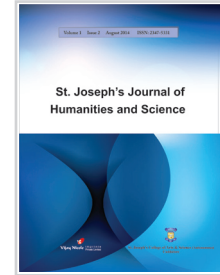




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## Exploring Identity and Hybridity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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### Abstract

Zadie Smith's fiction eludes literary categorization with its focus on immigration to Britain and development of hybrid identity. In the age of globalization, the issues of diaspora and hybrid identity continuously enrich the diasporic literatures of the twenty first century. Topographical shifting, cultural transactions, multiculturalism, fluid identities form a complex framework in the field of global migration. Recently identity shift in diasporic elements are recurrent themes. Zadie Smith's writings bear the stamp of this identity shift. A mixed culture milieu makes room for vistas of communication and dialogue in this cosmopolitan world. Cultural identities always emerge when the self is dislocated in space and time. This study is an attempt to prove that identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* which is shaped by cultural, racial, linguistic, political and spatial hybridity. It also traces the scope of hybrid identity construction in a multicultural social space using Homi Bhabha's theory. The critical theorist, Homi K. Bhabha has put forth the key concepts of mimicry, difference and ambivalence. Bhabha is the most important critic connected to the term Hybridity, which means joining of two entities to form a new entity. He views hybridity as a type of 'third space'. The 'third space' enables new structures to emerge by displacing history and past culture to form a new culture. With an incredibly realistic portrayal of human nature, *White Teeth* celebrates the 'third space' by portraying a forceful representation of space in the modern city London.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Multiculturalism, Assimilation, Hybrid Identity, Third Space, Homi Bhabha's Theory.

In contradiction to essentialist ideology, the concept of identity in a multicultural society is regarded as an ever changing process of construction and enactment. Stuart Hall says that "the construction of one's identity is affected by political, historical and social dimensions as well as personal ones" (*Identiteetti* 6). Societies, which are forms of cultural power, affect an individual's construction of identity. So a mixed culture makes room for hybrid identities in a multicultural society.

The concept of hybridity denotes the joining of two entities to create a third entity.

In Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* people move across national borders and adopt the new cultural identities forming new hybrid identities. "Bhabha contends that cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the 'Third Space of enunciation'" (*Post-Colonial Studies* 118). Cultural identities always

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emerge when the self is dislocated in space and time. "It is the 'in - between' space that carries the burden and meaning of culture, and this is what makes the notion of hybridity so important" (*Post-Colonial Studies* 119). This study will attempt to prove that identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is shaped by cultural, racial, linguistic, political and spatial hybridity. It also traces the scope of hybrid identity construction in a multicultural social space using Homi Bhabha's theory.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* presents Britain as a diverse and multicultural society. The pivotal focuses of the novel are three families - the Jones', the Iqbals and the Chalfens. Though all the three families are of mixed ethnicity, culture and religion, they create a sense of Britishness and a sense of belonging in the city of London. So the characters are the embodiment of hybridity and cultural diversity. The spatial dimension thus becomes prominent in the novel and this space as a hybrid location is an inherent part of the modern British society. Bhabha says that "it is to the city that the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation . . . it is the city which provides the space in which emigrant identifications and new social movements of the people played out" (*The Location of Culture* 243).

The New Empire is undergoing a critical phase in its post-colonial period. It is the crisis of the entire society where "culture-as-hegemony is the malleable, transparent, power-laden glue holding together- and lubricating-the different spheres and strata of society. In effect culture is the very stuff of which individual and collective identities are made" (Hussein175). Cultural identity manifests itself in the individual's search of personal identity. Stuart Hall points out two kinds of cultural identities. In the first he "defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial are artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 435).

Here Stuart Hall speaks about commonality that is searching for one's roots. "Culture is the combination of motor and mental behaviour patterns arising from the encounter of man with nature and with his fellow man" (Haddour 19). Cultural identities are generally historical experiences and mutual cultural codes. This concept of cultural identity played a vital role in

reshaping the globe. Such identity is not grounded in the archaeology but in hunting for the origin.

