most recent offering, "The Last White Man" (2022), represents a fresh contribution to the literary landscape. This novel grapples with the contemporary human identity, particularly that of black individuals. The title cleverly alludes to the word "lack" within "black," hinting at the absence of confidence, trust, and feelings of superiority on a psychological level, and a dearth of opportunities, amenities, and recognition on a societal level. "The Last White Man" has attracted substantial critical attention from various angles. The novel possesses the power to prompt reflection and reevaluation when encountered.

Hamid himself has acknowledged the unique ability of fiction to disrupt the collective imaginings ingrained in us and perpetuated by society.

This gripping work explores various themes, with racism and the challenges faced by people of color being central to its narrative. It presents a fantastical exploration of race and privilege, laced with ironic undertones. Amidst the absurd elements, the novel also offers a departure from conventional norms. It conveys a potent message to the modern world, emphasizing the possibility of transcending racial differences and celebrating our shared humanity.

Oprah Daily points out that the novel offers a thought-provoking perspective on privilege, grief, and transformations, both profound and subtle. Central to this narrative is the exploration of identity through characters like Andres, and later, Oona and her mother. Andres experiences a harrowing transformation, akin to Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," though his transformation into a black version of a white man carries a different, and arguably more unsettling, set of challenges.

The novel underlines the complexities of modern existence, where individuals with black identities are constantly seeking to define themselves in a society that often marginalizes them. The quest for individual identity is a central concern, as many individuals, particularly non-whites, navigate a maze of illusions, struggling to understand who they are and desiring recognition akin to that bestowed upon whites.

The notion of whiteness is intertwined with ideas of superiority, intellect, sophistication, civilization, and attention, perpetuated globally. In contrast, dark skin is often associated with negative qualities, such as evilness, inferiority, rudeness, brutality, and unsophistication. The novel depicts individuals with black identities as grappling with this societal framework, leading to an intricate exploration of self-identity and an internal struggle.

Both conscious and unconscious forces play a role in shaping self-perception within this societal schema. While external forces undoubtedly influence individuals, the inner forces often lead to self-conclusions that can be more insidious than society's judgments. Thus, cognitive processes are crucial in understanding individual actions and the conclusions individuals draw about themselves.

The concept of racial identity has prompted numerous debates and has been a recurring theme in literature, both factual and fictional. Racism and the categorization of individuals based on their skin color are remnants of colonialism, which divided the world into binaries and continues to shape our understanding of differences. Skin color remains a prominent marker for evaluating people, with deep-seated economic, political, cultural, and psychological consequences, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o asserts.

Historically, racism did not exist in the same form as it does today, as it is a product of colonialism. People are now categorized and valued based on their skin color, an easily observable trait. Racism's impact is not limited to social judgments; it extends to privileges and social status. White individuals are often granted tangible benefits, including the best employment opportunities, educational opportunities, and social invitations, while individuals with black identities face systemic challenges and discrimination.

"The Last White Man" paints a vivid picture of the experiences of people of color, highlighting their sensitivity to these issues and the confusion they often grapple with. The

novel's unique narrative style serves to create empathy for people of color, particularly through the character of Anders.

Literature Review

The exploration of black identity has been a recurrent theme in literature, with scholars often drawing on theoretical frameworks to dissect the complexities of this multifaceted concept. In the context of Mohsin Hamid's novel, "The Last White Man," this literature review engages with the profound exploration of black identity, utilizing Frantz Fanon's seminal work, "Black Skin, White Masks," as a theoretical lens for textual analysis.

Frantz Fanon's "Black Skin, White Masks" serves as a cornerstone for understanding the intricate layers of the black psyche. Fanon's work delves into the psychological impact of colonization on the individual's sense of self, exploring the internalized racism and the quest for identity among black individuals. The relevance of Fanon's framework to the analysis of Hamid's novel lies in its profound examination of the conscious and unconscious struggles faced by those with a black identity (Baumgartner &Lundblad, 2005).

