



**Exploring Female Autonomy in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*: A Feminist Analysis
of Black Women's Characterization**

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Abstract

This research paper utilizes a feminist perspective to analyse Zadie Smith's novel, *On Beauty*, with a specific focus on the characterization of Black women. The female characters in the novel challenge their marginalized positions and assert their independence, navigating the competing demands of motherhood, sexuality, body image, career, and ideology. Smith's diverse portrayal of women, including mothers and daughters, highlights the challenges of existing in a patriarchal society that often undermines their value. Although the female characters face affliction and torment, Smith's novel gives voice to those who have long been silenced and provides a platform for women to become autonomous. Through a thorough exploration of the narrative, this paper demonstrates that self-realization, self-knowledge, and consciousness are key instigators for female autonomy, even though societal labels may still be present. While the characters in *On Beauty* do not fully overcome their societal constraints, their small triumphs are worthy of commendation.

Keywords: feminism, race, gender, oppression, prejudice, identity, autonomy.

Introduction

The present paper discusses Zadie Smith's third novel, *On Beauty*, published in 2005. Smith is a contemporary British novelist, essayist, and short story writer whose work delves into issues such as class, political views, and sexuality, with a particular focus on women. The novel explores the inherent imbalance of power between men and women in society, where women are often not given an equal standing as their male counterparts. Throughout the novel, Smith highlights the struggles that all women face under the weight of societal expectations. By examining the themes in *On Beauty*, readers are forced to appreciate the dilemmas that twenty-first century women confront.

In *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith describes the lives of two separate families, the Belseys and Kippses, including their children, beliefs, cultures, and contradictions, as well as their interactions with one another. Smith portrays the events from numerous perspectives while adopting the identities of many characters. By observing how the characters interact, the reader may see the problems that exist between them. The suffering of the mother and daughter figures in the novel is problematic not only in terms of gender but also in terms of race and class. Carlene Kipps and Kiki Belsey, two wife-mother figures—one conventional and the other modern—are placed side by side to highlight the development of female consciousness in the twenty-first century.

In *On Beauty*, Smith delves into Kiki's mind to reflect on her experiences as a black woman in a predominately white culture. Kiki, a middle-aged black lady, is subject to societal stereotypes due to her ethnicity and gender. The novel shows how Kiki deals with oppression brought on by both racial and sexual stereotypes, as well as by her perception of herself in society. A white working-class British man who is Kiki's father-in-law demonstrates the pervasive racism that white people have for black people. Undoubtedly, he keeps it to himself and never displays it publically, but his heart is filled with hatred for

black people. As written in the novel, “Harry surely hadn’t meant to tell his only son that you couldn’t expect black people to develop mentally like white people do” (296). Because of their race, Harry sees them as inferior to white people. Moreover, black females are stereotyped as being immoral by him. While making generalizations about black females’ promiscuity, he also judges his own daughter-in-law, “She found a black fella, I spose. It was always going to happen, though. It’s in their nature.” (301). However, in reality, it is Howard who cheats on Kiki with Claire, who is a white woman. Harry’s stereotyping of Kiki portrays the way white males traditionally perceive black women. In the essay “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence” Evelyn M. Hammonds cites the negative connotations of the black female body at the end of the nineteenth century, arguing that experts in certain fields of scientific study believed that “the black female embodied the notion of uncontrolled sexuality.” (33) This is their conception of black women, and that is how people have traditionally demonised black females. As there is no direct connection to any form of contact between Harry and Kiki to get to know each other intimately, Harry’s judgements of Kiki are considered as prejudiced. Kiki’s children, on the other hand, stereotype their mother if it differs from how Harry does. Jerome uses her mother’s physique and body to describe her. “I love you, Mom,’ said Jerome ardently. You’re gonna get through this. You’re a strong black woman.” (166). Kiki’s appearance and her physical qualities shape the way her children characterize her. Kiki is a large woman. Thus, her family thinks her as “tough and insensitive.” (34) Without knowing her feelings deep inside, they classify her as “strong black woman” (166). She herself realizes that, “People had been telling her this her whole life. She supposed she was lucky that way – there are worse things to be told. But the fact remained: as a sentence it was really beginning to bore the hell out of her.” (166).

In her realization, Kiki considers the discrepancy between her own personality and the image she projects to the world. The novel describes how society creates a false picture of black women based on their appearance and skin tone while also revealing the anguish and uncertainty these women experience upon discovering their artificial image. Judith Farr Tormey argues:

Since oppression demands influences on psychological states one is made to have beliefs about oneself including beliefs about the proper social position for one to occupy that result in patterns of behaviour which conform to an inferior or subsidiary role. . . Moreover, she goes on to say that in its symbolic meaning being down is central to oppression whether it is relative merely to one’s moods or one’s social status (38).

