



An Analysis of Race, Migration, and Gender in Zadie Smith's White Teeth

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Abstract:

White Teeth (2000) by Zadie Smith is a book that takes place in a densely diverse London and it discusses how race, migration, and gender all intersect to create individual sense of identity and belonging. This paper explores the novel in the context of a postcolonial and intersectional approach by depicting how colonial past, life of diaspora, and gender conventions affect the main characters, especially Samad Iqbal, Clara Bowden, Alsana Begum, and Irie Jones, in two generations. The first-generation characters in Smith (immigrant children of Bangladesh and Jamaica) struggle to retain their cultures and assimilate, and their children who were born in Britain struggle with their lack of roots and their in-betweenness. The contextual analysis points out the presence of colonial past in the characters such as Samad, who now is a mimic man between cultures, and, as a result, his sons Magid and Millat represent contrasting reactions to the past. It also examines women agency within patriarchy: Clara and Alsana want to be independent but are oppressed by marriage and culture, Irie is strange and insecure because of her mixed-race background. The essay claims that White Teeth presents identity as a negotiable and fluid one. As critics put it, characters end up plotting their own paths so as to express their identities. The novel questions predetermined ideas about race or culture and focuses on the intersecting historical, diasporic, and gender pressure, which echo across various British diasporas.

Keywords:

White Teeth; postcolonial; intersectionality; hybridity; diaspora; gender performativity.

I. Introduction

White Teeth (2000) is a debut novel by Zadie Smith, the author whose works explore the world of multicultural melting-pot in London. The novel chronicles two families the English Joneses and the Bangladeshi Iqbals and their Jamaican-born Clara by intertwining previous events between World War II and the late 1990s. London as a city, which has been reshaped over the decades by immigration and colonialism, is more than a setting, it is a contact zone of race, migration, and gender. In one scholar, the novel by Smith traces the struggle of the diasporic identity and also doubt of Britishness in a de-centred and multi-ethnic London. Within this cultural-filled environment, the characters are hailing bargains between the traditions inherited and the current British norms. This essay discusses the ways in which the White Teeth book reflects race, migration and gender as being mutually controlling in creating identity and belonging. It claims that Smith criticises any fixed cultural/racial identity and instead the novel portrays the identity as dynamic and historically located. We demonstrate the use of both postcolonial and intersectional perspectives to analyze some of the main characters to reveal how people live with the impacts of colonial pasts and migration, how the past affects the current generation, and how the gender expectations bring about different challenges. In conclusion, the White Teeth does not show identity as something unique and definite but as something that is always negotiated because of the contradictory forces of society and represents a postcolonial Britain on its way.

II. Theoretical Framework

We invoke postcolonial theory, and diaspora studies and theory of gender/ intersectionality in order to frame this analysis. Postcolonial theorists focus more on how Empire history still has an identity effect: colonial and imperial formations drive a pattern of dominance and resistance through the generations. The idea of hybridity and the concept of the third space developed by Homi Bhabha can also be helpful in this case: the city becomes a place where cultural diversity is interpreted into a sort of solidarity, where, as a result, new identities emerge. The same is also applied to cultural identity by Stuart Hall who believes that instead of the single, true self, there are ruptures and discontinuities in identity and that it has to be perceived as a process of becoming. In White Teeth, the characters can be regarded as exemplars of this second model they lack an essentialist self, but rather a self that is an invention of history.

We also use the concepts of migration and diaspora. Diaspora academics place emphasis on rootlessness and multiple identities of migrants. In London, which is globalizing, the immigrants end up in perpetual negotiating position on the conflict between the past (homeland) and the present (Britain). This spatial/diasporic gaze is in keeping with the concept of convivial culture as proposed by Paul Gilroy in London as well as the third space of Bhabha (the city as a place of negotiation). The characters in Zadie Smith reside in this post-imperial London making up hybrid identities depending on diverse local spaces or networks. The concept of diasporic forms of escape developed by geographer Arjun Appadurai and the idea of chaos-monde developed by Glissant also reflects the aspect of migrants simultaneously being global and local.

