

EXPLORING THE MULTICULTURAL IDENTITY IN ZADIE SMITH'S WHITE TEETH

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Abstract

This paper explores the formation and negotiation of multicultural identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* – a novel that vividly depicts post-World War II London as a thriving and often challenging multicultural environment. By focusing on the lives of the Jones and Iqbal families, the study investigates how migration, cultural heritage, religion and personal history shape both individual and collective identities within Britain's diverse social landscape. The narrative follows characters who carry the burdens of the past, such as Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, while their children, Irie, Magid and Millat, embody the struggles and possibilities of second-generation immigrant identity. This analysis highlights how these younger characters are caught between competing cultural expectations.

Irie's attempt to reconcile her Jamaican and English backgrounds, Magid's transformation into a secular Anglicized intellectual despite being raised in Bangladesh, and Millat's rebellion through radicalism all illustrate the fragmented and hybrid nature of identity in diasporic contexts. Smith's portrayal of London underscores that multiculturalism is not merely a coexistence of cultures, but an active process of negotiation, conflict and redefinition. A central symbol examined in this paper is the Future Mouse exhibition, which functions as a metaphor for the desire to control, predict or homogenize identity in a multicultural society. Through this event, Smith critiques deterministic worldviews and challenges the notion that cultural differences can be easily managed or erased.

Instead, she emphasizes the inherent unpredictability and fluidity of human identity. Ultimately, the paper argues that *White Teeth* presents multicultural identity as an evolving, nonlinear process shaped by history, interpersonal relationships and the constant interaction of diverse communities. Smith suggests that peace and cohesion in a multicultural society can only emerge through mutual respect, recognition and the acceptance of cultural plurality.

Keywords: *Zadie Smith, White Teeth, Multiculturalism, Identity, Immigration, Cultural Conflict.*

1. Introduction

The story by Zadie Smith *White Teeth* – is set in London and takes place from the end of World War II, the end of the 20th century. The story focuses the lives of two families, *Joneses and Iqbals*. This novel explores the main themes, such as: **multiculturalism, immigration, identity, and the complexities of family dynamics in Britain**. This novel begins with *Archie Jones* – an Englishman who attempted suicide in his own car in the New Year in 1975, where he somehow survives, and later that day he meets a young Jamaican Woman named *Clara Bowden* at a party. (Smith, 2000: 8) Clara – a personage who has abandoned her religion, and she seeks a new life. After being married, Archie and Clara have a daughter, named Irie.

Conversely, the novel introduces the character *Samad Iqbals*. The story of Samad Iqbals – a Bengali Muslim who fought alongside Archie in World War II, is similar to Archie. After the war, Samad emigrates to London with his wife *Alsana*. They have twin sons: *Magid and*

Milat. The novel explores the difficulty of assimilation as the lives of the two families converge. Irie – the daughter of Archie and Clara, is mixed-race and faces identity issues. Samad – who struggles about his cultural and religious values, he is worried that his sons will become too assimilated. For this reason, he sends Magid back to Bangladesh so that he can be raised by his family, and to receive an Islamic Education. While Milat remains in London. (Smith, 2000: 13)

Irie – as she grows older, she develops a crush on Milat. They connect with each-other. Irie and Milat also become friends with a classmate named **Joshua Chalphin** – who comes from a Jewish intellectual family. Joshua Chalphin serves as a foil to Joneses and Igbals, where she highlights the complexities of **multiculturalism**, and the tension between the two cultural backgrounds. The characters' history and present lives start to overlap. The narrative explores the past of the Igbal and Archie Jones families. The **immigration** of Clara's mother – **Hortense Bowden**, it is also introduced in the novel. (Smith, 2000: 50)

The climax is reached during a scientific conference, named: **The Future Mouse Exhibition** – where this event brings together the various strands of the narrative. At the conference Milat and his radical group, named: **Kevin** attempts to sabotage the event. On the other hand, Irie – has been working as an assistant to **Marcus Chalphin**, Joshua's father, the inventor of the future mouse. Irie – finds out she's pregnant, but she doesn't know who the child's father is, because of her past love relationships with both Magid and Milat. Archie Jones steps in to save the event day, by apprehending Milat and preventing him not to cause even more destructions. Archie Jones is forced to face the consequences of his own past deeds, since he had been tasked to execute the **Nazi Doctor – Doctor Sick**, but chose to spare his life, a decision that still haunts him. (Smith, 2000: 60)