Although Kiki belongs to the upper-middle class, her deteriorated self-image makes her feel oppressed. When she is with white people, she still feels a sense of inferiority. When she is in the market with Warren, a mutual acquaintance, she believes that he finds her funny and amusing because she is a middle-aged black female, “the white American boys: I’m Aunt Jemima on the cookie boxes of their childhoods, the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry played around.” (51). Consequently, even though she is not a working class, she still feels mentally oppressed due to her socially generated self-image. “Sometimes you get a glimpse of how you appear to others. This one was very awful: ‘a black woman in a headwrap, approaching with a bottle in one hand and a plate of food in the other, like a maid in an old movie.’” (98). In Tormey’s terms, Kiki feels “‘oppressed to be oppressed’ on account of her self-presentation in society.” (41)

Throughout the narrative, Kiki has confrontations with the people around her, which gradually lead her to develop autonomy and selfhood. Unlike a typical mother, Kiki refrains from being overly responsible for her children. She respects her children’s individuality by allowing them to make their own decisions. Kiki claims that even though she has three children, she does not have to embrace motherhood as a uniform to be worn all the time. For example, in response to Zora’s worries concerning Levi’s lifestyle, Kiki says: “I’m his mother – I’m not a jailer.” (197). She is unconcerned with the children’s troubles. She does not take undue care of them and feels they can overcome the obstacles on their own. She is not prone to overburdening herself with mothering; instead, she strives to be

both authoritative and kind. Kiki tells her children about their wrongdoings but does not accept responsibility. She has authority over the children and attempts to instil a feeling of responsibility in them by asking them to share household chores. Unlike a gloomy conventional mother, Kiki avoids self-sacrifice since she is aware of the conventional expectations of children from parents, particularly women:

The older we get the more our kids seem to want us to walk in a straight line with our arms pinned to our sides, our faces cast with the neutral expression of mannequins, not looking to the left, not looking to the right, and not – please not – waiting for winter. They must find it comforting (194).

To highlight Kiki's independence, which she achieves almost entirely by the end of the narrative, the author introduces Carlene, a conventional lady, as a comparison. Even before Kiki meets Carlene, Kiki's son Jerome, a disciple of Christianity and conservatism, expresses his admiration for Carlene's domesticity and her ideal position as a wife and mother in the Kipps' home. Jerome compares Carlene to Kiki's baking at home, a conventional feminine task that his mother is unlikely to perform. Carlene, a cherishing mother figure at home, undertakes the mission of "trying to fatten him" (Jerome) up. Besides while "the rest of the family talk about sports and God and politics" Carlene –floats above it all like a kind of angel" (4). Apart from her home duties, Carlene's interference in any other aspect of life is denied. The author emphasizes Carlene's invisibility from Howard's eyes, as she walks around her home like a ghost. It seems as though she has lost so much of her individuality that she is practically unrecognisable. It is clear from her conversation with Kiki that Carlene, who is wholly reliant on her husband and her family, feels the burden of being Sir Montague Kipps' wife. She gets upset even by being referred to as Mrs. Kipps rather than by her first name:

Oh, please...Carlene, please call me Carlene...I feel the pull of an office and paperclips whenever anybody calls me Mrs. Kipps. Years ago I used to help Montague in his office – there I was Mrs. Kipps. In England, if you will believe me...they even call me Lady Kipps because of Montague's achievements...proud as I am of Montague, I have to tell you – being called Lady Kipps feels like being dead already. I don't recommend it. (95).

Carlene implies the suffocating pangs of the inferior position to which she is condemned. Despite experiencing a form of death in life, Carlene seems to have accepted her lower status in her marriage. She used to believe in stereotypes about men and women such as: "men move with their minds, and women must move with their bodies, whether we like it or not. That's how God intended it." (96). Kiki on the other hand never resorts to such stereotypes, and speaks with self-confidence, saying "I guess I feel men and women use their minds about equally." (96). Kiki, who believes in gender equality, makes use of her emotions. She is outraged by Carlene's accommodating attitude towards male superiority and masculine idealisation of females. Kiki strives to remind Carlene, who claims she has never been a feminist, of her desires aside from Monty's fear of her as a wife:

I mean, your husband Monty for example...He writes a lot about...what a perfect mother you are, and he...often uses you as an example of the ideal – I guess, the ideal –stay-at-home! Christian Mom – which is amazing of course – but there must also be things you...maybe things you wanted to do that...maybe you wish (172)

Carlene replied "I wanted to love and to be loved."(172) Without access to other aspects of life that are believed to be reserved solely for males, women are left with just one option and that is love. Carlene's existence is solely motivated by her love for Monty.

