

Language, Genre, and the Politics of Literary Form in Pakistani Fiction in English

¹Gulzar Ali, ²Dr. Humaira Riaz

¹Ph.D. Scholar in English Literature, City University of Science & Technology Peshawar, guali@numl.edu.pk

²Assistant Professor in English, Institute of Management Sciences (IMSciences) Peshawar, humaira.riaz@imsciences.edu.pk

* Corresponding author

Abstract

This article argues that the political orientation of Pakistani fiction in English whether resistant or assimilative in its relationship to the metropolitan literary apparatus is inscribed in literary form, and that formal analysis is therefore both possible and necessary as a mode of political evaluation. Drawing on Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's distinction between abrogation and appropriation, Fanon's analysis of the politics of colonial language acquisition, and Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, the article demonstrates through comparative formal analysis of Muhammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* (2022) that the two novels embody radically opposed formal politics. Hanif's formal strategies — genre subversion, vernacular code-switching, ironic satirical excess, and the refusal of consolatory narrative closure constitute formal resistant appropriation: the deployment of metropolitan literary conventions in the service of postcolonial resistant ends. Hamid's formal strategies — Kafkaesque allegorical abstraction, cosmopolitan standard English, psychological interiority without cultural situatedness, and universalising narrative resolution constitute formal assimilative appropriation: the adoption of metropolitan literary forms with minimal transformation toward postcolonial purposes. Drawing on postcolonial theory from Fanon, Ashcroft et al., and Bhabha, the article demonstrates that formal distinction between the two novels is not merely aesthetic but political — a distinction between different intellectual commitments to the primary culture, different understandings of the writer's social role and different answers to the question of what postcolonial literature in English is for.

Keywords: Pakistani fiction in English; literary form; genre subversion; vernacular English; Kafkaesque allegory; Muhammad Hanif; Mohsin Hamid; postcolonial English

1. Introduction: Form as Politics in Postcolonial Fiction

In postcolonial literary studies, the relationship between literary form and political orientation has been a contested site since the foundational debates of the 1980s. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) established the canonical position: postcolonial writers' relationship to English literary form is never politically neutral. Every formal choice — the selection of genre, narrative mode, register, and linguistic variety positions the writer in relation to the metropolitan literary apparatus that simultaneously enables and constrains them. Writers who reproduce metropolitan formal norms without transformation submit to the 'privileging norm' (Ashcroft et al. 1989, 3) that measures all literary value against metropolitan standards. Writers who subvert, hybridise, or transform those norms — who write back to the centre through the centre's own forms — practice what Ashcroft et al. distinguish as 'appropriation' rather than 'assimilation': the seizure of metropolitan forms for postcolonial resistant purposes rather than the absorption into metropolitan culture on its own terms.

This article argues that this theoretical distinction is empirically demonstrable — that it is possible to identify, in specific formal and linguistic features of specific texts, the difference between resistant appropriation and assimilative appropriation as formal political orientations. The comparison of Muhammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* (2022) provides the ideal demonstration case: two major Pakistani novels in English, published in the same metropolitan literary circuits, by writers of comparable international prominence, whose formal strategies are nonetheless radically opposed in

their political orientations. The formal contrast is not a matter of aesthetic preference or stylistic variation. It is, as this article demonstrates, the inscription in literary form of different intellectual commitments to the primary culture, different understandings of the writer's social role, and different navigational strategies within what Raja (2018) terms the 'double bind' of Pakistani Anglophone literary production.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework for form as politics in postcolonial fiction drawing on Ashcroft et al., Fanon and Bhabha. Section 3 analyses Hanif's formal resistant strategies across three dimensions: genre subversion, vernacular linguistic sovereignty and narrative refusal of consolatory closure. Section 4 analyses Hamid's formal assimilative strategies across the same three dimensions: allegorical genre adoption, cosmopolitan standard English, and narrative universalising resolution. Section 5 draws on recent empirical and formal scholarship to demonstrate that the contrast is measurable and not merely interpretive. Section 6 addresses the argument's implications for postcolonial literary studies and for the evaluation of Pakistani fiction in English.

2. Form as Politics: The Theoretical Framework

2.1 Abrogation, Appropriation, and the Privileging Norm

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) identify two foundational strategies through which postcolonial writers engage with the English literary tradition. The first is 'abrogation': the rejection of the centre's authority, its standards of correctness and value, its claim to represent the universal. The second is 'appropriation': the process by which postcolonial writers seize 'the language of the centre and remake it in their own image' (38) — using English against

itself, investing it with content, cadence, and meaning that the centre did not intend and cannot fully contain. Against both stands 'assimilation': the absorption of the postcolonial writer into metropolitan literary culture on its own terms, with the formal features of the writing conforming to metropolitan norms rather than transforming them. Ashcroft et al.'s most important insight is that the choice between appropriation and assimilation is not primarily aesthetic but political: 'the crucial issue is not whether the postcolonial text uses the language of the imperial culture but how it uses it' (7). The manner of use — the formal choices through which English is deployed — is where the politics of postcolonial writing is inscribed and can be read.