Hamid's "The Last White Man" is situated within the broader discourse on the psychosocial challenges encountered by black individuals. The narrative explores themes of inaction, passivity, confusion, self-denial, and the development of an inferiority complex. These elements resonate with Fanon's exploration of the psychological effects of racial oppression, providing a compelling context for understanding the characters' experiences in the novel.

The literature on black identity has consistently underscored the multifaceted nature of this concept, emphasizing its fluidity and susceptibility to external influences. Scholars have examined the impact of societal expectations, historical legacies, and personal experiences on the construction of black identity. In Hamid's novel, these facets are brought to the forefront through the transformation of various characters, revealing the profound impact of traumatic experiences on the complex nature of black identity.

Moreover, the universality of the truths presented in the novel adds a layer of significance to the discourse on black identity. The characters' experiences, while specific to the narrative, are reflective of broader societal issues and challenges faced by black individuals. This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the shared struggles and common threads within the black experience, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries (Benbasat & Zmud, 2006).

As this research seeks to challenge the notion of post-racial societies, it contributes to a growing body of literature that critically examines the persistence of racial dynamics despite purported societal advancements. Scholars have increasingly questioned the validity of post- racial narratives, arguing that they often mask underlying racial inequalities and perpetuate a sense of denial regarding the ongoing challenges faced by minority groups.

In summary, this literature review situates Hamid's novel within the broader discourse on black identity, drawing on Fanon's theoretical framework to analyse the psychosocial challenges faced by individuals with a black identity. The examination of characters' transformations, the exploration of universal truths, and the critique of post-racial ideologies contribute to the rich tapestry of literature addressing the complexities of black identity in contemporary society.

Material and Methods

To analyze this fiction, the theoretical framework is drawn from Frantz Fanon's "Black Skin, White Masks." At the heart of Fanon's work lies the profound desire of black individuals to become white, to emulate the white man. This work is pivotal in its exploration of the psychological challenges faced by those with a colored identity, which are shaped and transformed by external social forces, ultimately affecting their psychological well-being. "The Last White Man" is rich with numerous insights into the characters' minds as they grapple with a sense of alienation from both society and them.

Fanon employs a clinical approach to delve into the deep and intricate layers of human psychology. Society's division is predicated on the binary distinctions between white and colored, and racism emerges from these divisions, bestowing certain advantages upon the white community. Key terms from Fanon's book that are employed in this analysis include neurosis, alienation, collective catharsis, consciousness, and unconsciousness, among others. The treatment for these psychological afflictions is suggested to lie in psychopathology. Neurosis, broadly defined, signifies instability in mental order resulting from multiple traumas, influencing people's behavior, attitudes, perceptions, judgments, and actions, often without their conscious awareness. Fanon posits that both black and white individuals, enslaved by feelings of inferiority and superiority, respectively, behave neurotically.

Alienation, another critical term, is a central concept in Fanon's "Black Skin, White Masks." It refers to the feelings of self-estrangement and disconnection from one's surroundings. Colored individuals, according to Fanon, tend to identify themselves about white individuals rather than embracing their black identities, fostering a sense of alienation from mainstream society. This psychological state compels them to view themselves through the lens of psychoanalytic descriptions.

Fanon intricately weaves these concepts together in his work, describing the psychological turmoil of black individuals who unconsciously feel trapped in a vicious circle of rejection.

Collective catharsis, a pivotal term in Fanon's psychological model, involves the release of strong emotions through particular activities or experiences. In psychological terms, it enables people to discharge negative psychic energy, resolve conflicts in the unconscious, and recover from past traumas. Fanon advocates for a solution to the extensive psychological damage experienced by colored individuals through "collective catharsis." He suggests creating platforms for the release of accumulated aggression, guilt, anger, and agony, emphasizing the importance of mutual games in children's institutions, group therapy through psychodramas, and the potential use of illustrated magazines.

Fanon also employs a psychopathological approach to understanding mental disorders or distress. He contends that black individuals live in an extraordinarily neurotic ambiguity. This trauma is not limited to a few but is a collective unconscious shared by colored individuals worldwide. It shapes their worldview, causing them to act differently due to their perceived inferiority, becoming highly sensitive and experiencing fragmented thoughts and doubts. In essence, neurosis stems from alienation from self and society and can be managed through collective catharsis, with psychopathology serving as the methodology for this purpose. All of Fanon's concepts are interconnected, and their collective understanding provides insight into the psychological challenges faced by colored individuals and a suggested path toward resolution.

