



Allegorical Critique and Representation of Neoliberal Dystopia in Mohsin Hamid's *The Face in the Mirror*

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ABSTRACT

This study offers an allegorical reading of Mohsin Hamid's short story The Face in the Mirror through textual analysis, interpreting its central motifs of "black" and "white" as symbolic critiques of neoliberal dystopia. The "white" father represents the protective welfare state, associated with social security, dignity, and collective solidarity, while the "black" son reflects the neoliberal subject—alienated, commodified, and severed from communal bonds. Through close reading, the analysis uncovers how the short story dramatizes the erosion of welfare protections, the lack of essential services and the transformation of identity under racialised and economic pressures. The father's decline allegorically signifies the dismantling of welfare structures, leaving individuals vulnerable in a profit-driven order. By juxtaposing past solidarity with present fragmentation, Hamid critiques the dehumanising effects of neoliberalism while representing the psychological dislocation of its subjects. This research contributes to scholarship by deepening the understanding of neoliberal dystopia in The Face in the Mirror through the interpretive lens of allegory.

Introduction

Neoliberalism stands as the prevailing ideology shaping the contemporary world and we live in neoliberal age (Thorsen, 2010, p. 188). Harvey (2005) notes that neoliberalism is characterised by privatisation, open markets and free trade, liberalisation, and cutbacks on social welfare. The decisive shift towards neoliberalism occurred in the late 1970s especially in the United States. Under President Carter's administration, the newly appointed Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Paul Volcker, reoriented monetary policy towards a free market model. This process accelerated in the 1980s when President Ronald Reagan endorsed Volcker's reforms and pursued further neoliberal changes, including deregulation of agriculture and industry, curbing labour unions, and

liberalising finance. These shifts marked the rapid development of an open market economy in the US. At the same time, similar transformations took place in China in 1978 under President Deng Xiaoping, and in the UK in 1979 under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (p. 1). Kotz (2000) points out that Carter's government, previously interventionist in favour of public welfare, altered its policies in 1978 by introducing neoliberal reforms such as deregulation, fiscal austerity, and retreat from welfare programmes. The Reagan administration fully embraced and extended these policies, driven by the larger motive of globalisation (p. 8).

Martinez and Garcia (2016) argue that capitalism in the twentieth century evolved through three phases: classical liberalism, the Keynesian welfare state, and neoliberalism. Classical liberalism, dominant before the 1930s, began with Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith and his followers advocated free trade, elimination of state interference, and removal of barriers to commerce. These "liberal" values promoted individualism and unregulated enterprise, allowing capitalist classes to accumulate vast wealth. This system prevailed in the US throughout the 1800s and early 1900s until the Great Depression of the 1930s (What is neoliberalism?, paras. 3).

In response to the Great Depression, J. M. Keynes proposed a new economic model that challenged classical liberalism "as the best policy for capitalists" (para. 4). Keynes argued that full employment was essential for capitalism's growth, achievable only through government intervention. His approach, later known as the "Keynesian welfare state," prioritised public welfare, reduced inequality, and curtailed excessive capitalist profits. However, by the 1970s, corporate elites revived classical liberal ideas in response to shrinking profit rates, giving rise to neoliberalism: "... the capitalist crisis over the last 25 years (in 1970s), with its shrinking profit rates, inspired the corporate elite to revive economic liberalism. That's what makes it 'neo' or new[liberalism]" (para. 5). As Kotz (2000) summarises, "Neoliberalism is an updated version of the classical liberal economic thought that was dominant in the US and UK prior to the Great Depression of the 1930s" (p. 1).

Neoliberal proponents claim that such policies create greater wealth for all, yet critics argue that they redistribute rather than generate wealth: "[neoliberal systems] redistribute, rather than to generate, wealth and income" (Harvey, 2005, p. 159). Walonen (2016) states that neoliberalism transfers wealth "from the periphery to the centre internationally and from the working and middle to the upper classes domestically" (p. 9). It serves the interests of core nations and corporate elites while undermining working and poor classes both nationally and internationally. This results in a society "sharply divided into the haves and have-nots" (p. 94). In such a system, there is no social protection for the vulnerable. As Solomon (2018) notes, neoliberal rationality places responsibility for failure entirely on the individual, absolving the state from collective responsibility.

Martinez and Garcia (2016) outline several criticisms of neoliberalism: the elimination of workers' unions, wage reduction, cuts in public spending on welfare, removal of collective responsibility, and prioritisation of individual responsibility. The poor are blamed for their own plight, while state assets are privatised under the claim of efficiency, benefiting only a small corporate elite. These policies undermine public welfare, social goods, and community services. The resulting wealth concentration fuels global social unrest: "[in neoliberalism there is] Manichean social rift between the haves and have-nots" (Walonen, 2016, p. 94).

Consequently, critics describe neoliberalism as producing dystopian conditions. Walonen (2016) describes twenty-first-century neoliberal dystopia as:

The aggregate picture that emerges of a twenty-first century world structured socio-economically by neoliberal policies and hegemony at the local, national, and transnational levels is bleak: it is one of a vast handing-off of power and resources from government to politically connected private enterprise, of dwindling civic life replaced by rising consumerism, of an emerging oligarchic rentier class, of large segments of population faced with meagre material conditions of existence and few prospects of socio-economic mobility, and of a looming sense of a near future dominated by further economic collapses and mounting social strife. (p. 12)

The term “dystopia” is the antonym of “utopia,” coined by Sir Thomas More. While utopia depicts an ideal society free from violence and deprivation, dystopia portrays a frightening and undesirable society marked by crime, poverty, and inequality. As Sezen Turkmen (2017) observes in *The Thin Line between Hell and Here: Dystopian Fiction under Neoliberalism*, neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology of Western socio-economic culture, generating a particular form of dystopian anxiety (p. 16).

