

## Negotiating Transition, Transformation, And Change In Mohsin Hamid's The Last White Man

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### Abstract

Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* (2020) is a short novel that deals with the theme of human reactions to drastic and inevitable change. This study endeavors to examine how various characters in the novel respond to and cope with change that manifests itself as a force de majeure. The aim is to scrutinize how the assessments of notable theorists can be shaped into a framework to be used by researchers and policymakers in dealing with the phenomenon of change in society. To this end, two pivotal works are utilized to assemble a theoretical framework. These are *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems* (2002), edited by Lance H. Gunderson & C. S. Holling, and *Leading Change* (1996) by John P. Kotter. The former advances perspectives on the phenomenon of change while the latter explains why and how transition, transformation, and change can be dealt with so as to make them constructive for society. This study concludes that researchers and scholars, as architects of public opinion, can direct their energies toward developing theories that offer strategies of preparation, acceptance, and resilience in the face of inevitable changes that are an ongoing process in human life. Such strategies are of vital significance to achieve harmony in multicultural demographic profiles on a global stage where the rate of change has gone far above what Aldous Huxley (1959) once referred to as a "chronic state of revolution".

Keywords: change, transition, transformation, metamorphosis,  
panarchy, fable.

### Introduction

It is quite usual for readers of Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* (2020) to draw parallels with Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915). However, such observations tend to be spontaneous rather than well-considered because anything beyond a cursory look at both works reveals that the latter deals with a drastic physical change in only one character which results in transition and transformation in him and in a very limited family circle. The thrust of the story, however figurative, is only in the direction of personal perceptions and interpersonal relationships within one family. On the other hand, *The Last White Man* begins virtually in the same fashion but almost immediately expands its domain to socio-cultural and even political and numinous levels. As such, the change in skin color that comes over almost all the people in the novel's universe becomes a metaphor for inevitable transition, transformation, and change. The perception of any racial angle because of the reference to the change in Anders' skin color is also severely limited in scope as the writer, despite the choice of title, does not use the word "black" as a binary opposite of "white" for the skin color of any character in the novel. Actually, the word "black" is used precisely once in the text—with reference to the black iron gym where Anders works. It must also be pointed out that the term "African American" or any of its variants is never used. In fact, the whole premise of this study rests on the postulate that Mohsin Hamid has scrupulously avoided setting his narrative in any recognizable ethnicity or country. Even the impression that the territory appears to be an English-speaking one is based merely on the fact that the narration is in the English language. Therefore, the flow of this study moves at the level of transition, transformation, change, and metamorphosis without being inclined toward any racist, nationalistic, or ideological considerations. Transition, transformation, change, and metamorphosis are all terms that describe how things, conditions, and even people can change over time. Each of these concepts has its own set of characteristics and implications and understanding them can prove to be edifying in the pursuit of self-actualization.

### **Transition**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "transition" in sense 1 as:

- a. a change or shift from one state, subject, place, etc. to another.
  - b. a period or phase in which such a change or shift is happening.
- (Transition Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Transition refers to a process of moving from one state or condition to another. This can be a gradual or abrupt process involving a variety of different factors. Transitions can be challenging because they

involve adapting to new circumstances and letting go of old ones. However, they can also be opportunities for growth and learning. In *The Last White Man*, transition takes place on personal, communal, and cultural levels. These different transitions have different but interlinked timelines which suggest themes in a composition or motifs in a design.

### **Transformation**

Transformation, on the other hand, refers to a more profound and fundamental change. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “transform” in sense 1 as:

- a. to change in composition or structure.
- b. to change the outward form or appearance of.
- c. to change in character or condition.

(Transforming Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

When something or someone undergoes a transformation, some kind of fundamental alteration is involved. This might be a change in identity, purpose, or perspective. Where people are concerned, they can undergo transformations when they experience profound spiritual or psychological shifts. It is important to note that this process may entail a modicum of restructuring in a person’s physical form and behavior. Inevitably, transition results in a transformation that Mohsin Hamid depicts on many levels and in many domains in *The Last White Man*.

### **Change**

Change is a more general term that includes both transition and transformation. It refers to any change or modification to the current state of affairs. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “change” in sense 1 as:

- a. to make different in some particular.
- b. to make radically different.
- c. to give a different position, course, or direction to.

(Change Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Change can be positive or negative, intentional, or unintentional, slow, or fast. People may experience changes in their relationships, health, or financial circumstances on a personal level. Since “change” is a general term, it would be redundant to state that, considering the foregoing discussion about transition and transformation, *The Last White Man* is all about change.

### **Metamorphosis**

Metamorphosis is a type of transformation characterized by a dramatic physical change. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “metamorphosis” in sense 1 as:

- a. change of physical form, structure, or substance especially by supernatural means.
- b. a striking alteration in appearance, character, or circumstances.

(Metamorphosis Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

This term is frequently used to describe how insects and other animals undergo radical physical transformations. This process entails a complete reorganization of the organism's physical form and behavior. Since almost all the people in *The Last White Man* undergo a radical change in the color of their skin, the term “metamorphosis” can undoubtedly be applied to this transformation. More significantly, the drastic change in attitudes seen in the characters, especially those of Anders and Oona, indicate a metamorphosis above and beyond any routine dictionary definition.