In *White Teeth* the characters of mixed ethnicity tussle with the issues of heritage and legacy. The first generation character Samad Iqbal, the Bangladeshi has internalized the cultural codes of London without getting rid of his heritage and ancestry. Samad clings to his past exhibiting the Oriental cultural heritage. Samad's religion has a great impact in his life and this is evident from these words, "Nobody even thinks to pick up the Qur'an. Key item in an emergency situation: spiritual support" (222).

Samad wants his son Magid to be brought up in his Bengali Muslim roots and accomplish his great-grandfather Mangal Pande's legacy of devotion to his nation. For this purpose he kidnaps his own son Magid and sends him to Bangladesh. But this does not prevent the second generation Magid from becoming an English intellectual. Samad pours his feelings of the two cultures, "That is precisely the point! I don't wish to be a modern man! I wish to live as I was always meant to! I wish to return to the East!" (145).

Irie is the character most frustrated by her roots. Irie is born of a British father and a Jamaican mother. She hates how the past and the cultural heritage complicate her existing life. Therefore, she feels deceived when she finds out that Clara's upper teeth are false. So in order to discover her roots, she seeks the help of her maternal grandmother Hortense Bowden.

According to Stuart Hall the second kind of cultural identity recognizes that there are many critical points to fathom the significant differences "which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather-since history has invented-'what we have become'. We cannot speak for very long with any exactness about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side-the ruptures and discontinuities" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 435). Here Stuart Hall speaks about the newly formed identity which keeps on changing. This second kind of identity belongs to the future, crossing across the limits of place, time, history and culture. Through this second form we can identify the disturbed character of the colonial experience. The influence of the British culture is prominent in the Jamaican woman Clara. Clara undergoes a continuous process of transformation and her identities are fluid. So her identity and the space she inhabits are not fixed and homogeneous but pliable and heterogeneous. Smith

skilfully uses the metaphor of teeth to represent Clara's fluid identity. "When Clara fell, knocking the teeth out of the top of her mouth, while Ryan knew it was because God had chosen Ryan as one of the saved and Clara as one of the unsaved" (44).

In the scooter accident Clara loses her upper teeth. This metaphorically shows that she is rejecting the Jehovah's Witnesses, breaking her relationship with Ryan Topps and losing her Jamaican identity to form a new identity. Clara's identity is highly assimilative, she can easily adopt and accommodate to her newly settled British culture. She travels through a hybridized space where the novelist constructs the notion 'in-betweenness'. Edward Said "insists that all cultures are changing constantly, that culture and identity themselves are processes" (*Edward Said* 5).

The character Magid, the Bangladeshi holds an English identity. Magid is sent to Bangladesh to become a devout Muslim. But he returns to England "more English than the English" (406). Magid is transformed as an English intellectual because of his encounter with the Indian writer Sir R.V. Saraswathi. He taught Magid that "Too often we Indians, we Bengalis, we Pakistanis, throw up our hands and cry "Fate!" in the face of history. But many of us are uneducated; many of us do not understand the world. We must be more like the English. The English fight fate to the death. They do not listen to the history unless it is telling them what they wish to hear" (288).

Magid's geographical border crossing ironically led him to adopt English identity. Since Bangladesh is a part of the English colonies, Magid returns from his Orient land as "a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer" (407). Thus Magid thrives with an identity of an Oriental British. In their displacement and diverse experiences Bhabha says in his *Location of Culture* that "the borders between home and world become confused and, uncannily, private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon a vision that is dividing as it is disorientating" (1). This disorientation becomes still more visible when Magid joins hand with Marcus Chalfen who is "more English than the English" (328). Thus cultural identities are the points of a person's identification.