The 'privileging norm' that Ashcroft et al. identify is the standard against which all formal deviation is measured: standard international English as the unmarked norm, to which the postcolonial writer's departures appear as local colour, error, or charming exoticism. A postcolonial text that conforms to this norm — that writes in standard English, that adopts metropolitan genres without transformation, that addresses metropolitan concerns — achieves what Ashcroft et al. call 'access to a wide readership' at the cost of 'abrogating the reality of specific cultures and conditions' (10). The price of metropolitan legibility is cultural specificity. A text that refuses to conform — that inserts Urdu words without glossaries, that deploys ironic satire against metropolitan expectations of redemptive narrative, that refuses to explain Pakistani institutional reality to uninitiated readers — asserts cultural specificity at the cost of metropolitan legibility. This is formal dimension of the double bind: the structural tension between intelligibility and authenticity, between access and accountability inscribed in every sentence the postcolonial writer produces. Ashcroft himself later extended this framework in *Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001) where he traces the appropriation strategy across language, allegory, history and place arguing that transformation — the seizure and reworking of imperial discursive forms is the single most consistent strategy through which postcolonial societies have contested colonial control. The present article applies this extended framework to a dimension Ashcroft's 2001 study addresses only briefly: genre and narrative closure which are treated here as sites of transformation fully as significant as language.

2.2 Fanon, Language, and the Politics of Colonial Acquisition

Frantz Fanon's analysis of the politics of colonial language acquisition in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) provides psycho-political dimension that Ashcroft et al.'s structural account requires. Fanon's foundational claim 'to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture' (25) means that the postcolonial writer's relationship to English is never merely linguistic but always simultaneously cultural and political. The acquisition of metropolitan English norms is simultaneously the acquisition of a metropolitan worldview: 'The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is' (25). Applied to literary production, mastery of standard international English literary style is not politically neutral

achievement but assimilative cultural practice, a gaining of whiteness in Fanon's sense, a submersion of the linguistic particularity that carries cultural world of the primary culture.

The converse is equally significant for the writer who refuses metropolitan English norms, who maintains the code-switching and Urdu cadences and syntactic patterns of Pakistani English rather than refining them into standard literary English asserts what this article calls linguistic sovereignty — the insistence on primary culture's linguistic reality as a valid literary medium in its own right rather than as deviation from metropolitan standard that must be corrected or explained. This is not linguistic limitation but political choice: the choice to bear the cultural world of the primary culture in the language of the text, even at the cost of opacity to readers who do not inhabit that world.

2.3 Bhabha's Mimicry and the Formal Politics of Almost-the-Same

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of colonial mimicry provides the third theoretical dimension: the formal politics of approximation. Mimicry is 'the desire for a subject that is almost the same, but not quite... almost the same but not white' (89). The mimic subject is never fully identical to the metropolitan original — always carries traces of difference, of the primary culture, of the linguistic and cultural world that metropolitan forms cannot fully absorb. These traces are, in Bhabha's analysis, the site of the mimic's potential resistance: the gap between the almost and the not quite is where colonial discourse's claim to authority is most vulnerable to subversion. Applied to literary form, the Pakistani writer whose English is 'almost' standard — who writes recognisably in the metropolitan literary tradition but whose Urdu cadences, ironic excess, and institutional specificity mark it as different — occupies the mimicry position resistantly. The almost-the-same is the political position. By contrast, the writer who closes the gap — who produces metropolitan literary English so polished that it is indistinguishable from metropolitan production — performs what this article analyses as formal assimilation: the achievement of full mimicry without the resistant imperfection that gives mimicry its critical force.

3. Hanif's Formal Resistant Appropriation: Genre, Language, and Closure

3.1 Genre Subversion: The Mongrel Text

Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* appropriates multiple metropolitan genres simultaneously and subverts each for postcolonial Pakistani purposes. The novel draws on the noir thriller, the medical drama, the social realist novel and magical realist narrative but refuses the generic purity that each convention demands. The result is what might be called a mongrel genre - a deliberate mixing that refuses metropolitan demands for recognisable market legible form while appropriating those forms' narrative resources for locally accountable ends.

The marriage plot typically romantic in Western literary fiction, oriented towards courtship, union and domestic resolution is appropriated and transformed beyond recognition. In *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, Alice's marriage to Teddy Butt is not romantic achievement but a survival

strategy and it ends not in domestic happiness but in Alice's murder at her husband's hands. The conventional romantic arc is preserved structurally for Alice meets Teddy, they court, they marry but its ideological content is entirely replaced. Where the metropolitan marriage plot affirms heterosexual union as personal and social completion, Hanif's marriage plot exposes masculine entitlement as form of violence that the state enables and normalises. The ceremony takes place on a submarine arranged through Teddy's police connections — institutional corruption domesticised as romantic adventure. The honeymoon period is characterised by Teddy's jealous monitoring of Alice's professional interactions. The resolution is murder. The genre's conventions are present, but their political function has been entirely reversed.