Consequently, transition, transformation, change, and metamorphosis are all important concepts that come under the rubric of “change” and constitute the thematic motherlode of *The Last White Man*. As such, these concepts are the main focus of this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In a world shrinking even beyond the clichéd “global village,” sudden changes brought on by technological developments, relentless migration, and rapid mobility combined with drastic swings in cultural mores combine to create a perfect storm of change that can threaten the composure of even the most equable individuals and societies. Remarkably, it was in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Aldous Huxley, in his essay *Knowledge and Understanding*, declared that advancing technology produces a chronic state of revolution (Huxley, 1959). Now, at the end of the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, that declaration can, at best, be viewed merely as an oracular understatement. The common denominator in this “chronic state of revolution” is the factor of change which, in its rapidity and abruptness, stymies efforts to achieve harmony in multicultural demographic profiles. As a result, there has never been a greater need for understanding variable ecosystem dynamics, as well as a corollary emphasis on personal, communal, institutional, and political flexibility where change is concerned.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Study**

The immediate objectives of this study are to examine the characters and events in *The Last White Man* for evidence of personal and group reactions to change that happens as a *fait accompli* or a *force majeure*. The wider aims of the study are to explore how the views and opinions of eminent thinkers can be modeled into an integrated framework to be used by researchers, scholars, and policymakers in dealing with the phenomenon of both steady and drastic change in society.

### **Research Questions**

1. What stages of rejection and acceptance do both Anders and Oona go through while coping with the change in skin color they and their community undergo?
2. What are the reactions of highly conservative-minded elders like Anders's father and Oona's mother to this drastic change?
3. Considering the fact that the story carries on beyond the death of the last white man in Anders' life, in what way does the title of the novel remain relevant?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study rests upon the following two reference works:

- i. Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems ((2002), edited by Lance H. Gunderson and C. S. Holling.
- ii. Leading Change (1996) by John P. Kotter.

The former publication provides a multidimensional perspective on the phenomena of change and transformation while the latter provides insight into why and how transition, transformation, and change need to be dealt with in a manner that makes them constructive for groups, organizations, and society. The term panarchy is a portmanteau formed by combining the words pan and archy. Pan was a Greek god of nature who was part animal and part human and spread discord, chaos, and panic. Archy is derived from the Latin and Greek words for rules and is related to words like monarchy and hierarchy. As a result, panarchy describes nature and its imperatives (Holling et al., 2002). Consequently, it can be surmised that social-ecological systems, or panarchies, reflect Pan's unpredictable nature as well as the evolving rules by which these systems generate sudden, sporadic, and non-linear changes. Here, it would be pertinent to note that the authors observe a point germane

to this study: “Migrations of people, some forced by political upheaval, and some initiated as a search for new opportunity, are both threatening and enriching the international order” (Holling et al., 2002, p. 3). This observation is pertinent to the point already noted that the world is shrinking beyond the proverbial “global village”. Apropos the wider aims of this study, the following claim by the authors of *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems* is noteworthy: “Our goal for this book was to develop and test theories that explain transformational change in systems of humans and nature, theories that are inherently integrative” (Holling et al., 2002, p. 21). This claim becomes all the more pertinent when they pose a rhetorical question as to whether it is desirable to preserve and protect a system in its pristine and static condition. This question seems to be directed at societal elements that strive to resist change. Consequently, since change is inevitable, the formulation of integrative theories about it is of vital importance.

In *Leading Change* (1996), John P. Kotter declares at the very outset: “To some degree, the downside of change is inevitable. Whenever human communities are forced to adjust to shifting conditions, pain is ever present” (Kotter P., 1996, p. 4). However, he is quick to add that the distress associated with change is preventable if certain errors and pitfalls are anticipated and dealt with well in time. These errors and their consequences are listed as follows:

#### COMMON ERRORS

- Too much complacency.
- No sufficiently robust guiding group.
- Misjudging the power of vision.
- Inadequate communication of vision.
- Failing to create short-term goals.
- Declaring victory too soon.
- Neglecting to secure changes safely in the prevailing culture.

#### CONSEQUENCES

- New strategies aren’t implemented well.
- Acquisitions don’t achieve the expected synergies.
- Reengineering takes too long and costs too much.
- Downsizing doesn’t get costs under control.
- Quality programs don’t deliver hoped-for results.

Obviously, a perusal of the foregoing lists reveals that Kotter’s line of reasoning is mainly oriented to the corporate milieu. Yet, it is in these very points that the wider aims of this study lie as it is cognizant of the fact that, in the face of inevitable and inexorable change, there is

a need to address the crisis by implementing the empirical and goal-oriented approaches that accomplish success in the corporate world.

### Literature Review

The research articles perused in the course of this study are presented in thematic groupings with relevant comments.