The next part of this study attempts to analyse Hybridity which is the joining of two entities to form a new entity. Homi K. Bhabha is the most important critic connected to the term hybridity. He views hybridity as

a type of 'third space'. The 'third space' enables new structures to emerge by displacing history and past culture to form a new culture. Bhabha redefines "culture discourse, and identity as fluid and ambivalent, rather than fixed and one dimensional. While emphasizing the hybridity of all cultures, Bhabha closely links the notion of hybridity to the spatial metaphor of the third space, a concept that is inspired by the works on spatiality by historians and philosophers" (Acheraiou 90).

Ashcroft says that hybridity is an outcome of "new transcultural forms within the contact zone" (Post-Colonial Studies 118). It is often the result of colonialism. The contact zone is created between two or more cultures in which hybridization emerges in many forms like cultural, racial, linguistic and political. Hybridity has often been used in post-colonial discourse to mean cross-cultural exchange. Bhabha calls this cross-cultural exchange as 'Cultural Hybridity'. Here he connects the notion of cultural hybridity to the spatial metaphor of the 'third space'. He says that the third space is interchangeable with hybridity. Bhabha further states:

All forms of culture are continually in the process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to merge. . . . The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. (*The Location of Culture* 211)

With an incredibly realistic portrayal of human nature, *White Teeth* celebrates the 'third space' by portraying a forceful representation of space in the modern city London. Smith's characters are caught between two or three cultures. Millat is trapped between honouring his parents' heritage and in exploring the Western pop culture. Millat becomes a member of KEVIN, a combative fundamentalist of Islamic nation in order to fulfil his passion to become a Western gangster. He is caught between Oriental and Occidental cultures. "Cultural experience and cultural forms are radically, quintessentially hybrid claims, Said" (*Edward Said* 93). Millat inhabits an in-between space where he lives in a space of uncertainty. He moves from one space of social interaction to another space of social seclusion.

In the same way Millat's father Samad Iqbal is also caught between two cultures. Samad who is much concerned with his Muslim Bengali tradition also cannot escape from the in-between space created by the western culture. He is caught between his Islamic faith and his passion for the music teacher, Poppy. "Samad closed his eyes and heard the words," To the pure all things are pure and then, almost immediately afterwards Can't say fairer than that. Samad opened his eyes and saw quiet clearly by the bandstand his two sons, their white teeth biting into two waxy apples, waving, smiling" (182).

Magid and Millat caught sight of their father Samad with their music teacher Poppy as they bite the apples with their white teeth. Smith uses the metaphor molars to reflect that the twins are able to digest their father's action with another woman and therefore they are destined to follow in his footsteps. From this it is visible that the characters travel in a multicultural space. The spatial dimension is the most important factor in a multicultural society because spaces are the ongoing process of change and newness.

Irie is another figure of cultural hybridity. She despises how the past and cultural heritage complicates and restricts her present life. It is in this context, Irie gets associated with the white Chalfen's family to become completely British.

The result is a characteristic 'hybridity', or 'in-betweenness', greater than or at least different from some of its colonizing and colonized parts. In so far as the colonizing power attempted to 'reform' the subjectivity of its colonized subjects, what Bhabha calls colonial 'mimicry' became central to the form of hybridity: an 'ironic compromise' between domination and difference, which produced an Other that is almost, but not quite the same. Mimicry is thus the sign of the double articulation. (Milner 146)

This colonial mimicry is seen in the character Irie. She imitates the white Chalfen's who are scientifically oriented and their focus is only on the present and future. Like them Irie too just wants to look forward on future, "when roots won't matter more because they can't because they mustn't because they're too long and they're too torturous and they're just buried too damn deep" (527). In order to become completely British, Irie follows the white in her dress codes and behaviour.

The instance of Irie straightening her curly hair to look like a white is highlighted as a mockery in this context. Bhabha says that when the colonized 'Other' imitates the colonizer then that imitation is called a colonial mimicry and has an element of mockery in it.

Secondly, Bhabha speaks about 'Racial Hybridity'. Race or racism is a biologically constructed reality. In Britain the Whites established their racial superiority over the non-whites. Slave sexual oppression steadily increased the degree of hybridity in Britain. Smith highlights this process of change through the story of the Jamaican black woman, Ambrosia.