Turkmen argues that after the collapse of the USSR, neoliberalism emerged as the triumphant model, celebrated by figures like Fukuyama as the “end of history” (p. ii). Proponents such as Friedman, Fukuyama, and Hayek envisioned a neoliberal utopia that would meet global needs. However, dystopian fiction challenges this view, revealing deep inequalities — by 2015, the richest 1% owned 50% of the world’s wealth, while 10% of the population survived on less than \$1.90 a day. Turkmen also highlights exploitative labour conditions in the Global South, environmental degradation, wars, terrorism, forced migration, and xenophobia as defining features of neoliberal dystopia (pp. 4–5).

Hamid, described by the researchers such as Poon (2015), Raggio (2016), and Shah and Sheeraz (2025) as a critic of neoliberalism, consistently engages with neoliberal themes in his fiction. This research examines Hamid’s short story *The Face in the Mirror* as an allegorical dismantling of neoliberal dystopia. The analysis focuses on two recurring motifs — black and white — where “white” symbolises the positive qualities of the Keynesian welfare state before neoliberalism (protection, care, and collective welfare), and “black” represents the dystopian traits of neoliberalism (poverty, isolation, individualism, violence, and conflict). In the story, Anders’ father (white) embodies the welfare state, while Anders’ transformation into black symbolises the vulnerable generation living under neoliberalism.

Research Problem

Hamid, as discussed, consistently engages with neoliberal themes in his fiction. While his other works have been read and analysed in the context of neoliberalism, *The Face in the Mirror* has not attracted comparable critical attention. This study addresses this gap by examining the story as an allegorical critique of neoliberalism, situating it in contrast to the welfare state, and analysing the profound consequences of neoliberalism in producing dystopian conditions.

Research Objectives

This research aims to investigate how Hamid’s *The Face in the Mirror* dismantles the dystopian condition of neoliberalism through the use of allegory. It focuses on the recurring motifs of black and white, where black symbolises the neoliberal era marked by inequality, isolation, and conflict, and white represents the Keynesian welfare state associated with protection, care, and collective welfare. Hamid’s story reveals that neoliberalism is inherently unhappy and dystopic, portraying a

world where social bonds weaken and insecurity prevails. By analysing these motifs, the study seeks to reveal how Hamid critiques the socio-economic issues of neoliberalism and contrasts them with the values of a welfare-oriented system.

Research Questions

This study is centred on the following research questions:

1. How does *The Face in the Mirror* employ the motifs of black and white to represent neoliberal and welfare-state values?
2. In what ways does Hamid's short story depict the psychological and social effects of neoliberalism?
3. How does the allegory in the narrative contribute to the critique of neoliberal dystopia?

Literature Review

While Mohsin Hamid's fiction has been widely read and subjected to considerable scholarly engagement, *The Face in the Mirror*—particularly in relation to its thematic engagement with the dystopian condition of neoliberalism—has not yet received substantive academic attention. The only identified research devoted to this short story is by Soomro et al. (2025), entitled “*Negotiating Identity and Confronting Racism: A Postcolonial Analysis of Mohsin Hamid's The Face in the Mirror*”, published in the *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review*. Other notable sources include Karla Tepale's (2023) review on *Course Sidekick*, which addresses the themes of unconditional love and prejudice, and Matthew Groff's (2022) blog commentary, which offers a personal yet thematically informed interpretation of the narrative. A concise overview of these contributions is provided below.

Soomro et al. (2025) approach *The Face in the Mirror* through Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theoretical lens, with particular focus on the interrelated themes of identity and racism. They contend that the protagonist's encounter with her mirror image reflects the socio-cultural forces that shape selfhood, laying bare the origins of prejudice and the human aspiration for acceptance. Their study conceptualises identity as a fluid construct, shaped by cultural, social, and personal contexts, with the mirror serving as a metaphor for continuous self-reflection. They conclude that Hamid's narrative offers significant insights into the complexities of race, belonging, and self-definition within a heterogeneous, postmodern environment.

Groff (2022), in his blog review, commends *The Face in the Mirror* for its narrative unpredictability and thematic depth. He summarises the plot as a transformative journey for the protagonist, Anders, whose abrupt change in skin colour provokes societal unrest, rekindles familial connections, and prompts reflections on race, generational divides, and unconditional love. Groff draws attention to the story's underlying sense of menace, its resistance to formulaic closure, and its capacity to provoke critical engagement with societal responses to change. He further praises Hamid's prose for its precision, rhythm, and reflective power.

Tepale (2023), in her *Course Sidekick* review, interprets *The Face in the Mirror* as an examination of unconditional parental love alongside the prejudices rooted in skin colour. She highlights the evolving bond between Anders and his father, noting how they overcome long-standing differences to manage daily life amid persistent social hostility.

As discussed above, the few available scholarly and non-scholarly sources on *The Face in the Mirror* have not traced the text to the thematic domain of neoliberalism or its allegorical critique. However, other works by Mohsin Hamid have been examined extensively through the lens of neoliberalism, offering valuable contextual ground for situating the present study. The review of these studies is given below.