### Transition and Transformation

An opinion by Schlossberg N. K. (2011), discusses anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, and non-event transitions. Anticipated transitions are those for which the subject is well prepared because they are not only expected but also, in many cases, planned for. Unanticipated transitions include disruptive events like sudden onset health issues, accidents, and even unexpected positive developments. Non-event transitions are those that were eagerly desired but failed to materialize. Transitions, whether events or non-events; expected or unexpected, are experienced by everyone. These changes affect our roles, associations, practices, and conjectures (Schlossberg, 2011). The transition itself is in itself not as important as how much it alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. In *The Last White Man*, all three kinds of transitions are depicted along with the resultant alterations in relationships and feelings. (Schlossberg, 2011) also identifies the features that are shared by all transition events and nonevents, no matter how disparate they appear:

- **Situation:** This refers to the person's situation during the transition period and takes note of whatever concerns they may have.
- **Self:** This concerns the individual's resilience in dealing with the situation. It queries whether the person is confident, spirited, and capable of dealing with ambiguity. Positivity is of prime importance here.
- **Supports:** The support available during the transition period is crucial to an individual's sense of comfort and security.
- **Strategies:** Here Schlossberg refers to the graded coping strategies posited by Pearlin and Schooler (1978) that aim to change the situation, reframe it, or aid in stress reduction. These strategies are one of the tools used in the discussion and analysis section of this study.

Kralik et. al., (2006) state that the term 'transition' originates in the Latin word *transitio*, which means crossing, passing from one time, condition, or domain to another—to change. It has been used

in a variety of contexts in the literature of fields as varied as musicology, history, metallurgy, geography, anthropology, science, and health, with discussions ranging from molecular change to personal and developmental changes, and even countries undergoing socio-political and cultural changes (Kralik et al., 2006). They further state that the term 'transition' is frequently used in literature to describe a process of change in life's developmental stages, or changes in health and social circumstances, rather than people's reactions to change. In literature, most authors describe transition as not only a passage or movement but also a time of inner re-orientation and transformation with themes involving self-loss or identity shifts as a result of the uncertainty and turmoil that follows a crisis or disruption. Some authors depict fictional biographical disruption to describe changes in self-identity that necessitate redefinition in the face of adversity (Kralik et al., 2006). As a result, social transition can be defined as a change in life patterns. Because time is an important factor in transition, longitudinal studies are required to investigate experiences during the initial phase, the liminal period or midcourse, and the re-incorporating period, which results in new ways of living and being as a result of the transition experience. The matter of time has special relevance to the attitudes of all the major characters in *The Last White Man*.

It is noteworthy that the distinction between transition and transformation is a duality, not a dualism (Hölscher et al., 2018). The two terms are not interchangeable. However, as shall be discussed, they are not mutually exclusive as the issue is one of scale rather than semantics. The word "transition" has primarily been used to examine changes in societal subsystems (for example, energy, mobility, and cities), focusing on social, technological, and institutional interactions. The term "transformation" is more commonly used to refer to large-scale changes in entire societies that can be global, national, or local in nature and involve interacting human and biophysical system components. Transition analyses focus on the processes and dynamics producing patterns of change to explain how the non-linear shift from one state to another is supported or hindered. Transformation, etymologically, means "change in shape," and transformation analyses highlight what transits from emergent patterns of change and the nature of systemic outcomes (Hölscher et al., 2018). A sizable number of academics posit a unique distinction between transition and transformation. Some consider transformation as one possible transition pathway in their transition research. Other scholars distinguish transformation from politically top-down and technocratic transitions as more radical, large-scale, and long-term changes. Regarding this, the Panarchy Model is an example of an analytical framework that can be used to identify



emerging social-ecological vulnerabilities, maladaptation, and tipping points (Hölscher et al., 2018). Perceptions, values, and cognition all influence transition and transformation. Both concepts are frequently associated with normative notions to describe the desirability of transition and transformation. Current societal systems' unsustainable nature is contrasted with a collectively defined sustainability orientation for desirable transitions and transformations. Transformation is also used in relation to concepts like resilience and planetary boundaries, which help to assess the potentially negative consequences of undesirable transformations and direct desirable transformations toward safe and just operating spaces. Processes to shape transitions and transformations are deeply political, involving power struggles and value conflicts.

### **Metamorphosis**

As stated in the very first sentence of this article, comparisons of Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* are inevitable with Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Therefore, it is mandatory to investigate any similarities perceived and recorded by previous researchers. Kafka's story contains numerous examples of transformation, both physical and behavioral, that are expressed in both symbolic and literal forms. The story depicts the theme of maturity and estrangement. The main character Gregor Samsa attempts to fight his alienation by sneaking out of his room and looking out of his door. This final act of resistance gets the family in trouble and creates the idea that Gregor must be gotten rid of. But instead of being killed or let loose, Gregor is found dead in his room, completely debilitated, symbolizing his total defeat and collapse. (Stoops, 2016). His resemblance to Anders, Oona, and all the others goes only so far as the matter of physical and behavioral transformations is concerned. These similarities end when Samsa meets a dire end and Anders makes a new beginning with not only Oona and their daughter but also the rest of society. Kafka's story concentrates transition, transformation, and metamorphosis into a microcosmic setting which insinuates a fable while Mohsin Hamid presents these phenomena on a demographic level of universal proportions which takes his story to an allegorical level.

