



Cultural Variety and Literary Representation in Zadie Smith's "White Teeth": A Study

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DOI - 10.5281/zenodo.18654769

Abstract:

Zadie Smith's groundbreaking novel, "White Teeth," acts as a detailed portrayal of the nuanced intricacies of cultural identity set against the lively backdrop of multicultural London. By intricately examining characters from various ethnic backgrounds, Smith investigates the complex facets of identity development, negotiation, and expression. This paper aims to analyse the representation of cultural identity in "White Teeth" by examining characters' conflicts, narrative methods, and thematic elements. Through exploring themes like hybridity, assimilation, religion, and gender, this analysis seeks to dissect the complex network of cultural identity formation within the story's narrative framework. In the end, this examination highlights the vibrant interaction between personal agency and social forces in defining one's identity amid the variety of cultural influences.

Keywords: *White Teeth, Cultural Identity, Multiculturalism, Hybridity, Postcolonialism.*

Introduction:

"White Teeth" is a highly regarded novel by Zadie Smith that delves into the intricacies of cultural identity within the vibrant environment of multicultural London. Released in 2000, the book showcases a wide variety of characters, each embodying a distinct aspect of London's multicultural fabric. The book delves into themes of race, faith, ancestry, and belonging with insight and humor, emphasizing the intricacies of managing various identities in a multicultural community.

The main focus of "White Teeth" is the investigation of cultural identity, which is profoundly connected throughout the novel. It explores how people create and manage their identities amid multiculturalism, examining the concept of belonging, the conflicts between

assimilation and cultural preservation, and the intricacies of balancing multiple identities in a varied society.

The importance of cultural identity exists not just in its thematic depth but also in its representation of wider societal truths. By illuminating the intricacies of cultural identity, "White Teeth" encourages readers to face their own assumptions and prejudices, urging them to reflect on the dynamic and complex essence of identity in a world that is becoming more globalised

This research paper will explore Zadie Smith's "White Teeth," analysing how the novel represents cultural identity via its characters, storytelling methods, and thematic investigations. Through examining the challenges faced by main characters, the narrative framework, and

underlying themes, this paper seeks to reveal the complex interplay of identity development and negotiation in the novel, providing enhanced insight into how personal experiences and wider social forces contribute to the formation of cultural identity.

The book presents a varied group of characters whose stories illustrate the complex aspects of cultural identity. Archie Jones, a disenchanted Englishman, seeks his place in a transforming society, while Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi immigrant, wrestles with the conflict between tradition and contemporary life. At the same time, Archie's daughter Irie along with the twins, Magid and Millat, represent the intricacies of hybrid identities influenced by their diasporic backgrounds.

Smith uses different storytelling methods to highlight the subtleties of cultural identity. The structure of the novel, defined by various viewpoints and nonlinear narrative, reflects the fragmented essence of identity within a multicultural society. Flashbacks and intertextuality deepen the narrative, emphasizing the connections among personal stories and the shared essence of cultural identity.

Thematically, "White Teeth" examines the complexities of cultural identity by exploring themes of hybridity, assimilation, religion, and gender. Characters face the challenges of adapting to British culture while maintaining their cultural identity, struggling with issues of authenticity and a sense of belonging. Religion, especially Islam and Christianity, acts as a center for identity development and community affiliation, mirroring the varied religious environment of modern London. Furthermore, gender dynamics intertwine with cultural identity, as female characters claim agency and confront conventional gender roles within their cultural settings

Set in North London, Smith's *White Teeth* explores the lives of immigrants living in the city. The significant gap between their desires and realisations, the clash between their native and new cultures, the struggle to adapt and the anxiety of fragmentation, the backlash from patriots, and the emergence of religious conservatives are showcased. The book conveys to the audience the challenges that immigrants encounter in the nation, their necessity to adapt to Western culture, the identity struggles they confront, the sense of alienation experienced by their offspring, and their aspiration to exist in an equally exotic utopia. Smith depicts modern London through unique lenses that reveal her broad viewpoint, capturing dialogues among individuals from diverse racial backgrounds.

White Teeth is an interwoven story of three families from distinct racial and religious backgrounds residing in London. Given the author's diverse racial heritage, she is able to depict North West London as a cultural melting pot filled with vibrant representations. Displaying a multi-ethnic community has been Smith's experience since she was born and raised in it. She vividly and impactfully portrays the everyday experiences of those residing in London. She employs the everyday vernacular of English found in northwest London and weaves it throughout the novel effortlessly. The book addresses pressing topics such as identity struggles, displacement, assimilation, cultural blending, racial animosity, and lack of belonging. She skillfully illustrates the social existence of individuals from a multicultural background through her meticulous and stylistic approach.

Positioning itself within the realm of post-colonial Diaspora Literature, *White Teeth* organizes its subaltern characters in a non-hierarchical manner, avoiding a central figure and establishing numerous micro centers throughout. Contrasting various elements such as Irie's

buckteeth and artificial hair with Chalfen's experimental rat, and Samad's masturbation alongside the end-of-the-world campaign in a remarkably open fashion, the novel promotes plurality and diversity amid a global exodus (Haque, 149).