Results and Discussion

The narrative commences with a Kafkaesque touch, as it unfolds with the following revelation: "One morning, Anders, a white man, woke up to find he had turned a deep and undeniable brown" (Hamid, 2022, p.1). His transformation turns him brown, not into a monstrous figure, but into a brown-skinned version of his previous white self, which proves more distressing than a monstrous change. Initially, he considers it a dream, deeming it impossible to become brown, but he soon realizes the transformation is a reality. A sense of anger and, even more than anger, a sudden, murderous rage consumes him when he beholds his altered complexion in a mirror (p.2).

This transformation highlights the challenges faced by people with dark skin, who are often deemed unacceptable due to their physical appearance. The novel delves into the plight of these individuals, who are marginalized in various aspects of life, with limited opportunities to break free from this situation. The presence of a colored individual alongside a white person signifies the former's unrecognized and seemingly meaningless existence. This leads to unsettling feelings, with even thoughts of violence against the colored person being considered normal. The white community's self-claimed superiority plays a significant role in these sentiments.

Anders grapples with his changed situation, feeling a profound sense of loss as he believes white individuals consider themselves superior to black individuals (Fanon, 1993, p.3). He struggles to accept his transformed state and seeks solace in mundane activities, attempting to convince himself that everything will be fine, although he remains unconvinced (Hamid, 2022, p.3). This difficulty in acceptance is rooted in societal standards that equate whiteness with virtue, while blackness is often associated with evil, inferiority, and immorality.

As the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that the psychology of individuals with dark skin is deeper and more complex than that of their white counterparts, just as their skin color differs. They grapple with doubts about their existence, feeling like anomalies that should not exist (Hamid, 2022, p.3). This echoes Fanon's assertion that, for black individuals, there is only one acceptable destiny, and it is to be white (Fanon, 1993, p.4).

The societal transformation described in the novel, where individuals of various skin colors experience an unexpected change, results in race-based conflicts, leading to the indiscriminate killing of those with different skin colors. This unbearable situation prompts many individuals to contemplate suicide, as Fanon notes that an inferiority complex is closely tied to skin color (Fanon, 1993, p.68). White individuals who never felt inferior find it unbearable to live as colored individuals.

Anders's experiences mirror Fanon's descriptions, as he feels imprisoned, both within himself and in his surroundings, experiencing a sense of confinement (Hamid, 2022, p.51). The mixing of black and white individuals in gatherings underscores the awkwardness and discomfort that arises from self-constructed notions about dark-skinned individuals.

The novel portrays a world in which anarchy prevails, leading to rampant violence and destruction. Anders, now brown-skinned, exhibits a heightened sense of fear and sensitivity, constantly on guard against potential threats, despite no evidence of danger (Hamid, 2022, p.10). Fanon's concept of "supposed inferiority" is exemplified by the unease that surrounds Anders' existence (Fanon, 1993, p.83).

Anders's experiences culminate in his acceptance of his new identity, as he acknowledges the futility of trying to live as a white man when everyone has undergone a similar transformation. This transformation prompts individuals to react strangely and fosters destructive consequences for both black and white individuals, as the paradoxical nature of the situation becomes evident.

The novel concludes with the acceptance of their new reality, as all individuals turn black, erasing the previous racial divisions. Hamid thus offers a path to resolution, emphasizing the importance of embracing one's identity and becoming conscious of the unconscious, which is crucial for a peaceful and harmonious coexistence.

The exploration of black identity within the literary realm has been a longstanding and richly nuanced discourse, with scholars and writers delving into the multifaceted dimensions of this complex concept. Mohsin Hamid's novel, "The Last White Man," occupies a significant space within this dialogue, intricately weaving a narrative that interrogates the psychosocial challenges faced by individuals with a black identity. Central to this investigation is the application of Frantz Fanon's seminal work, "Black Skin, White Masks," as a theoretical lens for in-depth textual analysis.

