Language, Power, and Racial Identity in Mohsin Hamid's The Last White Man: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This study applies Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how language constructs and negotiates power and racial identity in Mohsin Hamid's The Last White Man (2022). Adopting a qualitative approach, the analysis focuses on selected textual excerpts to identify key linguistic features such as evaluative lexical choices, imagery, and narrative framing across textual, discursive, and social dimensions. The findings reveal that racial transformation in the novel is linguistically mediated through patterns of negative evaluation, spatial metaphor, and shifting narrative perspective, which contribute to the representation of whiteness as normative and privilege-bearing, while blackness is associated with marginalization and insecurity. The study demonstrates that identity is portrayed as fluid and socially constructed, with language functioning as an ideological mechanism that shapes perception, reinforces power hierarchies, and normalizes exclusion. By foregrounding systematic linguistic analysis rather than thematic interpretation, the research highlights the role of literary discourse as a site where dominant racial ideologies are both reproduced and contested.
Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Language, Power, Racial Identity, Fairclough, Mohsin Hamid

Introduction

Literature provides a critical space for examining how social meanings are produced, circulated, and contested through language. In contemporary fiction, language does not merely narrate events but actively participates in constructing social realities, particularly in relation to power, identity, and race. Recent literary texts increasingly foreground questions of racial transformation and belonging, making them productive sites for linguistic investigation rather than purely thematic interpretation.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a framework for examining such texts by conceptualizing language as a social practice embedded within ideological and power structures. Rather than treating discourse as neutral or transparent, CDA emphasizes how linguistic choices shape perception, legitimize hierarchies, and naturalize exclusion. Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model is particularly relevant in this regard, as it integrates textual analysis with discursive processes and broader social practices.

Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* (2022) presents a fictional scenario in which racial identity becomes unstable through unexplained physical transformation. While existing literary discussions of the novel tend to emphasize its allegorical or moral dimensions, there remains limited systematic analysis of how language itself mediates racial meaning and power relations. This study addresses that gap by examining how linguistic patterns in the novel contribute to the construction of racial identity, the negotiation of power, and the normalization of social exclusion.

Statement of the Problem

Although *The Last White Man* has attracted attention for its engagement with race and transformation, much of the existing commentary approaches the text thematically rather than linguistically. There is a lack of systematic analysis that explains how specific linguistic features contribute to the construction of racial identity and power relations within the narrative. Without such analysis, the ideological role of language in shaping perception and meaning remains underexplored. This study therefore investigates how language functions as an ideological mechanism in the novel by applying Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model to examine the textual, discursive, and social dimensions of discourse.

Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been widely employed to investigate how language constructs and sustains power relations, ideological meanings, and social identities across diverse forms of discourse. Central to CDA is the assumption that discourse operates as a social practice through which dominance and inequality are produced and legitimized. Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model remains one of the most influential frameworks in this regard, as it integrates textual analysis with discursive processes and broader socio-cultural contexts, allowing researchers to examine both linguistic form and ideological function.

Previous studies applying Fairclough's model have predominantly focused on political, media, and advertising discourse. Research on political speeches and banners demonstrates how lexical choices, pronoun usage, and evaluative language are strategically employed to construct in-group and out-group identities, legitimize authority, and marginalize opposing voices. Similarly, analyses of media and advertising discourse reveal how linguistic and visual elements work together to normalize consumerism, reinforce gender stereotypes, and promote culturally dominant ideals. These studies collectively establish that language functions not as a neutral medium but as a mechanism for shaping perception and sustaining power structures.

Within literary studies, CDA has been used to explore ideological representation in fiction, particularly in relation to themes of race, identity, and marginalization. However, much of the existing research tends to privilege thematic interpretation over systematic linguistic analysis, often emphasizing moral or allegorical readings without sufficiently accounting for how specific linguistic features produce these meanings. As a result, the role of language itself in mediating racial identity and power relations in literary texts remains under-theorized.

Although Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* has generated scholarly interest for its engagement with racial transformation and social exclusion, existing discussions largely focus on its ethical, philosophical, or symbolic dimensions. There is limited research that applies a rigorous

CDA framework to examine how linguistic patterns such as evaluation, imagery, and narrative framing contribute to the construction of racial identity and the negotiation of power within the text. Addressing this gap, the present study employs Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model to provide a systematic linguistic analysis of the novel, thereby extending CDA into contemporary literary discourse and foregrounding the ideological work performed by language in shaping racial meaning.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design to examine the ideological role of language in Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* (2022). A qualitative approach is appropriate as it allows for close textual analysis and facilitates an in-depth examination of how meaning, power, and identity are constructed through linguistic choices within literary discourse. Rather than quantifying linguistic patterns, the study prioritizes analytical depth in order to explore how language operates within specific narrative and socio-cultural contexts.

The primary data consist of selected textual excerpts from the novel, including narrative descriptions, focalized passages, and key moments of character interaction. Excerpts were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research objectives, particularly those that foreground racial transformation, social exclusion, and shifts in power relations. The selection process focused on passages that exhibit recurring linguistic patterns, such as evaluative lexical choices, metaphorical imagery, and narrative framing, which contribute to the construction of racial identity and ideological meaning.

Data analysis proceeds through close reading and systematic linguistic examination. At the textual level, the analysis identifies specific linguistic features, including evaluative adjectives, metaphor, transitivity patterns, and modality, to determine how racialized meanings are encoded in the narrative. At the level of discursive practice, the study examines how these linguistic features draw upon and recontextualize existing discourses of race, whiteness, and otherness. Finally, at the level of social practice, the findings are interpreted in relation to broader socio-cultural debates on race, identity, and power, situating the novel within contemporary discussions of racial ideology and exclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The study is theoretically grounded in Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which conceptualizes discourse as a dynamic interaction between text, discursive practice, and social practice. This model provides a comprehensive framework for examining how linguistic form, meaning-making processes, and social structures are interconnected.

