

Crisis Integrity in Zadie Smith's White Teeth

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Abstract: It is the nature of human mind to go in search of fresh woods and pastures new." (Milton, Lycidas). The word 'diaspora' refers to people who leave their traditional homelands either by choice or by chance. The word is of Greek origin, which means 'scattering'. Like seeds, the people spread all over the world without bothering about their own culture and tradition. Diaspora is the dominant element in White Teeth. Zadie Smith's first novel White Teeth has been analyzed as an example of the diverse and multicultural society of the present day city of London. This paper analyses its characters' experiences as immigrants of different generations and various ethnic backgrounds in London, explores the conflicts that some of these immigrants undergo in search of identity, locate how the process of immigration and settlement in a First World country like Britain might offer possibilities of redefinition of selfhood which shall be contextualized by the novel White Teeth (2000) by Zadie Smith. Moreover, the paper highlights how the multicultural society in which the characters inhabit physical as well as the cultural displacement undergo due to mental trauma immigration of plural and fluid identities.

Keywords: Diaspora, Multicultural, Immigrant, Ethnic background, Conflict, Tradition.

1. Introduction

Zadie Smith is a celebrated young British novelist of her generation. Her first novel White Teeth published in 2000, brought almost instantaneous global acclaim. Her obvious skills and her ability to deal with such diversified themes as multiculturalism, fundamentalism, post colonialism, Englishness and hybridity have been evidence throughout the novel. The success of Smith's work is partially attributable to her own background as she has drawn considerable attention from both the media and academics, alike. A review in The Observer states, "She's young, black, British and the First Publishing Sensation of the Millennium".

2. Zadie Smith and White Teeth

As a child of British father and Caribbean mother, Smith shares the same 'in between experience'; even though, she rejects the notion that White Teeth is an autobiographical novel. She portrays the character appearing within her own experience suggests the themes of inheritance and is apparently developed throughout White Teeth. A close resemblance between her background and her work, Smith's keen sensitivity on the issue of inheritance results from her in between life experiences is truly reflected in White Teeth.

3. Diasporic Elements in White Teeth

Diasporic writing is universally accepted as it serves as a tool to fathom the meaning of the text or human experiences. Among the numerous literary trends that have found its place in contemporary English literary canon, issues related to diasporic studies have generated interest in scholars and readers. There has been restructuring of the literary concepts and perceptions in recent times that have included disciplines as history, philosophy, gender studies, and media studies and so on under its framework. In diasporic studies, a considerable attempt has been made to locate themes such as identity crisis and maladjustment in a multicultural society.

Different people with varied backgrounds reflect the cultural and ethnic mosaic of their native country. The novel White Teeth, set in contemporary North London, detects the struggle of two immigrants. Two men –Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi, and Archie Jones, English met in 1945 as the soldiers of a tank crew in the final days of World War II and became lifelong friends. The novel examines the conflicts of their interlinked immigrant families living in multi-ethnic and multicultural Britain. Their friendship continues ever after their return to England. During that time, once the war was over they married and had children. Archie Jones marries a much younger Clara, a Jamaican girl, and has a hybrid daughter, Irie. Samad Iqbal marries Alsana, a Bangladeshi girl, who is also much younger to him, by a traditional arranged marriage and has twin boys, Magid and Millat. By the initiation of Archie's and Samad's children, who experience the dilemma of not belonging to an exact place and want to discover who they are, the conflicts of those second generation children of multi-racial or immigrant parents come to the surface. In the novel, Iqbal's family, thinking about solving those conflicts, sends one of the twins, Millat, back to Bangladesh. They expect, at least one of the twins, to be raised up according to traditional Islamic values. The other twin brother, Magid, grows up in London. Ironically, the plan collapses and Millat, who grows up in Bangladesh returns to London as an atheist, and their English-educated son Magid becomes a radical Islamic supporter in London. Besides, Iqbals' twin sons, Archie's hybrid daughter Irie has also some similar identity conflicts in her life as a child of a multi-ethnic family.