Intersectionality and gender theory represent the means by which to comprehend the overlapping social categories. The concept of intersectionality by Kimberle Crenshaw points out to the fact that the experience of a black woman cannot be divided into the forms of racial discrimination and the forms of gender-based discrimination. This implies that we have to take into consideration the way *White Teeth* characters are influenced by a variety of factors. The theory of performativity by Judith Butler helps to remember that it is the social norms which create gender identity through repetitive actions. The novel represents these norms being negotiated by female characters, who occasionally work to maintain them and occasionally challenge them. We shall be listening to the intersection of race, gender, and migration in order to exclude or empower characters. The black feminist critique of Bell hooks also emphasizes the point that there is a need to analyze the combination of the race, class, and gender hierarchies. Overall, our model will incorporate postcolonial understanding (hybridity, historical memory) with the intersectional feminism and diaspora perspective (overlapping identities, rootlessness) to deconstruct the identity in *White Teeth* as explored by Smith.

III. Race and Postcolonial Identity.

The novel by Smith is well informed with the colonial history and events of Britain. The protagonists, Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones, were raised in the influence of the British imperialism. The researchers note that these men have already internalized the values and social codes established by the British Empire, and their emphasis on ancestry and assimilation is considerably greater, which they, in turn, would like to transfer to their sons. That is, Samad and Archie are longing to have a lost sense of imperial greatness, as they attempt to accomplish in present day London. Stuart Hall can come to the rescue in this point: cultural identity is not predetermined but instead what we have become due to the interventions of history. That this concept of identity as in development is unconsciously reflected in both men.

Samad particularly is an example of the immigrant living between cultures. Once he even states that he is now a mimic man, a colonial subject who is trying to align with the dictates of assimilation which are established by the empire. That is, Samad is aware that he has embraced the English lifestyles (his impersonation) yet he continues to experience a sense of being a foreigner in his two worlds. In spite of this realization, Samad still finds it hard to come to terms with his Bengali identity and English identity. He sends one of his sons (Magid) to Bangladesh hoping to teach him religious piety, and attempts to keep home in strict Muslim ways. The irony in this situation is that Samad feels that he always needs to belong and to possess a unitary identity - but he demands that his children follow other cultural codes.

This postcolonial struggle is manifested in Samad having two sons namely Magid and Millat Iqbal who are very different in their responses to colonial legacies. Magid, a Bangladeshi educated in Bangladesh, comes back ironically more English than the English and wears conservative clothes of a British barrister. He becomes assimilated to the extent that he becomes a pukka Englishman, white-suited, silly-wig lawyer. Meanwhile, as a London-upbringing, Millat renounces both Islam and English conformism and moves towards radical politics. Smith actually refers to his organization as K.E.V.I.N (an extremist group). In this opposition, hybridity is present in the novel: identity is fluidity as a range. According to the critic Mathew Head, these twin boys transform the room into history when they meet again and this symbolizes the conflict of the two inherited backgrounds (South Asian Muslim and British) in them.

The focus on race and colonial history in *Generationally*, *White Teeth* focuses on various experiences of these phenomena. The first-generation immigrants (Samad, Hortense, Clara) directly face the colonial and racial relations: i.e., the mother of Clara, Hortense, is Jamaican immigrant who faces racism in England, and Clara, in her turn, has Jamaican father (the colonial Captain Durham) and mother. In comparison, the second generation (Irie, the twins) is born in Britain, and is indirectly connected with colonial past. This is highlighted in one of the analyses: first-generation characters experience identity tensions in a different way compared to the second-generation characters such as Irie and the twins, who have never had any other home but Britain but still have to come to terms with identity and belonging issues.

To put it in other words, race among the younger characters is a more unclear heritage. Irie is Jamaican and English; the twins are English born Muslims whose perspectives are complicated; all of them are rootless in a way.