Simone de Beauvoir distinguishes between the complexity of love for women and love for males. De Beauvoir defines love for women as "unconditional," transforming it from an emotion to a kind of "religion." (59) She refers to Nietzsche's thoughts on the matter:

The single word love in fact signifies two different things for man and woman. What woman understands by love is clear enough: it is not only devotion, it is a total gift of body and soul, without reservation, without regard for anything whatever. This unconditional nature of her love is what makes it a faith, the only one she has. As for man, if he loves a woman, what he wants is that love from her; he is in consequence far from postulating the same sentiment for

himself as for woman; if there should be men who also felt that desire for complete abandonment, upon my word, they would not be men. (60)

Love loses its essential qualities of being a shared existence and a mutual emotion between a man and a woman when transformed into a “life of dependency” to which a woman is “condemned.” When Carlene questions the meaning of her existence, she ends up asking her husband, “I don’t ask myself what did I live for...That is a man’s question. I ask whom did I live for.” (176). Therefore, when contemplating the purpose of her life, Carlene vainly concentrates on her husband Monty, which Kiki vehemently disagrees with. When Kiki experiences such existential issues, she does not offer the conventional justification, such as loving a man, like her friend Carlene does.

Kiki’s transformation in *On Beauty* gradually unfolds, prompted by her husband, Howard’s infidelity. Although deeply upset by Howard’s betrayal, Kiki hesitates to leave him quickly, claiming that “she was not quite done loving him, which was the same as saying she was not yet done with Love – Love itself being coeval with knowing Howard.” (60). Nevertheless, after some self-interrogation and self-awareness, she realizes that “things could not be exactly the same as they had been,” and therefore she rejects Howard’s attempts to return to the moments before his infidelity. “Kiki was not a fool and recognized the feeling for what it was: a dumb wish to go backwards.” (104). Having gained consciousness, Kiki expresses that her being in life is not and should not be contingent on her marriage, “Right now I’m trying to understand what my life’s been for – I feel I’m at that point – and what it will be for. And... that’s a lot more essential for me right now.” (176).

Kiki sadly points out to Howard that it is difficult for a woman to gain independence and the ability for self-definition if she devotes herself to a man. “I gave up my life for you. I don’t even know who I am any more...All I know is that loving you is what I did with my life.” (395). Frustrated by her marriage, Kiki feels the urge to embark on a journey to identify her identity and her reality in life. By the novel’s end, Kiki breaks her marriage and moves out to set herself up as an independent woman. Throughout the story, it is hinted that Kiki has the capacity to become liberated long before she changes into an independent woman. Carlene has experienced what it was like to be single before being married, but she has no hope for the future. Referring to the painting named *Maitresse Erzulie* hanging on the wall she says:

Like...? ‘Maitresse Erzulie,’ said Carlene, pointing to the painting. ‘You were admiring her, I thought.’

She’s fabulous,’ replied Kiki, only now taking the time to look at her properly. In the centre of the frame there was a tall, naked black woman wearing only a red bandana and standing in a fantastical white space, surrounded all about by tropical branches and kaleidoscopic fruit and flowers. Four pink birds, one green parrot. Three humming birds. Many Brown butterflies. It was painted in a primitive, childlike style, everything flat on the canvas. No perspective, no depth.

‘It’s a Hyppolite. It’s worth a great deal, I believe, but that’s not why I love it. I got it in Haiti itself on my very first visit before I met my husband. (174).

The painting serves as a reminder of her earlier, carefree years. She longs for those moments, but because she has internalized patriarchal ideals to such an extreme, she has lost all hope and is unable to function in the present society. In fact, her unexpected demise in the novel implies that women cannot survive without autonomy. Shoshana Felman claims that self-understanding occurs during the female awakening process through observations of both one’s own life and the lives of other women. Feminist awareness, then, is a process wherein a woman cultivates autonomy via both internal and external perception:

You became a feminist by writing this book, “says Jean-Paul Sartre. —I became a feminist when the book was read and started to exist for other women,” says Simone de Beauvoir. The bond of reading constitutes a renewed relation to one’s gender insofar as it establishes a relationship among all these becomings. (91)

Conclusion

It is clear from the novel that although women are aware of their secondary social status, it is painful but serves as the trigger for the need to gain autonomy. Smith introduced Kiki, an abused wife who experiences the psychological pain of being a black woman, as a symbolic figure for all women who are struggling to gain liberation and autonomy in their lives. By gaining consciousness, Kiki feels great pain, but this pain leads her to the path of self-hood. This self-realization inspires her to make changes in her own life and in the lives of those who are victims of the patriarchal society. This paper explores the whole narrative of *On Beauty* and concludes that in order for a woman to gain selfhood, she must forget and leave behind everything that socially defines her and venture into an alternative life of her own.

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