

Navigating Identity in Zadie Smith's "White Teeth": Exploring Postmodern Realities

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ABSTRACT

Postmodern writers compellingly illustrate the complexities of existence in a postmodern society. Zadie Smith, a groundbreaking Black British novelist and immigrant, expertly tackles these themes in her debut novel, "White Teeth" (2000). This powerful narrative delves into pressing postmodern issues, particularly the formation of identity as experienced by Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi, and his close friend Archie Jones, an Englishman. Through their interwoven lives and those of their children in vibrant, multicultural London, Smith invites readers to reflect on the rich tapestry of cultural identity and belonging in today's world. This paper aims to analyze the construction of identity through the postmodern theories. It will explore how characters shape their identities and how two cultures interact in this process. Additionally, the study will examine the influence of history and the first generation's experiences on the identity formation of the second generation.

Keywords: Construction of Identity, Postmodernism, Multiculturalism, Families, Race.

INTRODUCTION

In our contemporary society, the concept of identity stands out as a central theme that captivates our thoughts and discussions. Literature serves as a powerful medium for investigating the intricacies of identity. As Jonathan Culler aptly states, "Identity can be observed to be constructed or given; both perspectives are richly represented in literature." Michel Foucault further emphasizes that identities are not innate; rather, they are intricately shaped by social institutions and prevailing doctrines. Michel Foucault also claims that social structures and doctrines shape identities. In contrast to the pre-postmodern era, where identities and relationships both among individuals and between individuals and the state were largely perceived as stable and enduring, we now find ourselves in a postmodern landscape defined by fluidity and change. This shift has prompted many postmodern authors to engage with these evolving notions in their work, one of the most notable being Zadie Smith, who skillfully captures the complexities and nuances of identity in her writing.

Originally named Sadie Smith, she transformed her identity into Zadie Smith. According to Tracey L. Walters, Smith was born in 1975 in London and spent her childhood immersed in the vibrant multicultural neighborhood of Willesden. This rich cultural backdrop profoundly influences the families depicted in her acclaimed debut novel, "White Teeth." During her formative years, Smith found comfort in solitary pursuits, delving into literature and the world of black-and-white films. Today, she is recognized as one of the most celebrated and influential Black British writers. Her unique experiences with blended parenting and her upbringing in a diverse society are intricately woven into the fabric of her powerful narratives.

In Walter's view, Zadie Smith's bibliography consists of three significant novels: "White Teeth" (2000), "Autograph Man" (2002), and "On Beauty" (2005). "White Teeth" received widespread acclaim both in Britain and internationally, establishing Smith as a noteworthy figure in contemporary literature. Critics commend her remarkable capacity to explore diverse themes such as cultural hybridity, identity, religious fundamentalism, post-colonialism, and multiculturalism within a single narrative. Smith's recognition has been further enhanced by considerable media attention, alongside her compelling biracial heritage and exceptional talent, which contribute to her unique voice in contemporary British literature.

"White Teeth" powerfully delves into the complexities of life within a diverse culture, highlighting the distinct experiences of first- and second-generation migrants. Smith compellingly illustrates that second-generation migrants are fundamentally different from Western societal norms in their upbringing, lifestyle, and perspectives. Many characters find themselves feeling like outsiders in a world that should be familiar, despite having spent their entire lives in London. Meanwhile, others actively seek to connect with core groups to construct their identities and enhance their social status, demonstrating the ongoing struggle for belonging in a multicultural landscape.

The Anglo-Jamaican author in "White Teeth" powerfully examines the profound challenges individuals encounter while striving to forge authentic identities within a multicultural landscape and to develop a new national identity in postcolonial Britain. She intricately unravels the identity conflicts of her characters, set against the rich tapestry of their family histories. Nearly all of these characters have settled in London following the colonization of their native countries, and they are poignantly aware of their postcolonial identities. As a result, navigating a multi-ethnic culture often breeds confusion about their ethnic identities. The narrative predominantly centers on two prominent migrant families—the Joneses and the Iqbals—yet Smith devotes particular attention to the Iqbals, illuminating the complexities surrounding their identity construction with remarkable depth and insight.

Zadie Smith's intricate novel, *White Teeth*, opens with a compelling portrayal of Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, two friends forged in the crucible of World War II. As the narrative unfolds, both families confront profound challenges tied to their heritage amidst the sweeping changes in England. These turbulent transformations compel them to critically examine their cultural practices and identities, revealing the complexities of their ethnic backgrounds. This analysis delves into the experiences of the second-generation immigrants, Millat and Magid Iqbal from the Iqbal family, and Irie Jones from the Jones family, as they navigate the dynamic landscape of multicultural London in their quest to forge authentic identities.