The very theme of teeth is racial and historical. Teeth are the symbols of identity (the face in the mirror) to such characters as Clara and Irie. However, there is a chilling scene when the children are shown teeth as a racial identification a policeman of white color by the name Mr. Hamilton tells the children that he used to recognize African enemies by the whitish color of their teeth at night. It is at this point, when an old white man describes how he was able to target the black people using white teeth, that the 2nd generation children are made to realize the existence of a deeply rooted case of racism that exists within the British society. The picture of white teeth flashing through the brown face, therefore, turns into the symbol of resilience (the smile on the characters faces) and the symbol of the racism and threat towards minorities. These aspects demonstrate that Smith places a burden on her characters in these two respects: they cannot just move into a post-racial Britain.

IV. Migration and Displacement

Migration - physical movement and psychological dislocation - is an essential part of the life of the characters. Samad arrived in England as a young man (as a student, one of the popular post-colonial migration routes) and established his residence in London where he is working as a taxi-driver. Hortense and Clara were Jamaican immigrants (Hortense, in the early 1970s to join the father of Clara, Clara as a child). These first generation immigrants are full of nostalgia and turmoil. According to critics, the world of post-imperial Britain is characterized by individuals having what they call shifting cultures and deterritorialized and fragmented identities. In fact, the urban environment of London has been transformed permanently in the face of globalization. Samad recollects a lot of his village life and regrets its loss and Hortense holds on to her faith as a savior in a new land. These two have the profound feeling of being rootless: they cannot stand to go back to their countries, and they cannot ever feel completely at home in England as well.

The immigrants have different displacement through their children. Irie, Magid, and Millat were born and brought up in England, and they have the heritage of their parents being uprooted. The former generation, as one of the analyses elucidates, constantly experience a feeling of being rootless, since they cannot establish themselves in [London] whereas the latter generation cannot identify with the society in London despite the fact that they were born there. Irie attempts to fit within the school environment, but she feels strange and insecure due to her appearance of being mixed-race. She even diet and straightens her hair in her efforts to Englishify herself, then she tries to find her roots as a Jamaican. This conflict - the desire to fit in and not lose the memory of the background - is a typical example of the identity of the diaspora.

Immigrant identities are also determined by social institutions and environments. Smith compares the environments and the spaces that her characters inhabit. To Samad and Archie, pubs and Mosques are de facto homelands. The two brothers are in a multicultural Islamic center which is ironically called Hosana High (a pun on hosting - immigrants - in a holy place). Places of work are also important: Magid is employed in a lab led by Dr. Marcus Chalfen to construct a "FutureMouse" in which Magid physically and metaphorically becomes a man of a specific environment Western science. In comparison, Millat identifies himself/herself with KEVIN, the radical youth group, which replaces the social belonging with dogma. Therefore, *White Teeth* places its characters in the context of religious, scientific, and community institutions, demonstrating that all of them provide individuals with various identities (citizen, believer, scholar, fundamentalist). Samad has made a famous chastisement of Irie, when he grumbles after a family dinner about how his sons have lost their way... Two good Muslim boys I wanted was all. This sentence is uttered by Samad to Irie about Magid and Millat, which shows how much he is upset by the fact that they are not going in the same direction: the children have been influenced by other conditions than he wanted them to. This variety of experience is represented in the novel without a particular direction being approved, rather the way in which both schools of thought have their own positive and negative sides in a multicultural Britain.

Finally, racism and privilege are used to show power dynamics between immigrants and the British society. Smith demonstrates that 1960s-90s London is not a friendly colorblind country. As an example, Alsana Iqbal talks about how she felt like an outsider at a job interview due to her accent and Islamic dress (this scene is tangentially noted in analyses). Bureaucratic hassles of the Iqbal family (imaginings of immigration papers, visa renewal) also reflect the official pressure on newcomers. Meanwhile, Archie Jones is an English white, middle-class who has the privileges that others do not. The Chalfen family, supposedly being among the British insiders, is also shown as having Polish-Jewish origins towards the end of the novel, a fact that reminds the reader that even the white Britons are a blend of migrations. In these contexts and institutions, *White Teeth* discourses the process of migration as a process of negotiation of power and not an idyllic mix of multiculturalism.