When the problems of multi-ethnic and multicultural London are dealt with in White Teeth, it is inevitable to mention the conflicts of immigrant or multi-ethnic families and their second generation children. It is true that, whiteness nowhere features

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as an explicit condition of being British, is racially coded. In fact, this problem is mainly a result of societal attitudes and outer forces against post-colonial or immigrant families. Although, earlier colonies have gained their independence, those nations and also the people are still considered the ones under the dominance of England. They are still patronized by the British, who view them as colonials rather than as genuine Europeans. In this sense, to gain self-actualization and an identity, the children of immigrant families undergo a process in which they have different identity crises.

In *White Teeth*, Smith presents individual and social conflicts in multicultural Britain in terms of the first, second and even third generation immigrants. Those people try to be a part of the society which does not share their cultural norms and religion, feel different and sometimes alienated. Although immigrant parents experience crucial difficulties or crises in a multicultural world, it is said that their children come through double entanglements. In this conflict and its solution process, Smith presents an important issue of tracing the history and root in the life of immigrant families. The importance of history is so strictly mentioned in *White Teeth* that Zadie Smith begins her novel with the inscription of the statue named 'The Future' in Washington museum: 'What is past is prologue.' The inscription is inspired by Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. The novel shows how history and the past are formative and inescapable from the characters of the novel.

Smith handles the issue of history and root in two dimensions - 'Racial History' and 'Personal History.' Although those two dimensions are interwoven in *White Teeth*, the racial history is mainly reflected by the first generation and their historical memoirs, whereas the personal history is given by the second generation characters. These characters try to create a personal history in their process of identity formation. The matter of history is being diffused into the novel from the beginning. The narration of *White Teeth* begins with the story of Archie and Clara's meeting day-1st January 1975; with this the personal history of Irie, their hybrid daughter begins. Later on, Chapter 5, titled *The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal* takes the reader back to the end of World War II in which Archie and Samad were fellow soldiers. By this flashback to the war years, Smith tells the personal history of Samad and Archie and introduces the problem of colonization which is a racial and national history. It is understood that Samad was one of those soldiers who was coming from the colonized countries to fight a battle belonging to the colonizer England.

In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith deals with the issues of history and root relating them to the national, racial, familial and personal dimensions. By handling the memoirs of the first generation immigrants, she pictures the colonial history of colonized countries. The post-colonial consciousness she creates in the narration is significant in this respect. The colonial history which is hidden and covered is enlightened and appears as a salvation for some characters such as Samad Iqbal.

Besides deciphering the racial history, by turning to the racial roots of the multi-ethnic or post-colonial families, the bond of the second or later generation children to familial history is also depicted in the novel. *White Teeth* as a novel demonstrates the impossibility of escaping history or living entirely outside of its influence. It presents a lack of historical consciousness as a negative position for hybrid (Irie) or second generation (Millat) children of multi-ethnic or immigrant families. However, Smith presents turning racial and familial history as liberator and positive factors for identity construction. In this respect, she attributes a significant status to history and root in the narration. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that she doesn't advocate a total adaptation to the racial history nor she appreciates the clash of cultures in multicultural England.

The initial resistance that the characters endure and the people they interact with problems in different ways, help them emerge as independent beings. Their individualities are in a continuous process of negotiation and self-questioning. Through this process, the characters finally succeed to arrive at an identity that is almost complete in itself. There is optimism as immigrating to a foreign land might offer alternative means of self-expression as reflected in this novel.

In order to represent how identities are remapped when posited in multicultural post-war Britain, the fictional work *White Teeth* helps a lot. The novel deals with immigration related issues in a manner that has not been done earlier in diasporic studies. Instead of focusing on the problems relating to immigration such as maladjustment and discrimination, the novel highlights how immigration might offer possibilities of re-defining oneself.

4. Conclusion

In this novel, the modern novelist Zadie Smith talks about multi-culturalism in the sense of diaspora. The behavior of the characters is mostly on the basis of modern London. In a nutshell, the novel touches upon the cultures of the British, Jamaican and Bengali. The characters are also affected with the crisis of identity. Smith is too realistic in her examination of human nature, race and ethnicity. This idea is proved throughout the novel *White Teeth*.

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