Shah and Sheeraz (2025), in their article “A Left Critique of Neoliberalism and Resistance in Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*”, analyse the novel through the paradigm of the contemporary left critique, which is rooted in a neo-Marxist opposition to neoliberal capitalism. They contend that neoliberalism, as the latest manifestation of capitalism, primarily serves the interests of corporate elites, dominant states, and privileged social groups, producing adverse consequences for the working classes and peripheral societies. Their findings indicate that the novel foregrounds how neoliberalism privileges prosperous corporations and leading states while exacerbating inequality, ultimately generating resentment among the marginalised towards the wealthy. The study highlights the usefulness of the left critique in interpreting Anglophone Pakistani literature and calls for further research in this area.

Similarly, Shah (2025) examines *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as an allegorical critique of the coercive nature of Western neoliberalism in the post-9/11 context. In this reading, the relationship between Changez and Erica symbolises the long and complex relationship between Pakistan and the United States—where Erica’s emotional withdrawal and indifference towards Changez after 9/11 mirrors America’s coercive and dismissive stance towards Pakistan. The study argues that neoliberalism, while framed around principles of free trade, deregulation, and privatisation, in practice functions as “aggressive neoliberalism” when enforced through political, military, and ideological means. Hamid’s narrative, according to Shah, exposes these coercive policies through the uses of allegory, symbolism, and shows the protagonist’s resistance to critique hegemonic power structures.

Poon (2015) offers a different angle by reading *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* as a satirical self-help text that critiques the construction of the “neoliberal self” through moral compromise, self-interest, and systemic deception. In a related vein, Raggio (2016), drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of precarity, examines *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* alongside other post-9/11 works by Hamid, challenging the Western tendency to attribute anti-American sentiment in South Asia to religious extremism. Instead, Raggio locates such sentiment in the coercive political and economic effects of Western neoliberalism.

Shah (2025), in another study entitled “*Transnational Labour Vulnerability and Shared Precarity in the Neoliberal World Order: A Neo-Marxist Study of Mohsin Hamid’s Exit West*”, analyses the novel’s representation of the global working class under neoliberal capitalism. The research argues that neoliberalism dismantles welfare infrastructures, intensifies labour insecurity, and facilitates wealth concentration among elites, producing economic precarity as a transnational condition affecting both the Global South and Global North. By engaging with theorists such as David Harvey, Claudia von Werlhof, and Rajesh Makwana, the study situates *Exit West* as a work of resistance literature that destabilises the dominant migration narrative promising opportunity in the West, instead revealing the far-reaching disposability fostered by neoliberal regimes.

Carter (2020), in his research article, “*How Far Are We Prepared to Go? Mohsin Hamid’s Exit West and the Refugee Crisis*”, examines the role of neoliberalism in shaping contemporary attitudes towards displaced populations. The researcher argues that neoliberal bordering practices, combined with the dismantling of the welfare state, dehumanise refugees by positioning them

outside the scope of ethical responsibility. Hamid's *Exit West*, Carter contends, disrupts this narrative by reimagining borders as "doors" that open possibilities for alternative forms of human connection, while exposing the structural violence of neoliberal globalisation.

The above scholarship makes it evident that neoliberalism constitutes a recurring thematic concern in Hamid's work. From a broadly leftist and often neo-Marxist perspective, his works critique both the political and economic dimensions of neoliberalism, highlighting its coercive, exploitative, and exclusionary tendencies. Nevertheless, there remains a conspicuous absence of scholarly engagement with *The Face in the Mirror* in this regard. No existing study has examined its potential as a neoliberal allegory or as a critique of neoliberal dystopia. The present research therefore aims to address this gap by interpreting the short story's allegorical dimension as a critique of neoliberalism, contrasting its vision of a protective welfare state with the isolating and insecure realities fostered by neoliberal individualism.

Research Method and Theoretical Framework

This research employs textual analysis with a focus on allegorical interpretation to examine how Mohsin Hamid's *The Face in the Mirror* critiques the dystopian condition of neoliberalism. The story, composed in a linear, step-by-step style of fifty-two paragraphs, is analysed paragraph by paragraph to uncover layered meanings within the narrative, with special attention to the allegorical use of imagery, symbols, and recurring motifs.

The allegorical reading centers on the repeated use of black and white as the story's two leading motifs. White represents the positive attributes of the Keynesian welfare state before the advent of neoliberalism (emerging prominently from 1979 into the 1980s), including care, protection, and collective welfare. Conversely, black symbolises the dystopian realities of neoliberalism—poverty, deprivation, isolation, individualism, violence, and social conflict.

Within this framework, Anders' father (white) functions as an allegorical figure for the welfare state, embodying social protection and collective care. His visible weakness and eventual death symbolise the decline and ultimate demise of the welfare state in the face of neoliberalism's rise. This conceptualization (father as symbol of protection and welfare state) is informed by Rob Nixon's (2009) analysis in *Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque*, where he discusses the protagonist Animal in *Animal's People*. Nixon notes that Animal, orphaned by the explosion of Kampani—a metaphor for neoliberalism that kills his parents representing the protective welfare state—becomes a symbol of those "economically orphaned, abandoned to their fate by the merciless logic of the neoliberal marketplace" (p. 450). Similarly, Anders' transformation and loss reflect the vulnerability and alienation experienced by the neoliberal generation following the erosion of social protection.

By combining close textual reading with allegorical interpretation, this research aims to reveal how Hamid's narrative constructs a critique of neoliberalism's impact on social protection, human relationships, and collective well-being.

Analysis and Discussion

The short story, *The Face in the Mirror*, vividly portrays a dystopian world in which everything appears bleak, painful, and devoid of beauty—a landscape shaped by the modern neoliberal age, an era marked by excessive individualism that fosters social fragmentation, isolation, and pervasive

insecurity. From its opening lines, the narrative situates readers within a dark, cold, and oppressive environment that the protagonist, Anders, is compelled to endure in solitude. This hostile setting functions allegorically to represent the deteriorated social and moral fabric of a neoliberal dystopia, where communal bonds have disintegrated and the individual is left to survive in an existence stripped of collective protection or support.