V. Gender and Culture Expectations.

The female characters in *White Teeth* are experiencing their own fight of identity within the patriarchal and cultural norms. Smith describes Clara Bowden Jones, Alsana Begum Iqbal, and Irie Jones as very strong-willed and smart but most of the time restrained by gender expectations in their respective surroundings. According to one of the studies, Clara and Alsana are determined, intelligent, and driven and yet they are subject to forces of patriarchy and marginalized in the society. Indeed, the tension is reflected in the plot of each woman. Clara Jones (formerly Bowden) is brought out as a rebellious person due to her strict religious background. She finds an independent side by joining a group of Hippies, Flakes, Freaks and Funky Folk by the side of her boyfriend, Ryan Topps. However, it is only when Clara finds herself in a situation where she is completely independent that she realizes that such independence is a dangerous thing. She requires a safety net as she narrates to Ryan; she requires a husband to make sure that she fits in the society. She ends up getting married to the simple-minded Archie Jones in a wedding that is more or less loveless and thus she is in a sense sacrificing much of the freedom that she had enjoyed momentarily.

The analysis of LitCharts notes that Clara is inheriting this role of wife, which is acceptable in society, to survive, although she wonders why she loses her own spirit. In the later novel, Clara slowly attains a measure of independence but she is in university classes, and she has an intellectual friendship with Alsana, nevertheless her identity is tightly bound to her position in the Jones family. The character arc of Clara depicts that gender is a performative aspect: there are moments when she follows the submissive wife-behavior, and there are moments where she is not following the norm (studying, speak up). She demonstrates the concept by Butler of gender being a series of repetitives within a strict regime.

Alsana Iqbal (née Begum) offers another perspective into the matters of gendered expectations in the life of immigrants. Alsana too, is said to be outspoken and competent similar to Clara. She is a seamstress who works long hours to provide to the family of Samad and she is not afraid of stating her real opinions. In the very beginning, Alsana nostalgically tells that she and Samad were better than how they were before they were married off. She is a bare-foot country girl, but wise enough to realize that marriage to Samad, who is incapable of offering her any kind of security, has limited her life. The plot includes the double displacement in Alsana: she is out of her Bangladeshi village, not to mention that she does not have the freedom in the new land. Nevertheless, Alsana exhibits agency in minor aspects (keeping a journal, informing herself about the rest of the world) and later becomes a friend of Clara. Her experience implies that immigrant women tend to internalize patriarchal restrictions (she refers to herself as being restricted by [Samad] desires) but then silently act back against them by creating personal learning and communal spaces.

Irie Jones, who is the daughter of Archie and Clara, is a younger mixed-race view of gender and identity. I as a second-generation Jamaican and English girl experience cultural dislocation. She is not physically like her mother friends believe she looks Jamaican, although she has never been to Jamaica, something that makes her self-conscious. She has to face body-consciousness and subtle racism at school; she struggles to desire an exotic image and to be placed into the image of her White schoolmates at the same time.

The study of the *Global Journal* mentions that Irie feels like an outcast among her friends and that she has to go and find her family origins to understand what she is. Irie tries to assimilate (straightening her hair, dieting) but this process initially takes the form of repetitive actions but later gives way to a subversive repossession of the past. The performance and re-performance of her identity is occurring on a continuous basis in Butlerian terms as Irie attempts to act her identity. Living with her grandmother Hortense eventually introduces her to the Black British culture that helps her to disown some of the imposed norms (e.g. the Jehovah Witnesses of the circle in Ryan Topps). Irie faces a struggle, which makes her gender and race interconnect: she is very conscious of the fact that she is a mixed-race girl in a white-dominated London.

Throughout the generations, Smith allows women to speak, who struggle to discover the possibilities of their own individuality. Clara and Alsana are self-reliant and independent thinkers even when bound by marriage or tradition. Perseverance, education, faith are some of the qualities, which the novel repeatedly emphasizes, and with the help of these qualities these women can oppose complete subordination. Clara attending classes and Ambrosia (her mother) imposing faith on her, as Rai and Bhatt state, are the examples of the battle against hegemony practiced by the marginalized characters. In fact, even with the repressive gendered or racial binaries, Smith predicts the strength and power of her female characters.