The black/white dichotomy remains at the very centre of 'race' discourse whether or not, and to whatever extent, 'race' is explicitly biologized are seen as an essential human property. The distinctive connotative properties of 'black' and 'white' maintain power and material reality, and it would be an act of disavowal to deny the significance of the visible markers of racial identity in contemporary Britain. (Acheraiou 135)

Hortense Bowden is the daughter of a White English officer, Captain Charlie Durham and his Jamaican black maid Ambrosia. Hortense is a hybrid fruit of a forced relation. Smith recalls the past act of slavery in her novel. She writes that when captain Durham was posted to Jamaica, he made his black slave Ambrosia pregnant with a child. Ambrosia's child Hortense is a figure of racial hybridity. This hybridity is the result of a contaminated encounter and space. Smith expresses the indeterminate state of Ambrosia in a new space saying.

Early will I seek thee . . . my soul thirsteth for thee . . . . So sang Ambrosia as her pregnancy reached full term, and bounced with her huge bulge down King Street, praying for the return of Christ or the return of Charlie Durham – the two men who could save her – so alike in her mind she had the habit of mixing them up. She was half way through the third verse . . . when that rambunctious old rum pot Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, flushed from one snifter too many at the Jamaica Club, step into their path. Captain Durham's maid! (360)

Smith next talks about the story of Hortense's daughter Clara Bowden. The Jamaican girl Clara and the English Archie Jones fell in love and are brought together in marriage. This happens not in Jamaica but

in England which says about one's free will to choose their partners in a space established in modern Britain. This portrays the present multicultural England formed between the generation gap and the in-between space created. Ambrosia's story and Clara's story exemplifies the shift from a forced hybridity in Jamaica to a desired hybridity in Britain. Ambrosia was pregnant under forced conditions by Captain Durham but on the other hand Clara was pregnant through her legal marital life with her husband Archie.

The novel then focuses on Irie Jones, the pivotal hybrid figure of the younger generation. She is a figure of racial and cultural hybridity born of a black Jamaican – English mother and a White English father. Irie becomes a still more complicated figure of hybridity when she conceives a child with Magid or Millat. Even a paternity test cannot tell whether her child's father is Magid or Millat, since their genes are identical. Irie gives birth to a daughter who is a problematic mixture of three races – the Jamaican, the British and the Bangladeshi. The biological paternity of the baby will be unidentified forever. But the baby will be brought up by Irie and Joshua, with whom Irie fell in love at the end.

Smith herself in an interview said that the novel is a utopian view of race relations. The growing racial multiplicity in contemporary Britain is carefully studied by Smith in her novel *White Teeth*. Assimilation of the characters to new culture results in wide variety of racism. Bhabha says that the central notion of racial hybridity is the International culture which is located in the in-between space of translation and in a continuous negotiation of meaning and cultural identities.

Next, this study attempts to analyse 'Linguistic Hybridity' which is an intermixing of two languages. Language functions as a force in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Today every nation is linguistically hybrid. Colonialism has paved a way to learn the colonizers language and has resulted in linguistic intermixing. This linguistic intermixing is intensified in a multicultural society.

A day to day example of linguistic hybridity is clearly visible in Millat's use of language. Millat and his friends speak a hybrid mix of various languages. Smith states that it is a "strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English" (231). Millat's use of language is completely different from Archie's

manner of speaking. Archie speaks humorously in an old fashioned way. Archie uses comical phrases like "I should cocoa!" (120). It ironically means that he should say so.

Linguistic hybridity can also be seen at O'Connell's Pool House. It is a pub where Archie and Samad often meet. It is a place of diverse cultural mix. The walls are carpeted with "George Stubb's racehorse paintings, the framed fragments of some foreign, Eastern script" (183). The wall was also decorated with "an Irish flag and a map of the Arab Emirates knotted together and hung from wall to wall" (183). This decoration binds together all the cultural elements of the Occident and the Orient and hybridizing them.