The story opens with a depiction of Anders' isolation and reluctance to face the outside world, where the environment is "unsheltered"—a metaphor for the lack of protection or support as governments retreat from social welfare and collective responsibility under neoliberal policies. The following passage illustrates this mood:

Anders stood, the pain in his hand muted by the intensity that had seized him, and he felt himself trembling, a vibration so faint as barely to be perceptible, but then stronger, like a dangerous winter chill, like freezing outdoors, unsheltered, and it drove him back to his bed, and under his sheets, and he lay there for a long while, hiding, willing this day, just begun, please, please, not to begin. (Hamid, 2022, para. 5)

This opening paints a grim atmosphere, intensified by Anders' fear and reluctance to confront a day that promises pain and hardship. His pain deepens as he realizes he has been robbed—his anxiety grows as he perceives himself as a victim of a crime that has taken everything from him: *"He realized that had been robbed, that he was the victim of a crime, the horror of which only grew, a crime that had taken everything from him, that had taken him from him"* (para. 6). This "robbery" can be read as a metaphor for how neoliberal economic systems accumulate wealth by dispossessing the common people, leaving them vulnerable and stripped of security.

Further heightening Anders' distress is his experience when he looks at himself in the mirror of his cellphone. He no longer recognizes the "old Anders," but sees a transformed figure—his skin turned completely black. This transformation symbolizes a loss of identity and hope:

and when he was not checking there was no escaping the sight of his arms and his hands, dark, moreover frightening, for while they were under his control there was no guarantee they would remain so... (para. 6)

Here, the story uses the traditional dichotomy of white and black, where white symbolizes purity, prosperity, and positivity, while black connotes fear, negativity, and sadness. The white and its values refer to welfare state while the black and its negative connotations refer to neoliberalism. Anders' "theft" of whiteness and his transformation into black symbolize the erosion of the welfare state's protections (the "white" condition) and their replacement by a dystopian neoliberal reality filled with darkness and isolation.

The fact that Anders repeatedly tries but fails to undo this transformation emphasizes the overwhelming power of the neoliberal system and its dystopian conditions that trap individuals like him. He wants to return to the old, safer world but doubts this is possible: *"He wanted to believe that somehow he would change back, or be fixed, but already he doubted"* (para. 7). This expresses the disillusionment of those caught in neoliberalism, unsure if the Keynesian welfare state and collective protection can ever be restored. Thus, the story powerfully captures the fear, uncertainty, doubt, and anguish that define the dystopian reality of neoliberal individualism—a world where people are robbed of security and forced into painful isolation.

The main character is further portrayed as a lonely figure who “did not normally mind” his solitude (para. 8). However, he becomes increasingly unsettled by the hostile company of his black image, which seems to trap him. As a result, he does not dare to step outside, moving instead “from his computer to his refrigerator to his bed to his sofa, moving on in his small space...but there was no escaping” (para. 8). Allegorically, this scene critiques the constricted and isolating space produced by neoliberal capitalism and hyper-individualism—a space in which one’s security depends on constant productivity, and where even one’s own body becomes a source of anxiety if it is not functioning “well” enough to compete. Anders’s fear of his bodily transformation into black thus reflects a fear embedded in neoliberal dystopia: the shrinking of public and personal space, the intensification of isolation, and the constant underlying threat to survival. Similarly the limited space also signifies the overwhelming nature of neoliberalism surrounding the common people of which no escape is possible.

Anders’s dystopian condition is further emphasized when he is likened to “a sea creature that should not exist” (para. 9). The sea here can also be read allegorically as the vast, overwhelming flood of neoliberal markets that engulf ordinary individuals, confining them to repetitive, enclosed routines and alienating them from any deeper sense of their own existence.

This state of fear eventually renders Anders so unwell that he loses touch with his surroundings. He stops attending work, telling his boss he is “sicker than thought,” and then ceases to respond altogether. His boss, infuriated, sends a final message implying he “better be dying,” after which he leaves Anders alone (para. 10). This interaction reflects the typical attitude of neoliberal corporations, which—as Mie (2005) and Rushton (2019) observe—do not operate for the social welfare of their employees. Abandoning workers during times of crisis exposes neoliberalism’s prioritization of profit over human wellbeing, a reality Shah (2025) underscores: “This abandonment exemplifies neoliberalism’s prioritization of profit over social welfare” (p. 55).

Now Anders does not answer the boss; thus, his refusal to respond to his boss can also be interpreted as a subtle form of resistance against the relentless demands of neoliberal work culture, which thrives on isolating individuals through ceaseless labour.

Later, during the week following his transformation into black, Anders ventures out into the city wearing a hoodie so that his altered body might remain unnoticed. Yet his condition worsens when he realizes that even people who once knew him no longer recognize him. Passing them in public, he observes how they keep their distance, and he instinctively does the same. Although no one explicitly threatens him, a pervasive sense of danger settles over him. When he comprehends that familiar faces now see him as a stranger, he begins to avoid eye contact altogether, not wishing to attract attention. Allegorically, this mirrors the plight of workers in neoliberal economies who, once stripped of their jobs, lose not only economic stability but also social visibility and recognition.

Similarly, Anders is noticed by and he meets other black individuals, yet he feels no solidarity with them. Instead, he perceives them as “a group of animals, not humans, being transported from one task, one site, to the next,” existing solely for labour and stripped of any opportunity for enjoyment or self-determination (Hamid, 2022, para. 13). This imagery extends the allegory: blackness here symbolizes the marginalized labouring class under neoliberalism, reduced to an interchangeable workforce whose humanity is systematically overlooked.