Even though it's common in Britain to draw inspiration from other countries and give British white exotic girl names, many people still dislike having immigrants in their country when it comes to the fundamental concept of multiculturalism, which is the peaceful coexistence of various communities. (Al Salih, 2008) By using the project **The Future Mouse Exhibition** as a metaphor, Zadie Smith is able to convey the dystopian idea of the future multiculturalism, which includes: **unification, controllability, and projecting of the British country**. She chuckles at the notion of erasing the centuries of common history between the native and non-native British, and she rejects this hypothesis. (Tran Thu Tra, 2013) Through the scientific event – Zadie Smith presents the characters where they form strong bonds with each-other, and that it really affects their personal identity, since some of the characters that are presented in the novel, they face with this issue deeply. But the problem of the characters is not only the issue of identity, readers can very clearly see that the novel presents the issue of culture, the way of life, and the issue of multicultural society.

II. Multiculturalism and Identity in Contemporary Britain

Since the impact of multiculturalism on both individual and collective identity is the main topic of this research, first of all, it is worth defining what multiculturalism is. Multiculturalism – is the coexistence of multiple cultures. (Reynolds et.al, 2008) Multicultural society creates people of various races, ethnicities, and nations coexisting in the same community. In multicultural communities, people preserve, pass down, celebrate, and share their distinct cultural ways of life, language, art, customs and behaviours. (Longley, 2024) In the book *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith – London is presented as a multicultural and religiously diverse city. Smith presents the two families: **Joneses** (families with different national identities but also different worldviews, cultural values, and religious beliefs). **Igbals** (the immigrants).

Some of the assimilated and integrated people in London attempt to preserve their heritage and identity by adhering to their customs, values, and beliefs. (Al Salih, 2008) Even though it is difficult to live in a different country with different ethnicities, what Zadie Smith wants to convey to the readers is the message that what is the main purpose of existence and

peace. Immigration, assimilation, colonialism, racism, feminism, and other very serious issues are addressed in this novel.

As the novel is reaching the conclusion, the characters struggle with the consequences of their decisions. Magid – who was returned to London as an educated person, he becomes disappointed with his father's traditional values, and he adopts Marcus Shalpin's scientific ideas. Milat sticks to his radical beliefs, even though he struggles to reconcile with his love for Karina. Irie – faced with the paternity of her child, she decides not to worry who the father is, because she believes that the baby represents a new beginning and a chance to create a new identity in a multicultural, dynamic world. Her child is a representation of hope and unity. Through this novel, Zadie Smith, explores the complexities of: **identity, family and culture**, in a rapidly changing world. The present and the future are occasionally shaped by the past.

The main themes, such as: **immigration, assimilation, multiculturalism** – often raises questions of the nature of identity, in a multicultural society. This novel is powerful, since it represents the lives of two immigrant families in past war London. The novel delves into the complexities of identity, cultural heritage, and the quest for human connection. (Smith, 2000: 70) Multicultural exploration of individual and collective identity as a major theme is presented in this novel. Second generation immigrants: **Magid, Milat** and **Irie** – are the main focus of the novel. Because they are embedded in two cultures simultaneously and consider both as equally valid and meaningful, they differ significantly from the first-generation immigrants.

They need to successfully negotiate their identity, which helps them formulate a multicultural identity in Britain. (Tran Thu Tra, 2013) *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith describes the issue of the characters' identities, suggesting that the creation of a new identity will only be possible over time. Irie – who wants to balance her English and Jamaican heritage, is trying to create a new identity and life. Magid – who appears to be Bengali, but is English at heart. Milat – a fundamentalist Islamist with an American fetish. Peace and harmony in a multicultural environment will be achieved, when people will live together, while respecting each-other's beliefs, rituals, and cultures.