Another fine example for linguistic hybridity is the name of the owner of the pub. He is an immigrant named Abdul-Mickey. His name is a combination of Arabic and English words. This hybridized name was born out of two linguistic cultures. Also Abdul agrees to hang the portrait of Samad's great grandfather Mangal Pande. The word Mangal Pande is very astonishing to be heard in a Muslim family. It is a name related only to the Hindus. From this it is clear that Smith's novel is completely against purity and it is constantly speaking about mixed hybridity. Even names which are linguistically hybrid have evolved in the in-between space. "There is substantial evidence that intense mutual cultural and linguistic exchanges occurred through the proximity of colonizers and colonized cultures" (Acheraiou 18).

Power structure is another prominent feature visible in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. The term hybridity was much influential in the imperial and the colonial discourse. Ashcroft says that "post-colonial theory investigates, and develops propositions about, the cultural political impact of European conquest upon colonized societies and the nature of those societies' responses" (*Edward Said* 15). *White Teeth* depicts a dynamic image of the city of London. It allows the characters to collaborate and produce different spaces. Bhabha states:

Third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. . . . The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new

area of negotiation of meaning and representation. (*Nation and Narration* 211)

The concept of power structure can be traced in the novel through the life of the character Samad Iqbal. Samad was easily transferred from the Indian army to the new space, the English army because of Britain's connection with India. During World War II, Britain was in need of labours and so it encouraged immigration. Thousands of Italians and Poles were imported but still there was shortage and the British marched towards the West Indies. As a result many West Indians, especially Jamaicans landed in London. This gave rise to much political diversity in the contemporary London.

Smith skilfully lays out three different manifestations of political structures established as an outcome of the space evolved through migration. The novel casts light on three political movements - KEVIN, FATE and FutureMouse.

KEVIN refers to 'Keepers of the Eternal Victorious Islamic Nation'. Millat quits his love for western pop culture and becomes a member of this Islamic fundamentalist group. KEVIN and FutureMouse ignite combat between the twins. Millat refuses to see his twin brother Magid because he supports FutureMouse which Millat protests. A varying political space is created between the members of the same family.

The next issue which the novel focuses is the 'FATE'. It is a political movement 'Fighting against Animal Torture and Exploitation'. FATE was founded and run by Joely and her husband Crispin. Joshua and other members of FATE are involved in the animal cruelty abolishing work just to get closer with Joely. Therefore many members of KEVIN and FATE are more interested in gaining a political status and the thrill of fundamentalism than in its doctrine. Thus many characters are displaced and transformed in the spatial configuration.

The most highlighted political concept in *White Teeth* is the FutureMouse. It is Marcus Chalfen's highly controversial experiment. It is a genetic engineering research with a mouse in which he has altered a mouse's genes to develop cancer at specific times in its life. Chalfen hopes that this research might someday help to cure cancer. Here the political hybridity is much clearer – FutureMouse experiment creates cancer in order to cure cancer. Duality emerges in the third space. That is, on one hand FutureMouse creates cancer

in the mouse and on the other hand FutureMouse cures cancer patients.

In the chapter 'The Final Space' all the characters of the novel gather to witness Professor Marcus' experiment. The space created here is referred as "new British room, a space for Britain, Britishness, space of Britain, British industrial space cultural space" (518). The people who live in this century are "forced from one space to another . . . renamed, rebranded, the answer to every questionnaire noting nothing space please just space nothing please nothing space" (518-519). All these prove that despite plurality, differences and diversity, there is a common space for the British society. Whether black, white or brown Britain has a 'third space' to exist.

The novel beautifully portrays a multicultural space where heterogeneous identities are formed. *White Teeth* is a powerful display and vibrant representation of the spaces in the hybridized British society which celebrates the "third space". Smith's fiction is a brilliant construction of hybrid reality in an ethnically diverse nation. This study of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* thus demonstrates that identity in the novel is shaped by cultural, racial, linguistic and spatial hybridity. This construction of hybrid identities takes place in a multicultural space. Therefore the novel is a manifestation of both identity and hybridity.

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