Afraid of the profound change in his appearance, Anders initially refrains from telling his father — though he is not entirely certain why. Perhaps it is because he already feels like a disappointment

to him, and fears that this revelation would only deepen that sense of failure. Perhaps he wishes to spare his father the emotional burden. Yet, on a deeper level, Anders may be clinging to the idea that, as long as he does not disclose the transformation, nothing has truly changed; in his father's home, he could still imagine himself as the same person. Confession would solidify the reality and make the transformation irreversible. Eventually, however, he does share the truth.

In allegorical terms, Anders represents the modern precarious worker, while his father symbolises the welfare state — a protective social order that would abhor the neoliberal condition into which Anders has been thrust. This moment underscores both the emotional difficulty of accepting one's new reality and the anxiety inherent in losing connection, identity, and stability. It reflects the dystopian identity crisis engendered by neoliberalism, in which the self is destabilised by economic and social precarity.

When Anders finally reveals his transformation, his father's response is one of shock and disbelief. He hangs up the first time. On the second attempt, he asks if Anders is intoxicated or joking, and when Anders denies both, his father — with a familiar steel in his voice — demands to know if his son is calling him a racist. Anders firmly denies it (para. 15). This interaction conveys the generational and ideological rift between the older welfare-state mindset and the neoliberal condition embodied by the son.

Anders's decision to inform his father of his transformation over the phone — a choice he internally regards as cowardly — reveals both his emotional fragility and his deep sense of insecurity, traits shaped by the isolating pressures of neoliberalism. In a system where individual responsibility has replaced collective care, individuals like Anders are left without robust emotional support, making them hesitant, anxious, and disconnected even from those closest to them. Neoliberalism promotes emotional self-management, and replaces shared struggle with silence. Anders embodies this condition: he delays the conversation for fear of judgment and rejection, and when he finally speaks, his father responds with shock, anger, and disbelief — first hanging up, then asking if Anders was joking or under the influence of drugs, and finally demanding: “if his son was trying to call him a racist, to which Anders replied he most definitely was not” (para. 15).

This emotional distance is further illustrated when Anders arrives at his father's house: “His father was on his chair, hunched forward, as though expecting a blow, and when Anders looked at him, his father looked away” (para. 15). The physical and emotional hesitation between them shows how neoliberalism weakens even familial bonds, replacing open communication with fear, shame, and mistrust. Anders's so-called “cowardice” is thus not merely personal weakness but the product of socio-economic system that isolates individuals and renders human connection threatening rather than healing.

In allegorical terms, Anders's father — a construction foreman — represents the welfare-state era before the ascendancy of neoliberalism. Though visibly thin and gravely ill, he remains strong and capable, able to carry heavy loads with ease, symbolising dependability and care. This stability shaped Anders's gentle nature. However, Anders's transformation into a racialised “other” under neoliberalism symbolises the breakdown of that connection. His father no longer recognises the son who once resembled his wife, but sees someone entirely unfamiliar:

Anders's father could see, was going to suffer, and his mother had vanished, she was nowhere to be glimpsed in him, and he stood there, Anders's father, a cigarette in his mouth, one hand holding on to the fabric of his son's sleeve, the other rigid at his side, and

he wept, he wept like a shudder, like an endless cough, without a sound, staring at the man who had been Anders, until his son took him inside, and they both at last sat down. (para. 17)

This moment conveys a complex blend of love, grief, and recognition of inevitable suffering. As Poon (2015) notes, care and relational connection are essential elements that neoliberalism systematically undermines. Anders's loss of gentleness, and his father's discomfort with the change, symbolically reflects the rift between the welfare state and neoliberalism — or, on a personal level, the erosion of familial solidarity in an age of hyper-individualism. As Mie (2005) observes, neoliberalism distances itself from social welfare, replacing collective responsibility with market logic. The passage thus reveals the dystopian condition of neoliberalism, marked by suspicion, mistrust, and the erosion of intimate bonds, paralleling the absence of welfare-state protection.

The dystopian atmosphere deepens as reports emerge nationwide of others undergoing the same transformation:

Reports began to emerge from around the country of people changing, reports at first utterly disreputable, but later picked up by reliable voices, as a question to be confirmed, being confirmed, apparently happening (Hamid, 2022, para. 18).

Allegorically, this represents the growing marginalisation of the working class under neoliberalism. Initially dismissed — much as early accounts of systemic economic harm are ignored — these transformations are eventually confirmed as widespread, revealing that most people are becoming part of the vulnerable, racialised underclass. The narrative mirrors how structural oppression under neoliberalism becomes normalised once its effects are too pervasive to deny.

When Anders explains his transformation to his boss, he learns it is “not unique” (para. 19). His boss responds, “I would have killed myself” (para. 19), exposing the perspective of the capitalist elite: better death than relegation to a socially devalued state. This stark reaction reflects what Walonen (2016) identifies as the defining feature of neoliberal society — “sharply divided into the haves and have-nots” (p. 94).

The boss's remark about preferring death to being relegated to a Black, socially devalued position finds a grim parallel the following week, when “a man in town did just that [killed himself]” (Hamid, 2022, para. 20) after his own transformation. Formerly part of the privileged white class, he suddenly became Black within the neoliberal racial order—rendered socially vulnerable and stripped of the protections and advantages he once enjoyed. Unable to bear this abrupt loss of racial and economic privilege, he chose death, exemplifying how members of an affluent class, when relegated to a position of marginalisation and poverty, may prefer self-destruction over the erosion of their former status. The report confirms that the “white man” and the “dark man” were the same person, underscoring the internalised self-rejection produced by neoliberal racialisation and marginalisation. As Ruston (2019) argues, suicide, depression, and psychological harm are direct responses to the austerity, social cutbacks, and erosion of protection characteristic of neoliberalism (p. 199).