Gregor Samsa, just like Anders, is understandably astounded at waking up to find himself so drastically changed. Both characters wonder what happened to them. In fact, there is a transitory phase in which each dares to pretend that the metamorphosis has not happened. They wonder about the kind of event which has taken place. Their questions do not address the nature of the happening, the ontology, or even the process of the happening. In Samsa's case, the questions are left hanging even after the story is over (Weiss,

n.d.). In *The Last White Man*, no such issue remains unresolved. There is, of course, the acceptance of the unpredictability and randomness of the panarchic order—a constant in the human condition. How far these articles about Kafka's tale diverge from the track of the study in hand is demonstrated by the view expressed by (Wardani et al., 2022) wherein it is stated that *The Metamorphosis* depicts a bleak picture of a modern man's life who has become estranged from his family or himself. It also portrays a bleak picture of a man who has been ignoring himself in order to become subservient to his family. In *The Last White Man*, we see Anders and Oona suffering a period of alienation and estrangement but emerging wiser and stronger from it. The contrast between the bearing of each story leads in diverging directions and to different levels. Similarly, while discussing *Metamorphosis*, (Davachi, 2009) holds that the characters in Kafka's novels feel alienated as they find the world to be absurd and meaningless. Here, it must be stressed that at no stage in *The Last White Man* do the characters feel the world or themselves to be absurd. Rather, despite the ominous change coming over them and the transitory state of shock they undergo, the characters show remarkable resilience and adaptability which are mankind's only recourse in the face of overwhelming change.

At the very outset of *The Last White Man* and *Metamorphosis*, both protagonists are assailed by a tremendous existential crisis. (Asriningtyas & Mustofa, 2022) observe that Gregor Samsa is certain he does not want to become a beast. On the one hand, the logic and consequences of his work are controlling him: he wants to get up and continue his business trip. On the other hand, the inescapable reality of his physical condition cannot be denied. Anders is also driven to follow his daily routine, but his physical transformation stands in the way. Both feel extremely alienated in their respective conditions. A dysfunctional relationship between social structure and personality is one factor that contributes to alienation which is characterized by a negative, pessimistic attitude toward the social environment. Therefore, alienation is one of existentialism's hallmarks (Asriningtyas & Mustofa, 2022). Moreover, alienation is often accompanied by feelings of shame. Shame is a negative assessment of oneself or one's behavior that leads to a desire to hide, escape, or disappear, as well as feelings of inferiority, hopelessness, powerlessness, and worthlessness (Quindadiarto, 2022). Both Samsa and Anders are assailed by these feelings—the former consistently throughout the story—the latter on a scale of decreasing intensity. And, this is just as far as *The Last White Man* and *Metamorphosis* can be compared. Samsa's transformation is physically incapacitating. This is how Kafka establishes and maintains the dark and defeatist tenor of his story. On the other hand, not only

Anders and Oona but a whole society begins, willingly or otherwise, to gather under the umbrella of an irresistible change. In contrast to *Metamorphosis*, the tone in *The Last White Man* is conciliatory and alleviating – if not outrightly triumphant.

### **Panarchy**

Nothing in nature can remain static indefinitely, and even when massive changes affect entire societies or the climate, they may all be part of a larger, adjustive system known as panarchy (Mariani, 2013). A transition from a stable to an additional state is the first step in a continuous process of rejuvenation, creation, and growth in panarchy. By the same token, *The Last White Man* can be viewed through the lens of panarchy as has been stated in the theoretical framework of this study. (Mariani, 2013) also states that the theories of panarchy are applicable to many disciplines and can also be applied to change in human societies. This declaration lends further strength to the premise of the present study by implying that, in an era of perpetual change, transition and transformation in human society need to be addressed at a level of critical severity.

### **Coping**

The triumph, however passive, of Anders, Oona, and their society can be attributed to the fact that they willingly or unwillingly cope with an irresistible change that overwhelms them in the shape of a force de majeure. (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) declare that coping can be defined as behavior that shields people from being psychologically impaired by challenging social experiences, and it is important because it negotiates the impact that societies have on their members. According to them, coping behavior can provide protection:

- By eliminating or modifying the conditions that cause problems.
- By perceptually controlling the meaning of experience in a way that neutralizes its problematic character.
- By keeping the emotional consequences of problems within manageable bounds.

In *The Last White Man*, the first option of eliminating or modifying the triggering situation is not available to the characters. But the second alternative is the one which proves the most successful and fruitful for them. This enables them to keep the emotional consequences of the great change within manageable bounds. This seems to affirm the view advanced by (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) that coping has acquired a number of theoretical

meanings over the years, and it is now frequently used interchangeably with concepts such as mastery, defense, and adaptation. The aforementioned concepts are seen in varying degrees among the various characters of *The Last White Man*. (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) further observe that many of the difficult problems with which people cope, from a sociological standpoint, are not exceptional problems affecting exceptional people in exceptional situations but are persistent hardships experienced by those engaged in mainstream activities within major institutions. Here, it is important to note that the proposition is quite different in *The Last White Man*. Here, the predicament begins as an unusual problem impinging on unexceptional people. The implication is that coping, however specialized or heroic its perception, is a survival skill to be learned and honed by everyone regardless of station in life. (Hartwein, 1982) cites Pearlin & Schooler (1978) to specify the following resources for coping efficacy:

- **Social Resources.** Social resources are embodied in the interpersonal linkages in which people participate and which can provide critical support. These are family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and volunteer organizations.
- **Psychological Resources.** Psychological resources are personality traits that people use to help themselves cope with threats posed by events and objects in their environment. The prominent ones are:
  - **Self-esteem.** The positiveness of one's attitude towards oneself.
  - **Self-denigration.** This indicates the extent to which one holds negative attitudes toward oneself.
  - **Mastery.** This refers to how much one considers one's life to be under one's own control as opposed to being fatalistically ruled.
- **Perceptual Resources.** When coping fails to change the situation and thus fails to eliminate the problem, the stressful impact of the problem may still be buffered by responses that function to control the meaning of the problem. The way an experience is recognized and the meaning that is attached to it determine to a large extent the threat posed by that experience. So, the same experience may be intimidating to some people while being harmless to others, depending on how they perceive and process the experience. Consequently, it is possible to avoid stressful situations by cognitively neutralizing the threats that we face in everyday life.