The thriller plot undergoes parallel subversion. Alice's dangerous navigation of the Sacred Heart Hospital's institutional politics, her management of sexual harassment from colleagues, her support with Noor, the accumulating threat from Teddy builds suspense in the thriller's conventional manner. But where the thriller conventionally resolves into triumph of individual intelligence over systemic threat, Hanif's narrative refuses this resolution. The systemic threat of the G Squad, the informal economy of institutional corruption, the structural vulnerability of Christian women to violence is not overcome by individual heroism but confirmed by Alice's death. The thriller's promise of individual resolution is formally present; it is fulfilled by the opposite of what the genre conventionally delivers. This subversion is the formal mechanism of resistant appropriation: the metropolitan genre is seized and emptied of its ideological content, refilled with the political reality of Pakistani institutional life.

Pooja Sancheti (2022), in the study of Hanif's formal strategies, observes that his magical realism similarly refuses its conventional function. Where the dominant tradition of South Asian magical realism — associated with Salman Rushdie and his influence — uses magic to create a sense of postcolonial abundance, exuberance, and metaphysical amplitude, Hanif's magic is minimal, concentrated in individual women, and consistently ineffective: it 'offers neither hope nor succour' (140). Alice's quasi-miraculous healing powers cannot save her; the posthumous canonisation achieved in her father's Vatican letter achieves nothing within the novel's timeframe. The magical realist convention of transcendence-through-magic is formally present and formally denied. As Sancheti observes, Hanif's fiction is 'stubbornly local in its situatedness' (140) — a quality she identifies against the cosmopolitan, metropolitan-legible default of post-9/11 Pakistani writing. The stubbornness is formal: genre conventions are appropriated, their consolatory functions refused. Bakhtin (1981) supplies the theoretical vocabulary this mixing calls for: the novel, on his account, is constitutively heteroglossic, its unity achieved not by generic purity but by the orchestrated collision of incompatible discourses and genres within a single form. Hanif's mongrel text is heteroglossia turned to explicit political purpose — the collision of noir, medical drama, and magical realism is not stylistic exuberance but the formal

record of a social world in which no single genre's ideological promises can be honoured. Faris (2004) provides complementary account of the magical realist strand arguing that the mode's characteristic achievement is to render the marvellous and the quotidian narratively equivalent refusing the reader a stable frame from which to dismiss the magical as merely symbolic. Hanif inherits this equivalence but withholds the mode's more common consolatory use where Faris's paradigm cases typically deploy magical realism's remystification to recover wonder or possibility foreclosed by rationalist modernity, Hanif's magic remains as Sancheti observes stubbornly inefficacious present in the narrative's texture but denied any power to alter its outcomes.

3.2 Vernacular Linguistic Sovereignty: The Resistant Sentence

The formal politics of Hanif resistant appropriation is most precisely readable at the level of individual sentence. His English is systematically and pervasively inflected with Urdu and Punjabi cadences, vocabulary and syntactic patterns in ways that constitute distinct Pakistani English literary register that Ashcroft et al. 'privileging norm' would classify as deviant but that this article analyses as politically sovereign.

The most immediately visible feature is lexical as Hanif does not italicise Urdu words or provide glossaries. 'Dupatta', 'paish', 'chai', 'Muslas' — Pakistani English vocabulary appears as unmarked, normalised elements of the text's linguistic world. The refusal of italicisation is politically significant: italicisation marks Urdu words as foreign in the English text, positioning them as cultural specificity requiring explanation for a metropolitan readership assumed to be the text's primary audience. Hanif's non-italicisation performs the opposite assumption: Pakistani readers who inhabit this linguistic world are the primary audience, and metropolitan readers who do not are the ones who must work harder. The formal choice is simultaneously a choice of audience and a choice of political orientation. Rushdie (1991), in the essay that gives *Imaginary Homelands* its title, describes this kind of linguistic practice as a struggle to 'remake' English for postcolonial purposes rather than to write within the language exactly as the coloniser left it — a struggle he frames as itself a form of political freedom-making, since 'to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free.' Hanif's unglossed vocabulary and Urdu-inflected syntax are a formal instance of exactly this remaking: the language is not merely used but altered at the level of the sentence to accommodate a Pakistani rather than metropolitan center of gravity.