VI. Intersectional Analysis

Notably, *White Teeth* depicts that race, migration and gender do not interact in isolation but are interwoven in intricate forms. To illustrate, such minor roles as Clara and her mother, Ambrosia, are held by both a Black British woman of Jamaican ancestry and a Black Jamaican woman who has been colonised by the Englishmen. According to one critic, the attempt of Clara to be educated and the refusal of colonial rule by Ambrosia are both types of resistance to hegemony by characters in both race and gender. The case of Ambrosia resembles the discussion by bell hooks on enslaved Black women: she is both sexually and racially oppressed and insists on being independent (declining to marry Captain Durham).

Intersectionality is also traced in the crisis of identity of Irie, a child of a black mother and a white father. Her dilemma cannot be perceived as either race or the other, as a young mixed-race woman Irie does not experience the pressure of cultural expectations in any direction. As one of the studies explains, the path Irie takes is that of Englishifying herself (attempting to act like a white person) to replanting herself in multicultural London (adopting her own heritage), which emphasizes the fact how her gendered and racial identity is negotiated.

The story by Smith makes it clear that such overlapping identities tend to present special challenges. Rai and Bhatt comment that the fiction written by Smith is the blatant lack of a fair socio-political structure around the black woman and other marginalized women. The plight of Clara, Ambrosia, and Hortense (a first-generation Jamaican who will not give her ideals in) brings to the fore discussions, specifically, gender equity and intersectionality. The fact that the novel is alternating between the past and the present allows to imply that neither race nor gender can define the situation of a character, but the identity is the result of intersecting histories. This is represented in the way Smith described her children. Millat and Magid are unable to identify themselves without relying on their histories of religion, class and ethnicity. The last chapters actually unite Magid and Millat, making them bridging the generation gap to each other and literally covering the room with history, the past, the present, the future all coming together at the same point.

Finally, Smith shows identity itself as a fluid and negotiated one. It has been observed by critics that *White Teeth* implies that identities are a process, rather than an essence. To take an example, one critic has stressed that second-generation characters are not presented with an overarching path to take, but map out their paths themselves in order to establish their identities. This is a reversion to the point that Hall suggests regarding the subject of identity that is constantly changing. In this novel, the personal and cultural identity is developed in conflict and dialogue: free-thinking conversations between Mira and Hortense and Clara, the self-presentation of Irie, the progressive of ambiguity of Samad. This identity of a person, according to Smith, is rightly conceived as a process and not an arrival; this is agreeable with the idea of Butler, who points out that gender and race are not only performances being constantly renegotiated.

VII. Conclusion

Combining the history of postcolonialism, the migratory experience, and gender relations, *White Teeth* provides a subtle commentary on any predetermined concept of identity. Instead of creating the perception of Britain as a country that is inherently post-racial, Smith shows us the ongoing divisions of race and empire. As one of the commentators remarks, *White Teeth* explores the trickiness of the postcolonial heritage and demonstrates immigration as a direct result of the British historical global interaction. The intergenerational story of the novel shows that children of migrants will continue these legacies but also create new hybrid selves. As she has also proposed herself, elsewhere, Zadie Smith endows her characters

with the notion that culture and identity are hybrid and that they are always in translation. In *White Teeth*, every intersection touches, races, migration and gender: Samad is always worried about his twins boys assimilating, Irie is always trying to find a true self in the mixed heritage and this shows that identity is fluid, contingent and political.

To conclude, *White Teeth* supports the reader to regard identities as historically and socially constructed. It is not only in the case of Clara losing her teeth in London (and then discovering a new smile), but also in the case of Magid sending a good Englishman back, the novel emphasizes the non-naturalness of the position in the society and its changeability. The satire of racial science, description of interracial families, the emphasis on female steadfastness are all the sides of a story that makes the British life look more correct. The ultimate praise of the novel is the ability of the characters to make space to themselves even in the face of systems. Being the ones who map their own paths, these characters transform the British culture in the likeness of the outsiders within that culture who permeate it. *White Teeth*, therefore, can be seen as a breakthrough in the modern British literature, which insists on the multi-faced nature of identity and the significance of that belonging that has to renew itself continuously.

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