This study utilizes the abovementioned coping resources at appropriate stages with reference to *The Last White Man* in the discussion and analysis section.

### **Fable**

Both the trigger and the trajectory of the story in *The Last White Man* are based on the fantastical eventuality of almost every white-skinned person ending up being dark-complexioned. This element of fantasy brings it nearer, though not squarely within, the domain of being a fable. A definition of fable from J. A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* is presented mainly for the sake of form: "A short narrative in prose or verse which points a moral. Non-human creatures or inanimate things are normally the characters" (Cuddon, 1977, p. 300). A definition more current and germane to this study is given by Merriam-Webster: "A fictitious narrative or statement: such as:

- a) a legendary story of supernatural happenings.
- b) a narration intended to enforce a useful truth, especially one in which animals speak and act like human beings.
- c) Falsehood, lie."

(Fable Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Clearly, Cuddon's definition belongs to its own time – and literature has journeyed extensively since. This study adopts the first two definitions offered by the dictionary. Concerning *The Last White Man*, the word "supernatural" in the first definition could be construed as "supra-natural or unnatural" because white people turning dark en masse almost overnight is of extremely low probability. The second definition specifies an intention to enforce a useful truth. Without any claim to having knowledge of the author's intent, this study proceeds from the standpoint that while perusing *The Last White Man*, a reader can derive useful insights into dealing with transition, transformation, and change on personal, communal, and social levels. Fables can be effective because they clarify and approach serious, perplexing, and potentially dangerous subjects (Kotter & Rathgeber, 2005). They, unlike so much of the ephemeral information disseminated by instant media, have the potential to be memorable. They have the faculty to stimulate thought, teach important lessons, and provide motivation for action. John P. Kotter one of the authors of *Our Iceberg Is Melting* explains this in response to a question: "I've been studying for a long time how people learn. And I think it is pretty clear that our brains are hard-wired for stories...because that was how humans learned for tens of thousands of years" (Kotter & Rathgeber, 2005, p. 116).

### Discussion and Analysis

The Last White Man opens with a terse statement revealing a drastic transformation that has come over a man about to get out of bed in the morning: "One morning Anders, a white man, woke up to find that he had turned a deep and undeniable brown" (Hamid, 2020, p. 10). The curtness of these opening words echoes the suddenness of the change that the man finds himself to have undergone. There is a period of disbelief during which he almost wishfully thinks that there is someone else with him in bed. Such is the intensity of his denial that, even after realizing that there is no one else with him in bed, he persists in thinking that what he is seeing is an optical illusion "born in the slippery halfway place between dreams and wakefulness" (Hamid, 2020, p. 10). This is the typical reaction of a normal human being when confronting a drastic change. In this case, it is an intimately physical transformation that has both aesthetic and societal implications for Anders where he has no power to eliminate or modify the condition causing his problem. The reference to a slippery place between dreams and wakefulness takes on a metaphorical significance when seen on a level where change or even its anticipation triggers a collective state of denial in a whole society. Such an attitude invokes the first coping behavior put forward by (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978)—an attempt to eliminate or modify the conditions that cause the problem. The second coping behavior specified by them is fleetingly brought into play by Anders when desperately wanting to doubt the evidence of his selfie camera, he checks his impulse to rush to the bathroom to consult its trustworthy mirror. But even in this seemingly pragmatic restraint, he is motivated more by a fear of becoming a pursued prey rather than being a person in control. His terrified rejection of his own changed appearance, now confirmed by the bathroom mirror, engenders a helpless rage in him: "He wanted to kill the colored man who confronted him here in his home" (Hamid, 2020, pp 10–11). These apparently simple words have a substantive metaphorical value as they combine the dread of change with the conundrum of the "self" and the "other" in one short sentence. We see a man considering self-annihilation because he sees the "other" in his own "self". At this stage, Anders is barely able to keep the emotional consequences of his problem within manageable bounds. As such, he is at the edge of the third coping behavior specified by (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). The irony of the situation is highlighted by the author's statement that Anders could not escape himself that day. Since *The Last White Man* is a fable, its metaphorical significance remains foremost in this discussion. Therefore, it is imperative to view Anders' impulse toward self-destruction on a communal and societal level. Furthermore, the rejection of Anders'

picture by the algorithm of a digital album is a stark pointer toward the fallibility of technology when parameters of transition and transformation have not been programmed into it.