Beyond lexical choice Hanif's English deploys syntactic patterns shaped by Urdu structure. Joseph Bhatti's instruction to his daughter 'These Muslas will make you clean their shit and then complain that you stink. And our own brothers at the Sacred? They will educate you and then ask you why you stink' (Hanif 2011, 1) is English in vocabulary but Pakistani in rhythm, syntax and register. The question tag structure of 'And our own brothers at the Sacred?' deploys oral Pakistani English speech patterns, the blunt register refuses literary smoothing. This sentence as Bina Shah (2014)

observes of exactly this kind of sentence such Pakistani speech patterns rarely survive the passage in standardised literary English and its presence is precisely the formal assertion of literary sovereignty as Pakistani speech patterns belong in literary English as fully as any metropolitan convention.

Empirical research confirms that this is not idiosyncrasy but systematic formal politics. Akhtar, Baig, Aslam, Khan, Tayyaba and Iqbal (2020) applying the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to Hanif's code-switching demonstrate that his English-Urdu alternation 'consciously or unconsciously utilizes the technique of code-switching and code-mixing to highlight and promote native/local identities and cultural values' (368). The Whorfian framework implies that code-mixed language does not merely carry Pakistani content but encodes Pakistani worldview: the syntactic and lexical patterns of Urdu-inflected English carry with them the conceptual structures of linguistic world they inhabit. Metropolitan English stripped of these structures would carry a different conceptual world. The code-switching is therefore not a concession to multilingual Pakistani reality but an assertion of it — a formal inscription of the primary culture's linguistic sovereignty in the text.

Qasim, Anwar and Nawaz (2021) provide corpus based confirmation of this formal innovation. Their analysis of phrasal verb patterns in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* demonstrates that Hanif's English deploys structural patterns 'which had not been categorised in earlier studies' (139) empirically measurable linguistic departures from standard literary English norms. This is formal appropriation at the micro-syntactic level: English grammatical structures are used in ways that English grammar does not conventionally license because Pakistani English linguistic reality operates according to different rules. The 'abrogation' of the 'privileging norm' is empirically documentable not merely interpretively claimed.

Hanif's linguistic practice can be located more precisely on broader spectrum of strategies available to Pakistani Anglophone writers running from mediating English (glossed, explanatory written with a metropolitan reader's ignorance in mind) through elevating English (a dense literary register that asserts aesthetic seriousness without code-switching) to appropriating English (untranslated, unglossed, syntactically marked by Urdu structure) and at the far pole assimilating English (a cosmopolitan standard register stripped of local linguistic trace). Hanif occupies the appropriating position on this spectrum with unusual consistency; the significance of that position and of its opposite becomes fully visible in comparison with Hamid's practice in Section 4.2.

3.3 Narrative Closure: The Formal Refusal of Consolation

The third dimension of Hanif's formal resistant appropriation is his systematic refusal of consolatory narrative closure. Metropolitan literary fiction particularly literary fiction about Third World suffering as consumed by metropolitan audiences conventionally offers some form of redemptive arc: the individual who triumphs despite oppressive circumstances the community that preserves its dignity against systemic violence, the protagonist whose

death achieves symbolic meaning that transcends its political causes. Hanif refuses every available form of this consolation.

Alice Bhatti dies at Teddy's hands. The death is not symbolically redemptive: it is the outcome of the structural violence the novel has been documenting throughout. The police, who employ Teddy, will not investigate; the hospital will process Alice's case as it processes every other institutional failure — bureaucratically, perfunctorily, without consequence for those responsible. The French Colony will mourn, and the mourning will be as institutionally invisible as Alice's life was. The only formal gesture toward transcendence — Joseph Bhatti's letter to the Vatican seeking his daughter's canonisation, the prayer group — is presented with such satirical irony that it functions as exposure rather than consolation: a community's desperate need for miracle in a state that provides none, transformed by the narrative voice into institutional critique rather than spiritual uplift. This refusal is worth situating against a broader generic tendency. Erwin (2012) shows that prizewinning global novels in English typically resolve the representational problem posed by a suffering subaltern character by rendering that character narratively exceptional — lifting her out of her structural position through individual transformation, so that the reader's discomfort at systemic injustice is absorbed into satisfaction at one character's escape. Alice's death forecloses this exit formally as well as narratively: there is no exceptional survival to redeem the structural critique, no individual transcendence for the reader to substitute for systemic change. Where the genre Erwin describes typically closes the subaltern problem through individual resolution, Hanif's formal refusal of closure leaves it open.

Bibi, Saddiqi, Khan, and Shah Zeb (2025) provide the formal analysis of how this closure politics operates at the linguistic level. Their feminist stylistics study of fragmentation in the novel demonstrates that Hanif's objectifying language — the fragmentation of Alice's body into sexualised parts by the male characters who harass her simultaneously enacts and criticises the male gaze. The formal strategy is one of deliberate implication: the language that objectifies Alice is present in the text, but surrounded by irony, dark humour, and exaggerated register that make the gaze 'ridiculous and violent' (Bibi et al. 2025, 827) rather than naturalised. The representation is not comfortable; it makes the reader uncomfortable because the discomfort is the point. Metropolitan literary convention would soften this — would filter the objectifying language through sympathetic characterisation that distances the reader from it. Hanif refuses the filter. The formal discomfort is the resistant gesture.