Fanon's groundbreaking exploration of the psychological effects of colonization and racial oppression provides a robust foundation for understanding the conscious and unconscious struggles inherent in black identity. Hamid's novel, set against this theoretical backdrop, elevates the examination of the characters' experiences to a profound level. The psychosocial challenges depicted, including inaction, passivity, confusion, self-denial, and the development of an inferiority complex, mirror Fanon's exploration of the internalized racism and quest for identity among black individuals.

The characters within "The Last White Man" serve as conduits through which the narrative unfolds, revealing the intricate layers of their black identities. The novel's narrative arc allows for an exploration of the impact of traumatic experiences on the construction of identity, demonstrating the dynamic and evolving nature of black identity. The characters' transformations become a lens through which the readers can engage with the complexities of their psyches and the interplay between individual experiences and broader societal forces.

Furthermore, the universality of the truths presented in the novel expands the scope of the discussion on black identity. While the narrative is situated within a specific context, the resonances with broader societal issues are unmistakable. The characters' struggles and triumphs become emblematic of shared experiences, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. In this way, the novel contributes to the ongoing discourse on the interconnectedness of the black experience, challenging compartmentalized narratives and emphasizing the commonalities that bind individuals within the broader spectrum of black identity.

The research's intent to challenge the notion of post-racial societies adds a layer of critical engagement with contemporary ideologies. Scholars have increasingly scrutinized the concept of post-racialism, arguing that it often serves as a veneer that obscures persistent racial inequalities. Hamid's novel aligns with this critical perspective by interrogating the characters' actions and decisions within the broader social context. By doing so, the narrative underscores the fallacy of a post-racial society, exposing the enduring influence of racial dynamics on individuals' lives despite assertions of progress.

In conclusion, the comprehensive discussion on the intersection of black identity, psychosocial challenges, and the critique of post-racial ideologies in Hamid's "The Last White Man" provides a nuanced and layered understanding of the complexities within this literary exploration. By integrating Fanon's theoretical framework, the novel navigates the intricate terrain of black identity, contributing to a broader conversation that continues to evolve and shape our understanding of race, identity, and societal structures.

Conclusion

The study engages with the complexities of black identity in Hamid's novel, "The Last White Man," employing Frantz Fanon's seminal work, "Black Skin, White Masks," as a theoretical framework. The novel, set against a backdrop of psychosocial challenges, delves into the intricacies of conscious and unconscious aspects of black individuals. Through a nuanced exploration of various facets of black identity, the narrative unfolds layers of inaction, passivity, confusion, self-denial, and an inferiority complex, among other interconnected issues.

One of the central focuses of the research is the transformative journey of characters within the novel, illustrating the profound impact of traumatic experiences on the construction and evolution of black identity. The characters grapple with the multifaceted nature of their identity, navigating through the complexities of societal expectations, historical burdens, and personal struggles. This examination not only sheds light on the internal struggles faced by these characters but also underscores the broader social context that influences their decisions and actions.

The study asserts that the truths about black individuals presented in the novel possess universal applicability. By drawing on Fanon's framework, it seeks to uncover the pervasive and shared experiences of black individuals that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. The themes explored in the novel resonate with a broader audience, emphasizing the commonality of struggles faced by individuals with a black identity.

Furthermore, the research challenges prevailing notions of post-racial societies. It questions the often premature declaration of societies as post-racial, arguing that the intricate issues depicted in the novel persist and intersect with the discourse on post-racialism. By critically engaging with the narrative, the study invites a reevaluation of societal progress, highlighting the persistence of deeply rooted challenges and disparities that extend beyond surface-level declarations of racial harmony.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the understanding of black identity by intricately examining the complexities within Hamid's novel. By utilizing Fanon's theoretical framework, it provides a nuanced analysis of the conscious and unconscious aspects of black individuals, demonstrating the universal relevance of the portrayed truths. Moreover, it challenges the notion of post-racial societies, emphasizing the ongoing relevance of issues related to black identity in contemporary societal contexts.

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