Change provokes the human instinct for survival because it forces a departure from comfortable certainties. The initial if not the instant reaction is to regress into the comfort of something akin to catatonia or into an active pursuit of a consoling fantasy. In Anders' case, we see him doing the latter while thinking about his long-departed mother. He remembers that, in high school, he was known for his smile "which had come to him from his mother, from her face to his, and now was missing" (Hamid, 2020, p. 14). It is significant that he feels the change in color on his face as a separation from his deceased mother. A change in color has renewed, if not surpassed, the trauma of his mother's death. Figuratively, this symbolizes how change can be perceived as a loss of integrity and identity. This, according to the 4S model posited by Pearlin and Schooler (1978) and cited by (Schlossberg N. K. (2011) is Anders' "Situation". The second element of the model is that of resilience in the "Self" of the subject regarding which, at this stage, Anders finds himself totally unequal to the circumstance. The third element is that of "Support" which Anders tries to find in the memory of his deceased mother. Being denied the comfort of his mother's presence, Anders reaches out to his girlfriend Oona who, at this moment, is in a state of personal serenity after a yoga session. On hearing about his predicament, she utters reassuring and supportive sentences but "as he was speaking, she was thinking mainly, and increasingly, of herself" (Hamid, 2020, p. 15). To insinuate that Oona's reaction to Anders' distress is one of petty selfishness would be a hasty conclusion belying the rest of the story to follow. We are told that Oona was "cashed out" emotionally. Her seemingly solipsistic attitude is a depiction of a society lulled into narcissistic somnolence by ingrained complacency. This, according to (Kotter P., 1996), is one of the common errors which keep systems and societies ill-prepared for change. On a personal level, Oona, despite notions to the contrary, grants Anders' wish to drop in on him. In this context, her surprise at her own decision is yet another pointer to the estranged condition of that society. This relationship of disengaged familiarity is further demonstrated when she visits his home but is reluctant to give him any reassurance as that would mean the adoption of a role she wants to avoid. So much so, that she considers answering his smile with one of her own a commitment she does not want to hazard. But, as the story progresses, both of them move into the fourth element specified by Pearlin and Schooler (1978) cited by (Schlossberg N. K. (2011)— "Strategies". These are dealt with at a further stage in this discussion.

Ironically, the listlessness of a society that is most ill-prepared for change is the symptom that critically needs the restorative powers of what it so desperately fears. We get an intimate look at this phenomenon in many different manifestations in the story. One embodiment of this is the character of Oona's mother. During the life of her husband, she had a fantasy that the world was a good one and that life was fair in its dealings. To her mind, the people who suffered were the ones who were born bad or were just exceptional tragedies. The sudden death of her otherwise young and healthy husband is a classic case of a person being overtaken by a sudden catastrophic change. For her, all four of the three coping behaviors posited by (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) have not performed fully. The first coping behavior of eliminating or modifying the problematic cause cannot be deployed where the unexpected death of a young healthy spouse is concerned. Regarding the second coping behavior of perceptually controlling the problematic experience, Oona's mother has either not tried or has tried and failed. Resultantly, she lives the life of a reclusive widow. With regard to the third coping behavior of keeping the emotional consequences of problems within manageable bounds, the lady has found a modicum of purpose if not comfort in watching the world with the paranoid eye of a conspiracy theorist. However, as the story unfolds, it is seen that her suspicions are not all unfounded. One of her perceptions is that she lives "in a world that did not care and was getting worse all the time, and more and more dangerous..." (Hamid, 2020, p. 19) is accurate to a considerable degree. However, the reason why her daughter does not take her proclamations seriously is that the old lady rounds off her most profound statements with semi-senile utterances which render her opinions implausible. Another reason is that Oona, caught up in her own self, does not have the detached point of view that her reclusive but perceptive mother has. But, the young woman committed to the welfare of her mother as the author comments: "Oona was her mother's mother now" (Hamid, 2020, p. 19). This comment is an extended one in which the author describes how the words "mother" and "daughter" mean a lot more to Oona than what she once understood. In this case, the angle of gender is just an immediate requirement of the story because the concept being highlighted is that of the cyclic nature of age, time, and change. Mohsin Hamid goes on to say that mother and daughter are just like two sides of a coin—the difference being only in which side comes up in a toss. This is a clear reference to a widely held notion that both past and present are just points on an infinite circle and are indistinguishable because of being in a perpetual cycle. This merits a quote from William Wordsworth's time-honored poem *My Heart Leaps Up*: "So was it when my life began; / So is it now I am a Man; / So be it when I shall grow old, / Or let me die! / The Child is Father of