III. The Role of History and Memory in Shaping Identity

Another crucial dimension in ***White Teeth*** is the role of history and inherited memory in shaping the identity of both 1st and 2nd generation characters. Smith demonstrates that **identity** is influenced by personal experiences as well as the **historical** narratives passed down through families. This aligns very well with Tran Thu Tra's view that immigrant identity is formed through the continuous negotiation between the **past** and the **present** (Tran Thu Tra, 2013). Samad Iqbal's fixation on the legacy of Mangal Pande reveals how collective memory becomes both a source of pride and a psychological burden (Al Salih, 2018: 481). Similarly, Clara's mother Hortense passes on the eschatological teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, a belief shaped by her own Jamaican History (Smith, 2000: 50).

Even though Clara later abandons religion, this inherited memory continues to shape her worldview. These parallel histories demonstrate how cultural memory allows communities to maintain continuity, yet it can also become restrictive, preventing individuals from adapting to the fluidity of modern multicultural Britain. Through these layered generational stories, Smith emphasizes that **identity** emerges not only from present circumstances but also from the lingering, sometimes burdensome weight of the past. Longley notes that **multicultural societies** create conditions where **identity** is influenced by competing historical narratives coexisting with the same space (Longley, 2024).

Through these layered stories, Smith illustrates that multicultural identity cannot be separated from the memories of the past. Through the scientific event, Smith highlights how the characters form strong bonds with one another and how these connections affect their identities. Some characters face these issues deeply. But the problem is not only identity,

readers clearly see that the novel presents problems of *culture, lifestyle and the complexity of living in a multicultural society*.

IV. Humour and Irony as Tools for Critiquing Multicultural Britain

Zadie Smith's use of *humour* and *identity* serves not only as a stylistic choice, but also as a subtle critique of the contradictions inherent in multicultural Britain. Her satirical tone exposes the social tensions, performative tolerance, and cultural misunderstandings that arise in diverse communities. According to Al Salih, Smith's comedic narrative reflect the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation by showing how characters often unintentionally caricature their own beliefs (Al Salih, 2018: 482).

Samad's exaggerated panic over his sons' Westernization often appears *ironic* and *counterproductive*, illustrating what Tran Thu Tra describes as the *identity anxiety* experienced by many first-generation immigrants (Tran Thu Tra, 2013). The Chalfens' liberal *intellectual* multiculturalism is portrayed as patronizing and self-satisfied, revealing subtle power dynamics within seemingly progressive attitudes (Smith, 2000: 112). Through humor, Smith challenges idealized notions of integration and exposes the everyday failures, misunderstandings and comic clashes that accompany cultural coexistence. This stylistic approach underscores the novel's central argument that *multicultural identity* is inherently messy, unpredictable and full of contradictions, yet it is precisely within this complexity that genuine human connection becomes possible.

V. Conclusion

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* offers a rich and nuanced exploration of multicultural identity in late 20th Britain. Through the intersecting lives of the Jones and Iqbal families, the novel demonstrates how migration, cultural memory, religion and generational conflict shape both individual and collective identities. Characters such as Irie, Magid, and Millat illustrate the challenges faced by second-generation immigrants who must negotiate between inherited traditions and the demands of contemporary British society. Their journeys reflect the fragmented, hybrid and constantly evolving the nature of identity in multicultural contexts.

Zadie Smith highlights how the past continues to shape the present, revealing that personal and cultural histories cannot be erased but must be acknowledged and integrated. The Future Mouse exhibition serves as a central metaphor for society's desire to control or simplify identity, exposing the dangers of deterministic thinking and the illusion that cultural differences can be managed or eliminated. Instead, Smith emphasizes the unpredictability of human life and the necessity of embracing complexity.

Ultimately, *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith suggests that peace and cohesion in a multicultural society can only emerge through mutual respect, recognition of difference and acceptance of cultural plurality. The novel affirms that identity is not fixed but develops through ongoing encounters between diverse communities. By portraying London as a vibrant, multicultural space filled with both conflict and connections, Smith invites readers to reconsider what it means to belong, and to imagine a future in which diversity is not merely tolerated but celebrated.

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