The dystopian condition deepens as the narrative describes a rapid shift in the town's atmosphere. Many people are transforming into Black individuals, becoming more confined to their homes, and the roads and shops are especially deserted at night. The overall mood turns bleak:

Yes, the mood was changing, and the shelves of the stores were more bare, and at night the roads were more abandoned, and even the days were shorter and cooler than they had been recently, the leaves no longer as confident in their green, and while these seasonal shifts were perhaps only the course of things, the course of things felt to Anders more fraught. (Hamid, 2022, para. 21)

The abandoned streets and closed shops symbolize the isolation and individualism characteristic of a neoliberal dystopia. The seasonal decline — with cooler days and fading leaves — reinforces a sense of decay and fear.

Critics highlight that neoliberalism is often tied to war and conflict. Werlhof (2008) calls war and neoliberalism “two sides of the same coin” (p. 101). Turkmen (2017) argues that violence is a central feature of the neoliberal dystopia: war, terrorism, and economic crises force large-scale migration from war-torn nations to the West, where migrants face hostility, scapegoating, and exclusion. Other scholars, including Harvey (2005), Smith (2008), and Gregory (2004), link neoliberalism to aggressive capitalism and U.S. imperialism. Klein (2007) speaks of “coercive neoliberalism,” and Mann (2001), cited in Beeson (2006), notes that militaristic strategies of neoliberal states generate resentment and terrorism rather than resolving them. Hamid’s short story *The Face in the Mirror* reflects this theme through depictions of intensifying violence:

There were flare-ups of violence in town, a brawl here, a shooting there, and the mayor repeatedly called for calm, but militants had begun to appear on the streets, pale-skinned militants... visibly armed, and as for the police, the police made no real effort to stop them. (Hamid, 2022, para. 22)

This violence conveys a constant sense of war, frustration, and hopelessness. The conflict may also represent the Western authorities’ hostility towards the newly transformed Black population — an allegory for the arrival of migrants from war-torn or economically devastated regions into the neoliberal West, where they are perceived as threats. Lazarczyk (X.R.R.S., para. 1) explains that neoliberal economic crises — including job insecurity, deepening inequality, unaffordable housing, and lack of regulation — foster anti-immigrant sentiment. Rather than address systemic flaws, many politicians blame “the other,” including immigrants, leading to heightened racism and exclusion, especially after 9/11.

Against this perilous backdrop, Anders travels to see his father “with some chill in it” (Hamid, 2022, para. 23), taking back roads to avoid being noticed amid the escalating Black–white tensions. His cautious movements — “like a herbivore, out of an instinct for self-preservation... with gloves... a hoodie... sunglasses... ineffectual concealment” — reveal his vulnerability and the oppressive atmosphere of the dystopia.

When Anders arrives, he is shocked to see how much his father has deteriorated in just a week. Though his father tries to hide his pain, Anders notices his weakened frame and reluctance to look at his son’s changed face. Yet, as a symbol of the welfare state’s protective role, the father forces himself to look and welcome Anders home: “He inclined his head in welcome and took his darkened son back home” (para. 24). This scene encapsulates the story’s allegory: the father, as a symbol of the welfare state, is gravely weakened, implying that social protection is fading in the neoliberal era. Though diminished, he still offers care — yet his own decline foreshadows its eventual disappearance.

Inside his father's abode, Anders notices the furnishings are "dated" — the sofa covers with frills, lace coasters, and family photos, none newer than a decade ago (para. 25). These aged objects suggest that the remnants of the welfare state's values are now outdated in a neoliberal age dominated by individualism.

Despite his frailty, the father still provides for Anders, offering cash from his flask and loading supplies into his car over Anders's objections — an act that contrasts with neoliberalism's discouragement of familial dependence: "He ignored his pain... and he witnessed his boy... receive what his father was holding, what was obviously needed" (para. 26). This moment reinforces the tension between neoliberal self-reliance and the lingering, though weakened, ethos of mutual care inherited from the welfare state.

The story further illustrates the growing vulnerability of workers under neoliberalism, as Anders notices that, upon returning to his workplace, many others have also transformed into "blackness," symbolizing the lack of social protection. In contrast, the gym he used to visit in the past was once characterized by camaraderie and mutual support, reflecting collectivism and cooperation. Now, however, it is populated by "dark men" who barely acknowledge each other, a powerful metaphor for extreme individualism and social fragmentation in the neoliberal era:

At work Anders was no longer the only one who had changed... and a gym that had been almost a whites-only gym now often had three, or even four, dark men present... the gym was increasingly tense, and men who had known each other for years now acted like they did not know each other, or, worse, disliked each other, bore a grudge. (para. 28)

In this environment of isolation, interpersonal conflicts are met with indifference, revealing the erosion of community responsibility:

One night as Anders was ready to leave, two men got into an argument... and they started to shove each other in the parking lot... those who gathered did not say anything... soon the two men were punching, and it was ferocious. (para. 29)

The narrative also portrays open conflict between the "dark" people—representing marginalized workers—and militant forces determined to expel them: "...running them out of town... what one is dreading, a calamity of this magnitude, actually happens" (para. 30). Here, the allegory captures the dystopian reality of social disintegration and war under neoliberalism. Anders, himself transformed into blackness, attempts to defend himself with a rifle given to him by his father—the symbolic protector and representative of the welfare state. Encouraged by this weapon of protection, he confronts the bandits, only to realize they too are victims of deprivation: "...they who had been robbed already and had nothing left, just their whiteness, the worth of it, and they would not let him take that, not him or anyone else" (para. 31). This exchange reflects the mutual predation among the vulnerable under neoliberalism, as the weakened state has lost its former capacity to safeguard its people, both the white and the black, the bandits and the victims.

