

Crossroads of Culture and Conflict: A Comparative Study of Identity in White Teeth and Pali

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of identity crisis as it emerges at the intersection of culture and conflict in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bhisham Sahni's *Pali*. Both novels, although rooted in different cultural and historical contexts multicultural London and Partition-era India, respectively engage deeply with questions of personal, communal, and national identity. This comparative study analyses how each author portrays characters struggling with hybrid identities, generational trauma, and cultural dislocation. Through literary analysis, the paper reveals how both authors use historical narratives, characterization, and symbolism to highlight the complexities of postcolonial identity formation. This research delves into the intricate intersections of culture and conflict, focusing on the theme of identity crisis in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bhisham Sahni's *Pali*. Both texts, emerging from different historical and geographical contexts postcolonial Britain and Partition-era India portray individuals caught between cultural heritage and the pressures of assimilation or forced displacement. Through a comparative literary analysis, the study explores how characters negotiate their fragmented identities in the face of migration, generational divides, religious upheaval, and racial tensions. Smith's *White Teeth* presents the diasporic struggles of immigrant families in multicultural London, exposing tensions between tradition and modernity, while Sahni's *Pali* poignantly captures the emotional and cultural trauma of a child lost and assimilated across religious lines during Partition. By situating these narratives at the crossroads of culture and conflict, the research highlights how identity is not static but fluid, often shaped by historical violence, ideological resistance, and the yearning for belonging. The study ultimately argues that both novels serve as critical commentaries on the psychological and sociopolitical outcome of cultural dislocation and the ongoing quest for self-definition in divided societies.

Keywords: cultural conflict, diaspora, hybridity, identity crisis, generational trauma,

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, literature has become a vital medium for exploring the complex intersections of culture, identity, and conflict. The postcolonial experience, marked by migration, hybridity, and cultural displacement, has given rise to narratives that probe deeply into the question of selfhood amidst socio-cultural upheaval. This research paper undertakes a comparative study of *White*

Teeth by Zadie Smith and *Pali* by Bhisham Sahni, two culturally and temporally distinct texts that nonetheless grapple with the theme of identity crisis within multicultural societies.

White Teeth (1), set in contemporary London, unpacks the generational and cultural tensions faced by immigrant families as they navigate life in a diverse yet fractured society. Zadie Smith delves into the lives of her multi-ethnic characters to highlight the struggles of reconciling ancestral heritage with the demands of assimilation. (2) In contrast, *Pali* rooted in the harrowing backdrop of the India-Pakistan Partition, explores the trauma of dislocation and religious conflict through the story of a young boy caught between two identities. Bhisham Sahni presents a poignant narrative that emphasizes how historical violence and forced migration complicate the formation of personal and communal identities.

Despite their differing contexts, both novels underscore how identity is constantly negotiated at the crossroads of culture and conflict. This paper aims to examine how these works portray the identity crisis as a consequence of cultural disjunction, colonial legacies, and historical trauma. Through a comparative lens, the analysis will reveal not only the shared concerns of the authors but also the unique cultural and historical inflections that shape their characters' quests for self-definition.

The story 'white teeth' is not in chronological order but is carefully structured by time. (1) The main action of the story happens between 1975 and 1999 with flash backs that reach back to 1857. Bengal is the homeland of two main characters Samad and Alsana which provides another structure for establishing a chronology. The great Indian mutiny 1857 takes place when Bengal is British colony. Likewise, *Pali* explores the aftermath of the 1947 partition through the eyes of a young boy, Pali, separated from his family during the chaos. Pali adopted by a Muslim family in newly formed Pakistan, Pali lives for seven years here, before his Hindu father finds him and takes him back to India, the story examines the impact of the partition on individuals and the lasting effects of communal violence.

Methodology

In a comparative study of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bhisham Sahni's *Pali*, the methodology involves a thematic and contextual analysis grounded in postcolonial and cultural theory. This approach examines how both texts navigate identity crises, displacement, and cultural hybridity within distinct historical and geopolitical frameworks. The study uses postcolonial theory particularly Homi Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and "in-betweenness" to explore the fragmented identities shaped by migration and colonization. Stuart Hall's theories on cultural identity and diaspora are also employed to understand the characters' struggles in negotiating their past and present.

The methodology includes close textual analysis to compare narrative techniques, character development, and symbolic representations of identity. *White Teeth* is analysed within the context of post-war British multiculturalism, while *Pali* is explored through the lens of Partition trauma and forced religious conversion. The comparative framework focuses on key themes such as generational conflict, cultural negotiation, memory, and belonging. Both novels are studied in relation to their socio-historical backgrounds London's immigrant communities and India's Partition to highlight the authors' commentary on identity formation in the aftermath of colonial rule. (6) This interdisciplinary approach provides a nuanced understanding of how literature from different regions articulates the universal yet culturally specific experience of identity crisis.