4. Hamid's Formal Assimilative Appropriation: Allegory, Language, and Resolution

4.1 Kafkaesque Genre Adoption: Allegory Without Transformation

Where Hanif subverts metropolitan genres, Hamid adopts them. *The Last White Man's* formal template is unmistakably Kafka's *Metamorphosis* — the foundational text of European existentialist allegory about bodily transformation, social alienation, and the loss of recognisable

identity. When Anders wakes to find his skin has darkened overnight:

One morning Anders, a white man, woke up to find he had turned a deep and undeniable brown. This dawned upon him gradually, and then suddenly, first as a sense as he reached for his phone that the early light was doing something strange to the color of his forearm, subsequently, and with a start, as a momentary conviction that there was somebody else in bed with him... (Hamid 2022, p. 7)

The Kafkaesque inheritance is legible in every formal feature: the matter-of-fact registration of the impossible, the anxious first-person-adjacent focalization, the gradual domestication of the monstrous, the social reverberations of the transformed body. Ahsen, Shakoar, and Nubi (2024) provide the most detailed mapping of the Kafka-Hamid parallels, demonstrating that both texts dramatise existential horror at bodily transformation while targeting fundamentally different anxieties: where Kafka addresses capitalist alienation in industrial Europe, Hamid addresses racial anxiety in post-demographic-change Anglo-America — a concern Munos (2012) traces already at work, in more explicitly Pakistani-American form, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist's* staging of racial melancholia. The formal inheritance is precise; what differs is the ideological content deployed within the form. Deleuze and Guattari (1986) supply a further test the Ashcroft framework alone does not: they locate Kafka's own radicalism in his position as a Jewish writer deterritorialising German from within Prague, a structurally minor position relative to the major language he wrote in. Genuine appropriation of the Kafkaesque mode, on this account, would require an analogous structural relationship between the borrowing writer and the form's address — a minor position from which the major genre is seized and turned. Hamid's relationship to the Kafkaesque allegory shows no such structural minority: his English is the major language of metropolitan publishing, his implied readership is the metropolitan mainstream, and his position relative to the genre is that of a fluent insider rather than a deterritorialising outsider. The form is not merely borrowed but borrowed from a position with no structural resistance built into it.

The critical question is whether this constitutes appropriation in Ashcroft et al.'s sense — the seizure of the metropolitan form and its investment with new, resistant postcolonial meaning — or assimilation: the adoption of the metropolitan form with its ideological orientation substantially intact. Ashcroft et al. distinguish between 'appropriation,' which involves 'the power to select those features of the imperial culture which may be of use... [and] to invest them with new meanings' (79), and assimilation, which leaves the form's ideological orientation unchanged. Hamid's use of the Kafkaesque allegory looks closer to assimilation by this criterion he adopts Kafka's formal apparatus but applies it to a scenario of white racial panic in an Anglo-American setting that is defined by Western not Pakistani cultural anxieties. The form is borrowed; its ideological content is not transformed toward postcolonial resistant purposes but toward metropolitan concerns.

Perveen, Rashid, and Aqeel (2025) describe Hamid's generic strategy as a 'poetics of disruption' that combines magical realism, urban fantasy, and dystopian elements to create 'a conspicuous discursive space' — formally innovative, but, as this article argues, accessible to any metropolitan reader without requiring knowledge of Pakistani social reality. Anam, Ajmal, and Sharif (2024), in the only Genettian narratological study of the novel, demonstrate that Hamid's heterodiegetic narration and paragraph-length comma-driven sentences enact racial disorientation at the syntactic level — an accomplished formal strategy that serves the novel's psychological and emotional purposes. What neither the 'poetics of disruption' nor the narratological analysis can account for is why a Pakistani writer has chosen a form that requires no Pakistani cultural knowledge to read, addresses no Pakistani social reality, and serves a set of metropolitan concerns about race that are structurally disconnected from the racial and ethnic dynamics of Pakistani society. The formal choices are technically accomplished; their political orientation is assimilative.