Upon returning to his father's home, Anders notices further signs of decline: the once-lush garden behind the house, which his mother had lovingly cultivated, is now a barren patch of dirt and dead weeds: "...where once grew flowers and tomatoes and snap peas and thyme... now was a patch of dirt with tufts of weeds, weeds dry and dead at the onset of winter" (para. 34). This transformation mirrors the shift from an agrarian, nurturing society to the lifeless, extractive urban economy of neoliberal capitalism. Later, Anders and his father sit in the living room to watch television, expecting visitors, yet "no one came... not on that first night at least" (para. 34). This absence

reflects the detachment and social isolation that scholars such as Poon (2015) identify as central to neoliberalism's individualistic ethos.

Even within the family, alienation grows. Though Anders' father—symbol of care and social protection—had previously resented his son's transformation, he remains committed to supporting him: "...ready to do right by his son, it was a duty that meant more to him than life, and he wished he had more life in him, but he would do what he could with what little life he had" (Hamid, 2022, para. 35). Such moments reveal that neoliberalism fosters mistrust and estrangement, even in the most intimate relationships. As Harvey (2005) and Raggio (2016) note, neoliberalism exposes the poor and working class to heightened precarity, while the state distances itself from their welfare.

The decline reaches the material conditions of the household. There is even a shortage of electricity, leaving Anders' father to ration candles for night use:

In the morning the power went out... Anders's father judged it best they save their candles for nightfall... Anders discovered that his phone no longer had reception... wondered if the service had been cut off intentionally or if the backup batteries at the cell towers had died. (Hamid, 2022, para. 35)

Such scenes underscore the erosion of basic services under neoliberal governance. Lying in his childhood bed, Anders feels "more alone... and yes the chatter online had been grim" (para. 37), deepening the theme of alienation.

As conflict escalates, Anders remains with his ailing father, only to discover that his condition has worsened: "Anders could hear his muffled grunts... the battle his father was losing, and it made Anders guilty for not being a better son, for having left his father so abandoned" (para. 38). The father, symbolic of a fading welfare state, suffers while the son—product of neoliberalism—feels guilt for abandoning him. Anders' transformation into blackness is described as "taking something from his father, taking his dignity" (para. 38), illustrating how neoliberal pressures erode intergenerational bonds.

Even in his final days, the father's care persists:

...if a father did have to die in front of his son he ought to die as well as he was able... to leave his son with the strength to live, and the strength to know that one day he could die well himself. (para. 39)

This juxtaposition of selfless care against the backdrop of systemic neglect reinforces the story's allegorical critique of neoliberalism's human cost.

The narrative juxtaposes Anders's father — a white man symbolising purity, protection, and the welfare state — with Anders, whose transformation into black reflects the isolating and alienating conditions of neoliberalism. Even in his final days, the father's thoughts remain with his son, embodying the welfare state's ethic of care and responsibility. In contrast, Anders, shaped by neoliberal values, becomes increasingly detached, even expressing aversion to the smell of his father's wet bed. This detachment reflects the erosion of close familial and communal bonds under neoliberalism. The story thus draws a sharp contrast between the father's world — grounded in collective welfare and care — and the son's neoliberal authenticity, characterised by disconnection and self-preservation. The father's commitment is powerfully expressed in the line:

And so Anders's father strove to make his final journey to his death into a giving, into a fathering, and it would not be easy, it was not easy, it was almost impossible, but that was what he set his mind, while he had his mind, on attempting to do. (para. 39)

This moment implies the enduring, almost impossible, struggle to uphold care and solidarity in a world increasingly governed by neoliberal values.

After spending a week in hiding at his father's house due to the ongoing conflict, Anders finally ventures out to obtain medication to ease his father's suffering. The doctor, who had sounded "white" over the phone, turns out to be "black" when Anders meets him in person. He accepts cash payment merely for offering verbal advice, without providing any prescription: "and there was of course no prescription and no attempt to pretend there was a prescription" (para. 42). Instead of actual medicine, Anders receives only a brown paper bag, which unexpectedly triggers a childhood memory. He recalls accompanying his father to a construction site, surrounded by strong men who respected his father, and sharing lunch with them "like equals" (para. 42). Allegorically, this episode critiques the commodification of healthcare under neoliberalism, where the profit motive supersedes the ethos of public service. The brown paper bag—with no prescription—symbolises the hollow promises of neoliberal systems, offering appearances of help without substantive remedies. The flashback to his father's worksite further recalls the lost dignity and solidarity of the working class under the welfare state, where collective respect, economic security, and mutual care once prevailed. Under neoliberalism, these values are eroded, replaced by precarious labour and fractured community bonds.

On his way back, Anders observes how the town has further transformed: "the town was a different town now... with all these dark people around, more dark people than white people, and it made Anders uneasy, even though he was dark, too" (para. 43). Here, the allegory shifts—"black" becomes "dark"—marking a deepened alienation in which neoliberal subjects internalise unease even toward those who share their racialised condition. This reflects the dystopian reconfiguration of identity under neoliberalism, where solidarity is supplanted by fragmentation and suspicion.

