



EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF HYBRIDITY ON CULTURAL IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN ZADIE SMITH'S NOVEL, WHITE TEETH

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Abstract

The study aims to examine the unavoidable impact of Englishness on the cultural identity of immigrants in London in Zadie Smith's novel, White Teeth. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, the analysis focuses on the character of Samad Iqbal and his family to illustrate the tension between tradition and assimilation. The novel is an explicit portrayal of the cultural duality of Samad's family. Contrary to Samad's desire, his sons Majid, and Millat grow up with the hybrid culture. The novel depicts partial disappearance of cultural identity of Samad Iqbal's family in the presence of dominant Western culture. Cultural identity is the crucial elements in human society. Smith's writing touches upon the most relevant and serious issue of immigrants in Europe and America. The Protagonist Samad Iqbal, expresses regret on his decision to settle in London. The study argues that hybridity complicates notions of belonging and cultural identity.

Key Words: Zadie Smith, Hybridity, Identity, Culture, Diaspora, Multiculturalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Zadie Smith (1975) is a prolific Jamaican English writer, her debut novel, *White Teeth* (2000) receives a phenomenal response from a literary circle. *White Teeth* is listed on 39th among the list of hundred best books by *The Guardian* in 2019. The work encompasses Smith's own experience and perspective of life in London as a settler of 3rd generation. Being a third generation of African family, Smith isn't clear about the sole identity in her present surroundings. The pedantic details of Samad's family life are somehow relatable to Smith's own life. The novel depicts African, Asian, and European cultural clash, which resulted in cultural hybridity. The novel tells the story of a Jewish-Catholic family, the Chalfens, Archie Jones a native English former British soldier. And his family, and the major character, Samad Iqbal and his family who are originally from Bangladesh. They all live in a neighborhood in London; it is a city which has more settlers than any other cities in England. All of the families gradually assimilate with the English culture, but they have a constant sense of identity crisis.

HYBRIDITY

Hybridity generally means to place two or more things together in order to form something new. It is a broader concept which is relevant in numerous disciplines, such as history, linguistics, botany, and literary criticism. Hybridity as a literary concept, refers to the amalgamation of two cultures, in third space in postcolonial studies, Homi K. Bhabha (1949) is known for his poststructuralist approach towards hybridity. The idea is initially taken from Edward Saeed, but Bhabha made is totally new with the concept of the emergence of new culture, as result of migration. He believes that ones' indigenous culture mixes with the native culture of the host country, it gives birth to a totally new culture, which is called hybrid culture. Bhabha delineates the concept in three different sections, Hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. Zahan (2023) states that; According to Bhabha, Hybridity means to form in-between space where the cutting edge of translation and negotiation occurs, which he terms "Third Space", so hybridity is not meant to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather it is the third space. Third space refers to meeting or mixing place of two identities. While dealing with the postcolonial discourse, Bhabha comes up with the exploration of constant conflict between colonizers and colonized, in terms of culture and identity. Bhabha states that mimicry is an adaptation of the superior culture by the immigrants in order to achieve the same level as the native English people. Mimicry is beneficial to some extent according to Bhabha. One may succeed to demand for his or her rights in a Western host country through mimicry. Ambivalence is the third term, which means, that there has always been contrasting feelings between colonizers and colonized. Colonizers considered their subjects as lesser human being, or incapable of educating themselves, and the colonized people reflect the same indifference to them, the colonized ones believe that Western powers are the usurpers, therefore, they shall be eradicated in every aspect. The civilization, culture, and approach of Eastern world is depicted as inferior to the West in Eurocentric literature. Similarly a sort of critique can be found from Asian society which addresses the exaggerated image of colonized nations.