4.2 Cosmopolitan Standard English: The Language of Nowhere in Particular

The Last White Man is written in an English so cleanly metropolitan that its Pakistani authorship is invisible at the formal level. There are no Urdu words, no Pakistani idioms, no code-switching, no vernacular rhythms, no linguistic traces of the primary culture. The prose is spare, psychologically precise, rhythmically controlled through long comma-spliced sentences that achieve their effect through accumulation rather than image:

Anders's father died on a crisp, clear morning, shortly after dawn, and Anders was with him in his room when he passed, for he had noticed the change in his father's breathing that night, and he had stayed there with him, and his father had opened his eyes in the darkness, and he had seen Anders at his bedside, Anders seeing his father seeing Anders, and Anders's father had shut his eyes again... (Hamid 2022, p. 96)

This prose could appear without modification in a novel by Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, or any major Anglo-American literary writer. It is unmarked by cultural specificity — no word, no syntactic pattern, no register marks it as Pakistani. The occupations are generic Anglo-American designations: gym worker, yoga instructor, hospice nurse. The locations are described as 'the town,' 'the supermarket,' 'his father's house.' The formal choices constitute what Kachru (1985) would call 'inner circle' English — the English of the former colonial powers — produced by a writer from what Kachru terms the 'outer circle' (Pakistan, India, Nigeria), where English functions as a second language in a postcolonial context, and where Pakistani English itself has been formally recognised as a distinct institutionalised variety with its own internal norms rather than a deficient approximation of the metropolitan standard (Baumgardner 1995). The achievement of inner-circle fluency is, in Kachru's framework, a demonstration of English's spread and institutionalisation in postcolonial contexts; in Fanon's

framework, it is the linguistic 'whitening' that gains metropolitan acceptance at the cost of the primary culture's linguistic world.

The contrast with Hanif is formally precise and empirically measurable. Akhtar et al.'s (2020) and Qasim et al.'s (2021) studies document formal linguistic innovation in Hanif's English — departures from metropolitan norms at the lexical, syntactic, and structural levels. No comparable study exists for Hamid's language in *The Last White Man* because there is nothing comparable to document: the prose exhibits no departures from inner-circle norms. This is not a failure but a choice — a formal political choice to achieve the complete mimicry that Bhabha identifies as the closure of the gap between 'almost the same' and 'the same.' Where Hanif exploits the gap resistantly, Hamid closes it assimilatively, achieving the metropolitan legibility that the privileging norm rewards.

On the spectrum introduced in Section 3.2, Hamid's practice occupies the assimilating pole directly opposite Hanif's appropriating one. The two writers thus mark out the full range of the spectrum between them: mediating and elevating English remain available, intermediate positions, occupied elsewhere in Pakistani Anglophone fiction, but Hanif and Hamid define its outer limits with unusual formal clarity.

4.3 Narrative Resolution: The Assimilative Closure

The Last White Man ends with accommodation and resolution. Anders and Oona's relationship survives the transformation; they have a daughter described as 'a tough little girl in a fragile little body, soon long and lean and quietly ferocious in her gaze' (Hamid 2022, 115). The racial metamorphosis — initially traumatic, productive of social violence and personal crisis — is absorbed into the continuity of private life. The political crisis of whiteness's disappearance resolves into the personal continuation of love and family. The lyrical final passages — 'the years went by swiftly for Anders and Oona, more and more swiftly, as they do for us all' — offer the consolation that Hanif's narrative systematically refuses: beauty of expression as recompense for political irresolution, temporal passage as substitute for structural change.

Saqib, Tariq and Abrar's (2024) Derridean deconstruction of novel illuminates the formal mechanism of this resolution. They demonstrate that the novel simultaneously dismantles and reinstates racial stereotypes, chaos and violence are associated throughout with the process of darkening, the restoration of social order is associated with accommodation to the new racial reality. The formal narrative arc of crisis, accommodation, resolution is the arc of liberal reconciliation: the racial anxiety is real, the violence is real but the resolution available in the narrative's formal structure is individual and domestic rather than structural and political. Oona's mother's extremism is noted and mourned but the broader social structures that produce racial violence are not transformed. The formal closure of the marriage-and-child resolution absorbs the political crisis into private life offering metropolitan readers the emotional satisfaction of resolution without the political challenge of structural critique. Dyer (1997) supplies the theoretical name

for what this closure restores: whiteness functions socially as an unmarked, invisible norm and a narrative that resolves racial crisis into domestic continuity of a family quietly persisting, race no longer remarked upon returns whiteness's absence to the same unmarked status that its presence formerly occupied. The formal structure does not interrogate the norm Dyer describes; it re-establishes an equivalent one.

5. The Formal Contrast is Measurable: Empirical and Formal Evidence

The argument of this article might appear interpretive — a political reading imposed on formal choices rather than derived from them. The empirical and formal scholarship surveyed in this section demonstrates that the formal contrast between Hanif's resistant appropriation and Hamid's assimilative appropriation is not merely interpretive but measurable, documentable and confirmable through multiple independent analytical approaches.