The Iqbal family's ethnicity profoundly influences the tensions they experience. Samad Iqbal, an injured World War II veteran and Archie's best friend, hails from Bangladesh. He marries Alsana Belgum, who was promised to him before her birth, and they have twin sons, Magid and Millat. Samad harbors lofty aspirations for his sons, dedicating himself to molding them into traditional Bengali Muslim men. However, the reality is strikingly different: his sons, embodying the second generation, feel a much stronger affinity for British culture than for their father's heritage. He expresses his views on children who do not adhere to their cultural traditions, stating:

"They don't go to the mosque, they don't pray, they speak strangely, and they dress strangely... People call it assimilation when it's nothing but corruption, CORRUPTION!" (Smith, 248)

Magid Iqbal possesses a name rich with cultural significance, yet he struggles to embrace it. At school, his peers call him "Mark Smith," a name that his parents remain blissfully unaware of. When his friends

visit the Iqbal home, his mother, Alsana, warmly greets them, bewildered to find no "Mark" living there. Later Magid informs his mother of his whereabouts, prompting the narrator to observe that Alsana is "close to tears" (Smith, 198). Upon his return home that afternoon, his father's frustration erupts: "I Give You a glorious name like Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal... And you want to be called Mark Smith" (ibid).

The Iqbal family, rooted in the lower working class, faces the dual challenge of cultural pride and modern pressures. Samad Iqbal takes immense pride in his role as a waiter, embodying his heritage and identity. In contrast, his twins grapple with feelings of shame about who they are, making them susceptible to the allure of abandoning their family traditions in favor of a more modern identity. This conflict underscores a poignant struggle to balance heritage and assimilation, revealing the profound impact of cultural identity on familial bonds. As Fernández (2009) insightfully observes, the second generation "are not trying to fit into a culture but rather to find their own space by drawing on the culture they have been brought up in and, to some extent, either appropriating or rejecting the culture of their parents."

The novel's three main female characters, Clara, Alsana, and Irie, represent the roles of wife, mother, and daughter. Clara Jones, a complex Jamaican woman, is portrayed by Smith as "the most beautiful thing he has ever seen; she was also the most comforting woman he had ever met... Her wide grin revealed perhaps her only imperfection: a complete lack of teeth in the top of her mouth" (Smith, 24). Clara, daughter of enthusiastic Jehovah's Witness Hortense Bowden, seeks stability by dating Ryan Topps, a shy outcast at school. As Clara embraces aspects of Western pop culture, she remains dedicated to providing her daughter with the best life possible. However, her marriage triggers an identity crisis, forcing her to navigate the tension between her Jamaican heritage and the pressures of becoming an English woman. Alsana Begum is the wife of Samad, whose life has always been influenced by the desires of others. She is open-minded and has even helped her husband understand the struggles she faces concerning her identity in family life. Charismatic and judgmental by nature, she argued against moving to Willesden, which Samad deemed insignificant. Deeply connected to her cultural roots, Alsana was devastated when her son Magid called her "mum" instead of "amma." Similarly, Clara faced her identity crisis within Western pop culture. Despite their differences, both women share common struggles: marrying older men, confronting cultural clashes, and fiercely pursuing their identities while sacrificing for their families in a multicultural society.

Irie Ambrosia Jones, daughter of Clara and Archie, navigates the complexities of her racial and sexual identity. Irie faced a profound identity crisis as a third-generation individual, possessing Jamaican features but yearning for the admired beauty of British culture. She feels torn between her heritage. An affair with Joshua Chalfen complicates her sense of belonging. Seeking to reconnect with her roots, Irie moves in with her grandmother Hortense, idolizing her legacy. However, her identity crisis deepens as she struggles to balance her Jamaican features with British influences. Through Irie's journey, the author highlights the challenges of mixed heritage and the search for authentic identity in a fragmented world. In her engaging narrative, Smith effectively demonstrates that a strong sense of identity is vital for fostering self-esteem within society. To create a positive and enriching environment, individuals must fully embrace their cultural heritage and traditions. Smith also underscores that cultural identity is as significant as personal identity, serving as an essential ethical guide for future generations. Her characters poignantly grapple with identity crises shaped by the complex intertwining of their ancestors' cultures. The narrative highlights that certain roots are particularly significant for women. These roots

encompass the essence of one's being, the language that resonates most, the community that fosters connections, and the culture that has been practiced over time. Embracing these elements is not just important; it is fundamental to personal empowerment and meaningful contributions to society.

Conclusion

Zadie Smith's "White Teeth" is a brilliant exploration of London's vibrant tapestry, tackling crucial themes of race, ethnicity, cultural identity, and prejudice. The novel masterfully intertwines modern narrative techniques with traditional storytelling roots, inviting readers on a captivating journey through a world that harmoniously blends both contemporary and historical elements. Smith powerfully argues that an individual's identity is profoundly shaped by the bonds of family and friendships. She emphasizes that a deep understanding of one's cultural and traditional background is essential for fully grasping one's identity. This insightful perspective encourages readers to reflect on the intricacies of their own identities in a multicultural society.

This article emphasizes that the journey towards self-identity is crucial for every individual in achieving their goals. Regardless of wealth, talent, or resources, it is essential for society to recognize one's background to accurately determine their position. Identity is not just a characteristic; it is the essence of one's personality and quality, serving as a foundation for building meaningful connections with others. It profoundly influences an individual's self-image and self-esteem, ultimately shaping their life's trajectory. Embracing and actively forming one's identity empowers individuals to navigate their paths with confidence and purpose.

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