At the textual dimension, analysis focuses on linguistic features such as lexicalization, evaluation, grammatical structure, and narrative voice. The discursive practice dimension addresses how the text is produced and interpreted, including the circulation of racialized meanings within literary discourse. The social practice dimension situates these discursive patterns within wider ideological formations, particularly those related to race, power, and social hierarchy.

By integrating these three dimensions, Fairclough's model enables a systematic examination of how language in *The Last White Man* both reflects and challenges dominant racial ideologies. The framework is particularly suited to this study as it moves beyond thematic interpretation and allows for a structured linguistic analysis of how power and identity are constructed and negotiated through narrative discourse.

Data Analysis

This section analyzes selected excerpts from *The Last White Man* using Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model, focusing on how linguistic choices contribute to the construction of racial identity and power relations. The analysis proceeds from textual features to discursive and social implications, demonstrating how language mediates racialized meaning in the narrative.

1. Lexical Evaluation and Racialized Meaning

At the textual level, Hamid employs evaluative lexical choices to associate racial transformation with negativity and loss. When the protagonist Anders awakens to find that his skin has turned "deep brown," the surrounding environment is described through negatively charged adjectives such as "shabbily," "cracks," and "dirt." These lexical items carry negative semantic prosody and function to frame the transformed body within a discourse of disorder and decline. Rather than describing the physical change directly, the narrative displaces evaluation onto the setting, thereby indirectly associating blackness with decay and discomfort. This pattern reflects how racial meaning is not stated explicitly but constructed through evaluative language embedded in everyday description.

2. Narrative Framing and Identity Destabilization

Narrative framing further reinforces identity instability following racial transformation. The repeated emphasis on the protagonist's former identity—introduced through past-tense constructions such as "he was a white man"—linguistically signals the loss of social centrality. Grammatical tense functions here as an ideological marker, indicating that whiteness belongs to a privileged past while the present is characterized by marginalization. This shift illustrates how identity is discursively constructed as contingent rather than inherent, dependent on social recognition rather than biological fact.

In addition, the narrative frequently foregrounds spatial metaphors to encode exclusion. Descriptions of streets as "dark" or fragmented by "gaps" metaphorically mirror the protagonist's social displacement. Such imagery does not merely reflect mood but operates discursively to align physical space with racialized insecurity, reinforcing the association between altered skin color and social vulnerability.

3. Discursive Practice: Othering and Social Distance

At the level of discursive practice, patterns of social interaction are mediated through linguistic cues of distancing and avoidance. Phrases describing people giving Anders "extra room" on sidewalks linguistically enact social exclusion through spatial deixis. These constructions normalize avoidance behavior by presenting it as habitual and unmarked, thereby reproducing racial othering without overt hostility. The protagonist's internalization of this distancing—mirrored when he unconsciously reciprocates the same behavior—demonstrates how discourse shapes self-perception and regulates conduct.

Dialogue is notably sparse in moments of racial tension, with silence functioning as a discursive strategy. The absence of direct verbal confrontation foregrounds implicit forms of power, suggesting that marginalization operates as much through what is unsaid as through explicit language.

4. Social Practice: Language and Ideological Normalization

At the level of social practice, these linguistic patterns reflect broader ideological assumptions about race and belonging. The association of whiteness with centrality and blackness with peripherality mirrors dominant racial hierarchies within contemporary societies. By depicting racial transformation as socially disruptive rather than biologically significant, the narrative exposes race as a socially constructed category maintained through discourse.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that language in *The Last White Man* functions as an ideological mechanism that normalizes exclusion, mediates fear, and constructs racial identity as fluid yet hierarchically organized. Through evaluative lexis, narrative framing, and discursive silence, the novel illustrates how power is exercised subtly through everyday language rather than overt domination.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study set out to examine how language constructs power relations and racial identity in Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* through the application of Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis. By foregrounding systematic linguistic analysis rather than thematic interpretation, the study demonstrates that racial meaning in the novel is not conveyed explicitly but is discursively produced through evaluative lexical choices, narrative framing, spatial metaphors, and discursive silence.

At the textual level, the analysis reveals that negative evaluation and imagery surrounding the protagonist's transformation function to associate racial change with loss, instability, and social vulnerability. These linguistic patterns contribute to the construction of whiteness as normative and socially central, while blackness is framed as peripheral and disruptive. At the level of discursive practice, everyday interactions marked by avoidance, silence, and spatial distancing normalize exclusion without overt hostility, illustrating how power operates subtly through routine language use. At the level of social practice, these discursive patterns reflect and reproduce broader ideological assumptions about race as a socially constructed yet hierarchically organized category.

The findings underscore that identity in the novel is neither fixed nor biologically determined but contingent upon discourse nor social recognition. Language functions as an ideological mechanism that shapes perception, regulates behavior, and legitimizes unequal power relations. By situating the novel within contemporary debates on race and belonging, this study highlights the relevance of Critical Discourse Analysis for examining literary texts as sites of ideological struggle.

Overall, the research contributes to CDA scholarship by extending Fairclough's model to contemporary fiction and demonstrating how literary discourse participates in the reproduction and contestation of racial ideologies through subtle linguistic means rather than explicit narrative assertion.

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