Cultural hybridity and in betweenness in white teeth and Pali

In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith powerfully portrays cultural hybridity and in-betweenness through the lives

of immigrant families in multicultural London. The novel explores the intersections of race, class, religion, and heritage, showing how characters are constantly negotiating between their ancestral roots and the pressures of assimilation in British society.

Cultural hybridity is most vividly seen in characters like Irie Jones, the daughter of a Jamaican mother and an English father. Irie's struggle with her physical appearance and cultural identity reflects the confusion of growing up in a space that doesn't fully embrace her mixed heritage. Her longing to fit into both worlds and rejection by each highlights the complex process of forming a hybrid identity.

Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi immigrant, also embodies in-betweenness. He desperately tries to preserve his Islamic and cultural values in a Western environment, even going so far as to send his son Magid back to Bangladesh. Ironically, Magid becomes more English than his twin brother who stays in London, showing the unpredictable outcomes of cultural transmission. Smith uses humour, irony, and multiple perspectives to show that identity in a postcolonial, globalized world is not fixed. Instead, it is formed in the "in-between" spaces' fluid, contested, and continually evolving.

In *Pali* by Bhisham Sahni, cultural hybridity and in-betweenness are powerfully embodied through the central character, a young boy caught in the chaos of Partition. As a child of Sikh parents left behind in Pakistan and raised by a Muslim couple, *Pali* symbolizes the fragmented identity that arises from geopolitical upheaval. His dual cultural affiliation biologically Sikh but emotionally tied to a Muslim family creates a state of liminality. He exists between two religions, nations, and identities, never fully belonging to either. Sahni uses *Pali*'s confusion and emotional turmoil to expose the psychological cost of forced assimilation and cultural displacement. When *Pali* is "rescued" and returned to his biological family in India, he mourns the separation from the only family he remembers, revealing that identity is shaped as much by lived experience as by birth. The narrative questions the rigidity of religious and national boundaries, suggesting that hybridity is both a human reality and a political problem. Through *Pali*, Sahni critiques the violence of Partition not only as physical displacement but as a rupture of personal and cultural continuity, forcing individuals into unnatural definitions of belonging. Thus, *Pali* becomes a poignant exploration of cultural in-betweenness in a divided subcontinent.

Loss and displacement in white teeth and Pali

Both *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith and *Pali* by Bhisham Sahni explore the themes of loss and displacement, though in different cultural and historical contexts. These works reflect how individuals grapple with the trauma of separation, identity crises, and the consequences of colonialism and communal violence.

In *White Teeth*, Smith presents displacement primarily through the experiences of immigrants and their children in multicultural London. Characters like Archie, Samad, and Irie face struggles tied to their racial, cultural, and generational identities. Samad, a Bangladeshi immigrant, feels displaced not only geographically but morally and spiritually, torn between traditional values and Western life. His decision to send one of his twin sons back to Bangladesh reveals a desperate attempt to reclaim lost heritage, which ultimately fails, illustrating how cultural loss and generational disconnection can never be neatly reversed. The novel shows that displacement is not just physical but psychological rooted in the complexities of living between cultures and the inevitable erosion of origin stories.

On the other hand, Bhisham Sahni's *Pali* deals with the violent partition of India in 1947, focusing on a Hindu boy abducted and raised by a Muslim family. His loss is stark and traumatic: separated from his biological parents and caught between two religious identities. When his Hindu parents later attempt to reclaim him, *Pali* is torn. His displacement is not just about geography but about familial and religious

belonging. Sahni exposes the human cost of partition, showing how politics rip apart individual lives. Both texts, though different in style and setting, poignantly reveal how loss and displacement shape identity and memory across generations.

Partition as the central trauma in Pali

Bhisham Sahni's novella *Pali* presents the Partition of India not merely as a historical backdrop but as the central force shaping the narrative, characters, and thematic concerns. The story revolves around a young Sikh boy, Pali, who is inadvertently separated from his family during the violent communal riots of 1947 and is taken in by a Muslim couple in newly-formed Pakistan. This event becomes symbolic of the broader rupture experienced by millions during Partition, where identities, relationships, and communities were torn apart.