the Man;" (Wordsworth, 2013, p. 623). The phases of age are transformations that are always in transition and are thus all colors in the spectrum of change. Interestingly, Oona's mother perceives this more readily than her daughter. The reason is that for the old lady, the spectrum of time spins in a coarser raster and she can see the transformations albeit in low resolution. Oona, in the prime of her youth, is surrounded by a blur of change that outpaces her perceptive ability. Her mother, on seeing her daughter go out, has a peculiar suggestion for her: "You're so beautiful...You should get a gun" (Hamid, 2020, p. 20). Considering the old lady's previous remarks about white people suddenly not being white, her instruction can be seen in a racist light. But, the overriding factor here is to be found in her words which occur before this stage when she remarks: "People are changing" (Hamid, 2020, p. 19). These words relegate any notions of racism to a low-level sub-heading and promote the factor of change to the top level. Furthermore, it is natural for a mother to be concerned about the safety of her young daughter. There might be opinions holding that Oona's mother is an alarmist or, in the current idiom, a prepper. However, beyond the flippancy of instant media, anticipation and preparation are also much vaunted as personal and social qualities. Consequently, *The Last White Man* highlights the importance of a premeditated and purposeful approach to the phenomena of transition, transformation, and change. This would be the only way to anticipate, preempt, or modify the distressful conditions arising out of change. Given the benefit of such prudence, the perceptual control of change-related experience and control of its emotional consequences will have established practices well in place before the occurrence of the change. A character in sharp contrast to Oona's mother is Anders' father. The immediate reason is that, whereas Oona's mother does not have to contend with any instantaneous physical change in her daughter, Anders' father is suddenly confronted by the fact that his son has begun to look like "the other". The fact that Anders takes the pragmatic step of using the telephone to bring this fact to his father's notice does nothing to mitigate the effect of the transformation when the two meet face to face. The retired old construction worker with a remarkable but deteriorating muscular physique cannot help sobbing like a child on seeing his son. Like a typical self-made father, he has always been uncomfortable about the abilities of his son. Now, to the dreaded physical transformation is added an uncanny tinge when the author reports the old man's thoughts: "this boy, Anders's father could see, was going to suffer, and his mother had vanished, she was nowhere to be glimpsed in him" (Hamid, 2020, p. 23). Significantly, the numinous element of losing his mother's resemblance strikes Anders' father as the most painful blow. Here again, the distress brought on

by change lies in the perceived break with the sanctified past. It bears mentioning that Anders' father is indeed the last white man in *The Last White Man*. It is in him that the ordeal let loose by change reaches its climax.

The personal anguish of Anders' and his father begins to be subsumed into a larger pattern as news begins to spread that people around the country are changing. The irony in the writer's choice of language cannot be ignored as it is significant that, in the first instance, it was the color of the people and not the people themselves that was changing. However, the material fact is that the change in color was certainly bringing about changes in the people. The only good that Oona seems to derive from this is that she remarks to Anders that now he is not alone. His response is that he does not feel any worse than before. Clearly, at this stage, being in similar company does not make him feel any better. This is because the tipping point in him and in society has not yet been reached. However, his personal coping mechanism of perceptually controlling the meaning of experience has certainly received a boost. There are, of course, momentary setbacks as when Anders' boss remarks that he would have killed himself if such a thing had happened to him. Anders shrugs in answer as he is unsure how to reply. Significantly, Anders' boss appears larger to him than he really is. This seems to be due to the fact that the boss has not yet undergone the dreaded change. Again, the stares of the athletes at the gym have a disconcerting effect on Anders and constitute an impediment to his coping mechanism. He experiences a philosophical dilemma of existential proportions when he tries to act naturally by being himself. This was "impossible really, for what was more unlike oneself, more awkward, than trying to be oneself" (Hamid, 2020, p. 27). So, he begins to mirror the other people around in their ways of speaking, walking, and moving. This is the most significant development in Anders' character as it constitutes an attempt to keep the emotional consequences of the problem within manageable bounds. This is accomplished when an individual surrenders their ego to the collective condition of society and begins to go with the flow. This thought is echoed when the writer describes the ambiance of Oona's yoga studio patronized by "mostly women, and while not wealthy, wealthier by local standards, and more educated staving off age through attempts to remain supple, and relatively slender, in surroundings where human smells were banished" (Hamid, 2020, p. 28). In a single phrase, Mohsin Hamid succeeds in capturing the quandary of people attempting to resist the inevitability of change. Even the futility of education which ill-prepares for change is subjected to authorial irony. The plants in the studio are dealt with in an equivocal manner: they connote either the natural cycle of life or

the immortality suggested by the long lives of redwood trees. The mention of “human smells” is a taunt at the elitist aversion to natural human processes, which in themselves, are transitory in kind. The interpretation is left open to the observer, although it bears mentioning that even the longest-living redwoods are not immortal. Oona herself is on a quest for self-realization which she pursues through a series of futile endeavors in acting, writing, business, and social media. Her lackluster performance leaves her suspecting a fakeness in herself. The upshot of this episode in the story is that all existence is a cycle and that transition, transformation, and change are inevitable.

For Oona, the tipping point comes when she begins to feel uncertain about her mother being wrong about a creeping disaster building up around them. She finds herself able to consider that her mother could be right about the coming of “a great, a terrible storm” (Hamid, 2020, p. 33). Anders, who is more mobile than her, explains that the actions of people in one’s social circle bring about changes in one’s personal attitudes and convictions. The transformations of skin color happening around them constitute a phase of transition marked by civil disturbances and militancy. The shock of the change generates such a level of alarm and insecurity that people begin to form militias that roam the streets and neighborhoods frightening Oona into giving up her bike in favor of motoring. In this regard, the most significant fact is that, concerning these bands of militants, she feels that, despite being white, “they were together and she was alone” (Hamid, 2020, p. 37). This fragmentation of the social structure and the resultant alienation of all concerned is the most painful consequence of being disconcerted by unexpected change. As such, heightens the importance of studying transitions and transformations well in advance in order to extrapolate responses to estimated changes. Anders has undergone physical transformation and is now in the process of a mental transition. As a result, he begins to have inklings of change he never had time to consider in the past. These come to him in the form of his father’s rapidly declining health. The thought of his father’s eventual demise had always seemed to be more fantasy than fact to him blurred, as it was, by its seemingly distant occurrence. Now, the impending change forces his thoughts onto a different perspective on time where “between every day there are hours, and between every hour there are seconds, and so on, the instants that are left stretching out into infinity” (Hamid, 2020, p. 40). This, almost Borgesian formulation, implies that, given its infinite sequence of transformations, all sentience is a process of continuous transition —and change is the all-pervading metaphor of life. On the other hand, a developing realization colors Oona’s thoughts when she begins to strongly consider that her mother has a better

understanding of the circumstance and that “her understanding of the situation was deeper...as though she had access to a mystical truth, a terrible mystical truth” (Hamid, 2020, p. 49). Going by the text, it can be noted that change dictated, as it is, by Panarchy is a terrible mystical truth.