The disparity between first-generation immigrants and their second-generation counterparts regarding their perspectives on identity issues and feelings of belonging adds a vibrant touch to the novel. The initial immigrants strive hard to integrate into the multicultural environment but sadly struggle to adapt and blend into British society. This rejection and the awareness among their children that their purported homeland is unwilling to embrace them as its own raise issues of identity and belonging. Where is the rightful place for these immigrants? Are they able to maintain the customs and heritage of their native land? Are they able to assert that they continue to be a part of their original community? Residing in Western society, they observe that their children gradually transform beyond recognition. All these situations are clearly portrayed through the characters created by Zadie Smith. She employs Samad Iqbal as her representative to express her thoughts on her identity crisis and feelings of alienation. As per Samad.

London is a city where you are never embraced, just accepted. Simply endure as if you are a pet that has finally learned to behave. Who would choose to remain? However, you have entered into a deal with the devil... It drags you in, and unexpectedly, you become unable to go back; your children are unfamiliar. You are absent (White Teeth, 407).

He believes the younger generation is prone to experiencing issues with their identity. Samad, a middle-aged expatriate with unfulfilled dreams, experiences reverse culture shock due to his frustrated aspirations. Somewhat unconventional in revitalising his racial and

cultural identity, he exaggerates his parenting role, leading to a misunderstanding of his children. To rectify his improper relationship with his children's music instructor Poppy Burt Jones, Samad chooses to send one of his twin sons to Bangladesh for the boy to learn and practice Islam in its authentic form. After being returned to Bangladesh at the age of nine, Magid becomes an atheist, much to his father's disappointment. Samad states, "The individual I sent home emerges as a true Englishman, dressed in white, a foolish wig lawyer." I have here a completely paid-up green bowtie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist. "I occasionally question why I make the effort" (White Teeth, 407).

As an identity crisis develops, the twin brothers opt for completely distinct paths in their quest for identity and a feeling of belonging. Magid chooses to embrace Atheism, has faith in science, and favors British attire, behavior, and perspective, while his brother Millat opts for a connection to their roots through religion, albeit with a unique twist. Though sharing a name with Muslim heritage, Millat becomes a member of an Islamic organization known as Keepers of the External and Victorious Islamic Nation (KEVIN). He also believes that his identity can never be authentic.

Briefly, he understood he lacked a presence in this nation, no representation in the land until the week prior, when, unexpectedly, individuals like Millat appeared on every station, every radio, and every publication, expressing their rage, and Millat acknowledged that rage, which acknowledged him in return, seizing it eagerly (Smith, 234).

Millat's inability to establish a complete identity lies in the conflict between his early and later teenage years. His indulgence in negative behaviours such as sex, drugs, and violence prompts his parents to blame the corrupting influence of the West. Millat's childhood identity

has been formed to resemble that of a white boy, having been born and raised in England. Unconcerned about his background, the Muslim youth Millat was spending time with his rebellious friends, skipping classes to view pornography and violent adult films, pursuing women with blonde and brunette hair, using marijuana, and causing anxiety for his parents. However, his sense of self and all his convictions start to break down when he becomes part of KEVIN. Millat begins to reject all these Western customs, and he realises that he must be authentic.

As a female author, Zadie Smith portrays the character Irie Jones to express the issue of identity. Irie was born to a Jamaican mother, Clara Bowden, and an English father, Archie Jones. Irie, a daughter of mixed English heritage, becomes fixated on English culture influenced by the Chalfant. Being a buck-toothed girl, she aspired to be a dentist, but after observing her mother Clara's dentures, she sought to uncover the root of her identity. Whenever Zadie Smith depicts Irie Jones, she always includes the phrase, "she held her hand gently on her belly." This behavior indicates her insecurity and desire to shield herself from an unseen threat. While at school, she attempts to alert Millat about the impending inspection targeting smokers and drug addicts, her hand gently resting on her stomach. She desires to eliminate her Afro hair resembling a wire spring, enduring the tormenting discomfort and irritation caused by the chemical Ammonia to straighten it. This illustrates the identity crisis she experiences, and it also represents an unsuccessful effort to discard the Jamaican characteristic she wishes to eliminate. After being intimate with the twins, she finds herself pregnant and wishes for the second son to be the first, and she remains uninterested in knowing the identity of her unborn child's father. Given that the Samad siblings are identical twins, a chromosome test

cannot determine the child's parentage, and therefore She loses her child's identity as a third-generation person; Irie seeks to learn about her heritage from her grandmother Hortense. She is afraid of space and desires her mother to recount her childhood, yet she is refused. She behaves in accordance with her name, which signifies 'be cool,' reflecting her demeanor. She makes every effort to emulate the Chalfens, who serve as her role models, yet she is not accepted into Chalfenism.

Conclusion:

By depicting cultural identity, "White Teeth" provides a deep understanding of the intricacies involved in identity creation and adjustment within multicultural communities. Smith's novel acts as a striking mirror of the rich blend of cultures that define modern London, encouraging readers to consider the shifting and evolving aspects of cultural identity in a more globalised society. In the end, "White Teeth" serves as a celebration of cultural diversity and the persistent search for connection within the intricacies of contemporary existence. Zadie Smith, a modern British author, reveals her experiences as a multicultural person in her book and examines contemporary society, which includes individuals embracing different cultures, religions, languages, and ways of life. She doesn't need to exert much effort to showcase the multicultural and multi-ethnic community since she resides with them and is one of them. Her initial effort to craft a novel has turned into a successful endeavour, earning her significant recognition. The book *White Teeth* has emerged as a landmark in modern literature, illuminating the path for those who explore themes of diaspora and its effects.

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