Through Pali's journey, Sahni explores the complexity of identity, belonging, and emotional displacement. The child becomes a site of contested claims between biological and adoptive parents, between two nations, and between two faiths. His dilemma encapsulates the identity crisis faced by those caught in the crossfire of nationalism and religious division. Sahni resists simplistic binaries of good and evil; instead, he foregrounds the shared humanity of those affected, regardless of religion or nationality. Partition emerges in *Pali* as a catalyst for both personal and collective trauma. It destabilizes familial structures and moral certainties, exposing the fragility of constructed identities. In doing so, Sahni elevates *Pali* from a personal narrative to a powerful commentary on the human cost of political division and the enduring scars of Partition. Pali experiences a profound sense of loss, loneliness, and existential crisis. He neither forgets his parents nor his original traditions, language, and culture. This mental tension and entanglement with dual identities depict a deep-seated trauma that impacts his entire being.

Identity crisis and trauma in white teeth and Pali

Both Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bhishma Sahni's *Pali* explore identity crises and trauma arising from different circumstances. In *White Teeth*, characters like Irie Jones face identity struggles due to their mixed Jamaican and English heritage within a multicultural London setting. This leads to a fragmented self, as Irie feels caught between two cultures. Similarly, Millat Iqbal experiences inner conflict and identity loss as he navigates between secular and religious extremism.

Conversely, *Pali* focuses on a single, severe traumatic event. Pali's abduction and forced conversion during the Partition of India severely damage her identity. (7) This trauma, caused by violence and loss, prevents her from fully rejoining her original community and accepting her new identity. She experiences rejection and deep psychological distress, which define her self-perception. These novels demonstrate varied experiences of identity crisis and trauma. Smith's characters deal with a more subtle, ongoing trauma linked to cultural displacement and multicultural anxieties. Sahni's character, however, endures a direct and violent trauma of forced displacement and re-identification. Ultimately, both authors show how external factors, whether societal pressures or historical violence, deeply affect an individual's identity and sense of belonging.

Beyond Borders: a comparative analysis of multiculturalism in white teeth and Pali

"Multiculturalism" is a broad concept, and its portrayal in literature can vary significantly depending on the historical, social, and political context of the narrative. Analysing Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bhisham Sahni's *Pali* side-by-side offers a fascinating comparative study of how multiculturalism is

represented, both in its idealized forms and its complex, often painful, realities. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is often hailed as a quintessential novel of contemporary multicultural Britain, particularly London. It's a sprawling, multi-generational saga that celebrates the vibrant diversity of the city while simultaneously dissecting the challenges and inherent paradoxes of a multicultural society.

Celebration of Diversity and Hybridity:

The novel revels in the mixing of cultures, languages, and traditions. London is depicted as a "cultural melting pot" or "salad bowl" where different groups coexist, leading to unique forms of hybrid identity. Characters like Irie Jones (Jamaican-British), Millat and Magid Iqbal (Bangladeshi-British), and their interactions with the white English Jones and Chal fen families exemplify this blend. Smith embraces the idea that identity in a multicultural context is fluid and constantly evolving.

A central theme is the differing experiences of the first and second (and even third) generations of immigrants. Samad Iqbal struggles with his Bangladeshi heritage and his desire to preserve it for his children while navigating life in Britain. He experiences a sense of displacement and often feels "just tolerated," facing subtle and overt racism. Archie Jones, a white Englishman, forms a lifelong friendship with Samad, suggesting the possibility of genuine connection across cultural divides. The second-generation characters are born and raised in Britain, grappling with their parents' traditions and the pressures of assimilation into mainstream British culture. Millat embraces a more radical, separatist form of Islam, while Magid becomes overly "Anglicized" and struggles to connect with his roots. Irie navigates her mixed heritage, seeking to define her own identity in a space where both Black and white British cultures exert influence. Their experiences highlight the complexities of belonging when one's identity is hyphenated.

Despite the celebratory tone, Smith doesn't shy away from depicting the pervasive nature of racism and discrimination, often subtly embedded in everyday interactions (microaggressions) or more overtly in prejudiced remarks. (6) Immigrant characters frequently feel the "undercurrent of race," leading to feelings of alienation and frustration. The novel critiques the hypocrisy of political statements that preach diversity while actual lived experiences reveal a different reality. The core of the multicultural discussion in *White Teeth* is the characters' relentless search for where they belong and who they are. This struggle is intensified by the conflicting cultural loyalties and the impact of historical legacies (like colonialism) on contemporary British society.