On Hanif's side, the formal evidence accumulates from several independent research traditions. Akhtar et al.'s (2020) sociolinguistic study documents code-switching as a systematic, not incidental, feature of Hanif's English. Qasim et al.'s (2021) corpus study documents phrasal verb patterns that depart from standard English categorisation. Bibi et al.'s (2025) feminist stylistics study documents fragmentation as a quantitatively measurable textual strategy with both representational and resistant functions. Sancheti's (2022) comparative magical realism study documents the formal departure from South Asian magical realism norms in the direction of local situatedness and resistance to consolatory closure. These four studies, using four different methodological approaches — sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics, feminist stylistics, and comparative literature — converge on the same formal political reading: Hanif's text is formally resistant, formally marked as departing from metropolitan norms, formally oriented toward a primary-culture audience.

On Hamid's side, the formal evidence is equally convergent. Anam et al.'s (2024) narratological study documents the heterodiegetic narration and comma-driven syntactic rhythm as metropolitan literary techniques deployed without transformation. Ahsen et al.'s (2024) Kafka comparison documents the formal inheritance without documenting formal transformation toward postcolonial resistant ends. Perveen et al.'s (2025) identification of a 'poetics of disruption' confirms the novel's formal innovation while also confirming — through its analysis of the novel's accessibility to metropolitan readers — that this innovation does not require Pakistani cultural knowledge to read. Saqib et al.'s (2024) Derridean analysis documents the formal contradiction between the novel's ostensible racial critique and its narrative structure, which reinstates the racial anxieties it claims to challenge. These studies, again using different methodological approaches, converge on the same formal reading: Hamid's text is formally assimilative, formally unmarked by Pakistani specificity, formally oriented toward metropolitan concerns and audiences.

The convergence of independent research from different theoretical traditions on the same formal political

distinction confirms that the distinction is not an interpretive imposition but a formal feature of the texts themselves. Formal resistance and formal assimilation are inscribed in the texts at the level of language, genre, and narrative structure — available to multiple analytical approaches, recoverable through multiple methodological frameworks. The political reading of literary form is not speculative but demonstrable.

6. Implications: Formal Analysis as Political Evaluation in Postcolonial Studies

The argument of this article has implications beyond the specific comparison of Hanif and Hamid that it demonstrates. If formal resistant and assimilative appropriation are inscribed in literary texts at measurable levels — in language, genre, and narrative structure — then formal analysis is not only an aesthetic practice but a political one. The postcolonial literary critic who attends to formal features is engaging in political analysis: identifying the intellectual commitments encoded in formal choices, reading the orientation of the text toward or away from its primary culture, evaluating the extent to which metropolitan forms are transformed or adopted in the writing's formal structure.

This has consequences for how Pakistani Anglophone fiction is evaluated. The existing critical scholarship on both novels is overwhelmingly thematic: it asks what the novels represent, whose stories they tell, which theoretical frameworks illuminate their content. The formal dimension — how they tell those stories, in what language, through what genre conventions, with what relationship to metropolitan literary norms — is addressed in specialist linguistic and formal studies but rarely integrated into the broader critical evaluation of the novels' political orientation. This article proposes that formal analysis should be central rather than supplementary to political evaluation of postcolonial fiction.

Applied to Pakistani Anglophone fiction more broadly, the formal criterion generates a different critical canon from the thematic one. Writers who practice formal resistant appropriation — who write in vernacular-inflected Pakistani English, who subvert metropolitan genres for local purposes, who refuse consolatory closure — may achieve less metropolitan recognition while producing work of greater formal political significance. Writers who practice formal assimilation — who adopt metropolitan styles, genres, and narrative conventions without transformation — may achieve greater metropolitan legibility and commercial success while producing work whose political orientation is formally accommodationist — a dynamic Huggan (2002) and Brouillette (2007) each independently document at the level of the postcolonial literary market as a whole, where formal accessibility to metropolitan readers and commercial success are structurally linked to exactly the kind of generic and linguistic conformity this article identifies in Hamid's practice. The formal criterion cuts across the thematic: a novel can be thematically about Pakistani politics while being formally assimilative in its language and genre, and a novel can be formally resistant while addressing universal rather than specifically Pakistani concerns. Formal political analysis

provides dimension of evaluation that thematic analysis alone cannot deliver.

The Hanif and Hamid comparison demonstrates the stakes of this formal political analysis with unusual clarity because the two writers occupy the same structural position, same national origin, same metropolitan publishing circuits, same international critical attention while enacting opposite formal political orientations. Their contrast is not the contrast between the marginalised and the celebrated, the local and the global, the political and the aesthetic. It is the contrast between two possible formal responses to the same structural condition: two answers, in literary form, to the question of what Pakistani fiction in English is for and whom it serves.

7. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the political distinction between resistant appropriation and assimilative appropriation — between the two poles of Pakistani writers' navigation of the double bind — is inscribed in literary form and recoverable through formal and linguistic analysis. Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* and Hamid's *The Last White Man* embody formally opposed political orientations: the former practicing genre subversion that deploys metropolitan conventions against their ideological grain, vernacular linguistic sovereignty that maintains Pakistani English as a literary medium in its own right, and narrative refusal of consolatory closure that insists on the structural reality of Pakistani institutional violence; the latter practicing genre adoption that imports metropolitan allegorical form without postcolonial transformation, cosmopolitan standard English that erases the linguistic traces of the primary culture, and narrative resolution that absorbs the political crisis of racial transformation into private accommodation.