On a societal level, the bewildering and horrific effect of this terrible mystical truth takes a violent turn when the riots begin. The almost total loss of control by the system forces Oona to reach the conclusion that the dire situation was “outside the control of human beings, of society, a tidal wave that would come and sweep over town, sweep over every neighborhood, no matter what anyone tried or did” (Hamid, 2020, p. 46). Clearly, a society unprepared for change has panicked and has succumbed to anarchy. The latent hostility between the white and the dark people comes out into the open and Anders has to fend off three white marauders by brandishing his father’s rifle. At this point, Oona is still a white-complexioned woman, but she begins to manipulate her own photographs in order to make herself look dark. The reason for this desire does not lie in any fear or fashion. It lies in the fact that she finds fulfillment in being in harmony with the flow of events, and she feels herself transitioning from a shattered self to one full of power and potential. To lend a semblance of reality to this, she even applies dark makeup to her face. Her darkened face appears to show “a future her born from a past her” (Hamid, 2020, p. 54). However, when she washes her face, the dark makeup flows down the sink like the death of a river, and it is immediately clear to her that the only real change is the one that happens in its own time and at its own pace. Meanwhile, the riots have confined Anders to his house, and he feels “imprisoned, doubly, triply imprisoned, in his skin, in this house, in his town” (Hamid, 2020, p. 59). It is remarkable how Mohsin Hamid maintains an almost stereoscopic perspective in the narrative using a rapid sequence of macro and micro depictions. Soon after the aforementioned feeling of being imprisoned in his own home, Anders suffers a strange alienation when he sees his own father disconcerted at seeing his dark-skinned son being kissed by Oona who is still white-skinned. This peculiar attitude is seen coming from a father who has the tenderest feelings for his son and whose “sense was that a good death would be one that did not scare his boy” (Hamid, 2020, p. 62). This is a notably skillful depiction of how hidebound attitudes can override the most sensitive issues and turn transition and change into distressing experiences.

The death of Anders’ father marks a crucial juncture in the story because it has an intriguing relevance to the title of the novel *The Last White Man*. It is of material importance that the story goes on even after “his casket was closed and his burial was occurring and

he was committed to the soil, the last white man, and after that, after him, there were none" (Hamid, 2020, p. 77). However, the story goes on for three more chapters before ending. The significance of this point lies in the fact that *The Last White Man* calls for an interpretation above and beyond the micro level of personalities and their skin complexions. The last white man is not meant to be construed as a single, white-skinned male. Rather, it is a metaphor for the last bastion which, for all good intentions associated with it, cannot resist the onslaught of unrelenting change which is an unbending law of Nature. Anders' father, like everyone else, was helpless before all the changes that happened before him, and to him, death comes as the final irrefutable proof. Therefore, the writer carries on the story to depict the maladjustment regarding transition and change which still hung over the town like a dark shadow. As an illustration of fear and superstition generated by such a condition, Oona's mother is exposed to media material about the inherent savagery of dark people. So, in a way, the specter of the last white man still hovers over the minds of the people. But, the transition is now leveling out into the new norm as Oona soon sees when a government clerk accepts her old, white-skinned photograph despite her dark-skinned appearance. Oona's mother too begins to accept the inevitable as she herself had turned dark some time ago. Anders' gym has been renovated and the writer takes the opportunity to use the premises as a metaphor for the human condition when he describes the weightlifters and bodybuilders "fighting the gravity the world exerts on all those who walk upon it, exerts seemingly equally, though in actuality not equally, not equally at all" (Hamid, 2020, p. 87). At the heart of this metaphor lies the fact that the perceived inequality of the force of gravity lies in the mass of the subject which, in turn, lies within the subject's control. Here, the concept of mass would be the attitude that an individual or social unit brings to bear upon inexorable transition, transformation, and change.

### Conclusion

The conclusion of this study is to be found in the concluding lines of the narrative. As the story moves to its end, there is another emblematic scene where the young daughter of Anders and Oona kisses the withered hand of her maternal grandmother. This symbolizes the completion of a circle where old and young merge into one, and the phase of transformation is completed. But, the cyclic nature of transition is highlighted in the closing sentence of the novel when Anders imagines his daughter after the demise of her parents. This moves him to place "his brown hand on the side of her brown face, soothing her, his brown daughter, his daughter, and miraculously she let him" (Hamid, 2020, p. 91)—they accept each

other. So, it can be expressly concluded that transition, transformation, and change can and will come again and again. The only comfort is in anticipation and acceptance. This study closes with the recommendation that future researchers and scholars, being architects of public opinion, direct their talent and energies toward formulating theories that take into account matters of preparation, acceptance, and resilience regarding inevitable changes that are an ongoing process in human life.

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