While affirming diversity, the novel also implicitly critiques a simplistic or uncritical view of multiculturalism that ignores the power imbalances, systemic racism, and internal conflicts within and between communities. It shows that true integration is not a "flattening process of uniformity" but requires "equality of opportunity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance." Smith offers a cautiously optimistic view, particularly through the younger generation. Characters like Irie, Millat, and Magid, despite their individual struggles, form bonds that transcend racial and cultural divides, suggesting a potential for a more harmonious future where differences are not just tolerated but celebrated. However, this hope is tempered by the recognition that racial divisions and the effects of racism are deeply ingrained and not easily overcome. The primary "discussion" of multiculturalism in *Paki* is through its absence and destruction. (10) The novel chronicles the devastating fallout of the India-Pakistan partition, which was largely based on religious demarcation. Instead of coexistence, the narrative depicts forced displacement, violence, and the brutal imposition of new religious and cultural identities. The protagonist, Pali, a Hindu child separated from his family during the Partition, is adopted by a Muslim family in Pakistan. He is then

compelled to adopt Muslim customs, language, and name. Later, when he is reunited with his Hindu birth family in India, he faces another forced "conversion" back to Hinduism. This double forced assimilation highlights the profound identity crisis he experiences, struggling to reconcile his past and present, his original culture and the one he was forced to adopt. His anguish encapsulates the psychological trauma of those caught in the crossfire of communal violence.

Loss of Shared Heritage:

Unlike *White Teeth*, where different cultures enrich the social fabric, *Pali* shows how the forced separation actively destroys any sense of shared heritage or peaceful coexistence. The novel laments the loss of a composite culture that existed before the Partition, where Hindus and Muslims often lived side-by-side, sharing common traditions. The Partition was not a celebration of diverse cultures but a violent rupture, where religious differences were weaponized, leading to unspeakable atrocities. Sahni critiques the ideology of those in power who instigated these divisions. (9) *Pali* emphasizes the arbitrary and cruel nature of borders drawn along religious lines, which tore apart families, communities, and individual identities. It's a critique of how political decisions can obliterate existing, albeit sometimes tenuous, forms of multicultural living. While the overarching theme is the trauma of partition, Sahni also subtly hints at the inherent human capacity for kindness and compassion that can transcend religious divides, as seen in *Pali*'s loving adoption by the Muslim family. However, these moments are often overshadowed by the larger narrative of suffering and forced conformity.

Comparative Analysis: Contrasting Visions of Multiculturalism

The two novels offer contrasting but complementary perspectives on multiculturalism: Smith explores multiculturalism as an ongoing, lived reality in a globalized city like London, showcasing both its enriching aspects and its inherent challenges, particularly regarding identity formation, generational conflict, and subtle racism. It focuses on the negotiation of identities within a diverse society. (2) Sahni examines the devastating consequences when multiculturalism breaks down violently due to religious and political manipulation. It's a narrative of forced de-multiculturalization and the traumatic impact of imposed identities. Both novels deeply explore identity, but *White Teeth* presents it as a fluid, hybrid spectrum of possibilities, while *Pali* shows it as a fractured, forcibly altered experience, leading to profound alienation. *White Teeth* ends with a tentative sense of hope for integration and understanding among the younger generation, despite the underlying issues. *Pali*, however, is imbued with the lingering trauma of historical events, leaving a more somber impression of the permanent scars left by communal violence. The different portrayals are fundamentally shaped by their respective historical contexts. *White Teeth* reflects post-colonial Britain, grappling with immigration and evolving notions of Britishness. *Pali* is rooted in the specific, violent history of the Indian Partition, a catastrophic failure of inter-communal harmony.

Conclusion

In examining Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Bhisham Sahni's *Pali*, it becomes evident that both texts poignantly explore the complex interplay between cross-cultural interactions and the formation of identity in postcolonial contexts. Smith's novel, set in contemporary multicultural London, delves into the generational conflicts and cultural hybridity experienced by immigrant families, highlighting how identity becomes a fluid and contested space in a globalized world. In contrast, Sahni's *Pali*, set against the violent

backdrop of India's Partition, presents a more historically rooted struggle, where cultural and religious identities are forcibly imposed or denied, leading to deep psychological and existential crises.

Despite their different settings and narrative styles, both works underscore the challenges of negotiating belonging and selfhood in societies marked by historical trauma, migration, and shifting cultural boundaries. While *White Teeth* offers a satirical yet empathetic look at the diasporic search for meaning and rootedness, *Pali* presents a tragic account of identity torn apart by communal divisions. Together, they offer rich insights into how cross-cultural tensions shape personal and collective identities, reminding us that the quest for self-understanding in a fractured world remains both urgent and deeply humanistic. Together, they offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how far multiculturalism can both flourish and tragically fail in different historical and social landscapes.

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