The formal contrast is not merely interpretive but measurable: independent empirical and formal scholarship — using sociolinguistics, corpus analysis, feminist stylistics, comparative literature, narratology, and deconstruction — converges on the same formal political reading from multiple methodological directions. This convergence confirms that formal resistance and formal assimilation are features of the texts themselves available to formal analysis as well as to political interpretation.

The argument's larger implication is for postcolonial literary studies as a critical practice: formal analysis is political analysis and a postcolonial criticism that attends to literary form, to language choice, genre subversion, narrative structure and the relationship to metropolitan literary norms is equipped to read the political orientation of postcolonial texts with a precision that thematic analysis alone cannot provide. In the specific context of Pakistani Anglophone fiction this means attending to how writers use English not merely to what they say in it — to the formal politics encoded in every sentence, every genre choice, every narrative resolution or refusal. The form is politics.

References

- Ahsen, Jian, Urooj Shakoor, and Nubi Gambari Nubi. 2024. 'Metamorphosis and Identity: Exploring Racial Reconfiguration in Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* (2022).' *International Premier Journal of Languages and Literature* 2(1): 58–76.
- Akhtar, Sumaira, Fatima Zafar Baig, Muhammad Zammad Aslam, Talia Khan, Sunbal Tayyaba, and Zafar Iqbal. 2020. 'Code-Switching and Identity: A Sociolinguistic Study of Hanif's Novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*.' *International Journal of English Linguistics* 10(1): 364–371.
- Anam, Saima, Muhammad Ajmal, and Hafiz Rana Sharif. 2024. 'A Structuralist Narratological Analysis of Mohsin Hamid's Novel *The Last White Man*.' *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 5(1): 11–22.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 1989. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge.
- Ashcroft, Bill. 2001. *Post-Colonial Transformation*. London: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Baumgardner, Robert J. 1995. 'Pakistani English: Acceptability and the Norm.' *World Englishes* 14(2): 261–271.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bibi, Hina, Sana Saddiqi, Shahbaz Ali Khan, and Chahat Shah Zeb. 2025. 'Women, Words, and Wounds: Fragmentation as Feminist Resistance in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*.' *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL* 8(3): 822–835.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1986. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White*. London: Routledge.
- Erwin, Lee. 2012. 'Domesticating the Subaltern in the Global Novel in English.' *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47(3): 325–339.
- Brouillette, Sarah. 2007. *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1952. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- Faris, Wendy B. 2004. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Hamid, Mohsin. 2022. *The Last White Man*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Hanif, Muhammad. 2011. *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Huggan, Graham. 2002. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge.
- Kachru, Braj B. 1985. 'Standards, Codification and Sociolinguistic Realism: The English Language in the Outer Circle.' In *English in the World: Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures*, edited by Randolph Quirk and Henry G. Widdowson, 11–30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Munos, Delphine. 2012. 'Possessed by Whiteness: Interracial Affiliations and Racial Melancholia in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.' *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48(4): 396–405.
- Perveen, Amreen, Fareeha Rashid, and Arshad Aqeel. 2025. 'Speculative Fiction or Conspicuous Discursive Space: Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man* as Poetics of Disruption.' *Social Sciences Spectrum* 4(1): 234–243.
- Qasim, Hafiz Muhammad, Iqra Anwar, and Muhammad Shafqat Nawaz. 2021. 'A Corpus-Based Analysis of Phrasal Verbs in Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*.' *Pakistan Journal of Language Studies* 5(1): 126–145.
- Raja, Masood Ashraf. 2018. 'The Pakistani English Novel: The Burden of Representation and the Horizon of Expectations.' *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies* 6.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1991. 'Imaginary Homelands.' In *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*, 9–21. London: Granta Books.
- Said, Edward W. 1983. *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sancheti, Pooja. 2022. 'Women, Violence, and Magical Realism in the Fiction of Mohammed Hanif.' *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 49(1–2): 136–154.
- Saqib, Muhammad, Nida Tariq, and Muhammad Abrar. 2024. 'Decentring Whiteness: A Critical Study of Race and Identity in Mohsin Hamid's *The Last White Man*.' *International Journal of Human and Society* 4(1): 1398–1406.
- Shah, Bina. 2014. 'Literature: The Antidote to the Pakistani Identity Crisis.' *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49(1): 3–10.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Gulzar Ali: Writing –review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Dr. Humaira Riaz:** review Supervision, Conceptualization.

© The Author(s) 2026. Published by Department of English, University of Chitral.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.