As established earlier, Anders's father symbolises the protective welfare state—the historical guarantor of social security. Now frail and near death, his speech becomes fragmented and unclear, with words reduced to "no more than sounds" (para. 44). Allegorically, this signals the political silencing of welfare discourse in the neoliberal era: its language of collective care and protection is no longer intelligible to those shaped by market logic.

Even in decline, Anders's father remains concerned for his son—now fully a "dark" neoliberal subject—though at times he fails to recognise him: "sometimes [he] looked at the dark person who sat at his bedside and knew it was his son, but sometimes... did not know who he was, but he knew that he had a duty to this person" (para. 45). This depicts the welfare state, in its dying moments, still attempting to shield those made vulnerable by neoliberal transformations, even when its beneficiaries no longer recognise or understand its role.

The father's eventual death—"his already labored breathing had grown more labored... and when he stopped breathing... with that breath Anders's father was no more" (para. 46)—marks the allegorical end of the welfare state itself. With his passing disappears the last vestige of protection, connection, and care—qualities Poon (2015) identifies as essential in countering neoliberal capitalism's alienating effects.

In the aftermath of his father's death, Anders is left completely exposed: "he wept so hard and so loud that it surprised him, and made him want to shush himself" (para. 47). This grief shows the vulnerability and disorientation of those left unprotected in neoliberal society, revealing the emotional void created by the dismantling of collective welfare structures.

Anders's father dies without any debt, a detail that underscores the strength of the welfare state—free from the debt traps that characterise modern neoliberal institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, which, as noted by Harvey (2005), Welhof and Hadiz (2006), and Klein (2007), have entangled nations and individuals alike. As the text states: "*Anders's father had died without debt and having paid for his own funeral arrangements, both being matters of principle for him, severe and uncommon principle*" (Hamid, 2022, para. 48). This reflects the extraordinary principles of the welfare state.

The father's death passes unnoticed by nature, evoking a Tennysonian elegiac tone reminiscent of *Break, Break, Break*, and further signifying an era in which neoliberal society no longer grieves the loss of protectionist structures. The seasonal imagery—spring "about to be sprung"—is ironic. Like in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where spring is called "the cruelest month," here it signifies not renewal but the cruel satisfaction over the death of protectionism and collectivism:

On the drive back the sun was shining as though nothing had happened and there was no snow on the ground and there were hints of green here and there... a day that suggested, inappropriately, jarringly, that winter would soon be over, and that spring was beginning to be sprung, and it all just hit Anders, unslept and red-eyed, it hit him right in the face. (para. 49)

Yet Anders also reflects the sadness of one transformed by neoliberalism—symbolised by "black"—who mourns the loss of the protective past embodied by his father. In contrast to earlier collectivist traditions, where funerals would draw large crowds, the funeral of Anders' father is attended by only a few people, many of them strangers to Anders: "*Anders did not know who was who and which was which... and there were not many of them, but there were enough, the right number*" (para. 52). This sparse attendance reflects the atomisation and individualism of the neoliberal age.

The ceremony, meant "*to make real what had happened*" (para. 52), becomes an allegorical confirmation of the death of the welfare state. The narrative's conclusion—"his casket was closed... the last white man, and after that, after him, there were none" (para. 52)—frames Anders's father as the final embodiment of purity, care, and protection, qualities now extinct in the neoliberal order where all have turned "black." This symbolic shift mirrors the societal transformation of the twenty-first century into a condition of individualism and neoliberal dystopia.

Throughout the story, the father's illness in a modern age, followed by his death, allegorises the decline and ultimate collapse of social protection, making way for a darker order—much like the ominous transformation in W. B. Yeats's *The Second Coming*. Hamid renders the rise of neoliberalism as the arrival of something destructive, bringing sorrow rather than progress.

The narrative's atmosphere is steeped in darkness, sadness, and grey autumnal tones. Neither Anders nor his father is happy; both experience turmoil, grief, and dissatisfaction. Even the promise of spring at the father's death is ironic—it does not truly arrive, and autumn does not end. The father's disapproval of his son's transformation into "black" reflects the Keynesian critique of

neoliberalism, while the son's vulnerability and unhappiness suggest that the ideology has swept across the entire society, leaving no one untouched. In this way, Hamid's story becomes a powerful allegory of the modern dystopian condition under neoliberalism.

Conclusion

This study has examined Mohsin Hamid's short story as an allegorical dismantling of neoliberal dystopia, using the recurring motifs of "black" and "white" to interrogate the transformation from a welfare-oriented social order to one defined by neoliberal individualism. The analysis reveals that "white" functions as a symbolic register for the father—embodying purity, stability, and the protective ethos of the welfare state—while "black" marks the son's transition into the precarious, atomised existence of neoliberal modernity. The gradual shift in Anders's identity, his reluctance to reveal his transformation, and his eventual emotional detachment illustrate the personal cost of this socio-economic shift: the erosion of belonging, the weakening of family bonds, and the loss of collective moral responsibility.

The father's unwavering care, even in the face of death, stands as a counterpoint to the son's neoliberal alienation, while the funeral scene—marked by sparse attendance and the final absence of any "white" figures—symbolises the definitive end of an era. Hamid's seasonal imagery, particularly the deceptive spring that never truly arrives, deepens the dystopian resonance by suggesting that renewal under neoliberalism is illusory.

By weaving together personal narrative and political allegory, Hamid exposes the affective and ethical consequences of neoliberal dominance. The story becomes not merely a portrait of individual transformation but a warning of the broader societal impoverishment that follows when market logic supplants collective care. In doing so, it reclaims the literary power of allegory to critique the present, reminding us that the decline of social protection is as much a moral and emotional loss as it is an economic and political one.

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