ANALYSIS OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

White Teeth mirrors the life of settlers from the previously colonized nations. These individuals carry their own culture, traditions and belief system with them. Colonization refers to the period of British rule in some African and Asian regions in 19th and early 20th century. The current concept of colonization is extended to dominate the mentality of previously colonized nations. Coloniality of power and knowledge are the ideas to address the current way of classification among different nations in terms of culture, race, religion, and power etc. The idea of coloniality is dealt in many ways by numerous writers, but the most significant one is Aníbal Quijano (1928-2018). Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity unearths the uneasiness of colonized society in the process of assimilation. "The migrant culture of the 'in-between', the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability, and in so doing, it moves the question of

culture's appropriation beyond the assimilationist's dream, or the racist's nightmare" (Bhabha, 1994). Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity makes the matter more relevant across the world, as it can be observed in the character of Iqbal in the novel. A former British soldier, Iqbal lives a miserable life, doing an odd job in a local cafe.

White Teeth is a story of three families from different backgrounds, Samad Iqbal's family, The Chalfens, and the family of Archie Jones. They all live in north London in neighborhood. Iqbal's family consist of his wife Alsana, his sons Millat, and Majid, Marcus Chalfen lives with his wife Joyce, and son Joshua, Archie has a young Jamaican wife Clara, and their daughter Irie. The novel's essence lies in the confusion created among the characters from miscellaneous origins. Third generation of the immigrants didn't have first-hand experience of the land and culture of their ancestors, therefore, their approach towards identity massively differ from their parents. A struggle to maintain one's own originality in a foreign land is unlikely to be continued by the third generation. The West expect others to discontinue their cultural practices, and westernize themselves.

Third generation of the immigrants is the one who faces the "in between" crisis more than their parents. The basic crisis of older generation of settlers is to stay different from the Westerners, while the younger generation makes effort to mimic English culture to avoid being different. It is not only the immigrants who experience massive change in their approach in a Western multicultural society, but the natives also get influence from their immigrant neighbors. West is portrayed to be the center of superior civilization and culture in Eurocentric Media. It is observed currently, that the center is deteriorating itself. Western culture doesn't hold its originality due to the influx of many intellectuals and elite class from East. Jacques Derrida negates the concept of center and periphery; he believes that periphery is likely to be a center with the passage of time. A hybrid and multicultural setting of London cannot be called purely English society. London is an amalgamation of myriads of cultures, people of various ethnic and social backgrounds come closer to the dominant Whites to live in a same neighborhood. Sakiz (2023) affirms Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the centre-periphery binary by demonstrating that what is positioned as outside is, in fact, already inside. Although the White community does not accept multi-ethnic children as their own, these children can no longer be regarded as biological outsiders. Third generation of expatriate has a mixed blood, they are utterly disconnected from their traditional center of cultural identity. They are more exposed to Western life style therefore, their inclination towards Western culture something natural, and they feel comfortable to mimic the host culture. As it can be observed in Majid's perspective, he doesn't feel proud of Mangal Pande. Majid loves to party in Western style, and enjoys Western fashion.

White Teeth is a detailed portrayal of the transitional period of cultural identity of the Expatriates. The foreigners try hard to maintain their true cultural heritage but, it is unlikely to stay away from the host culture in English society. Samad Iqbal struggles to maintain his originality in cultural identity, but he fails to follow Islamic teaching, and life style. The study affirms that it is non-viable for Iqbal's family to stay firm to their pure culture, but Iqbal is persistent to mold his children's life style forcefully. Iqbal proudly affiliates himself with the Indian heroic figure Mangal Pande, whose first short ignite the war of independence in 1957. Whenever Samad talks about his heroic ancestor Pande, Archie reads loudly the story's colonizer version to Samad which was written by a contemporary historian named Fittchett (ARIKAN, 2013). Iqbal sometimes goes back to past in nostalgia, when they live in harmony among own people. At the expense of religion, culture, and history, Iqbal initially preferred to settle in London for a better life. Iqbal seems regretful of his decision to be a part of western society; he believes that London deprives him from his roots and ethnic identity. Bhabha's term "in between" is appropriately applicable in the condition of third generation of Jones, and Iqbal's family. Irie, Millat, and Majid are the real confused individuals in terms of their identity. They are preoccupied with their roots for ancestors, at the same time their existing environment

influence their life style and culture. They are in between with unclear personal identity. Third generation is *White Teeth* is a reflection of the current generation of settlers, they have never practiced their indigenous culture on their fathers' land. As it is argued in a study that; second- and third-generation settlers, such as Irie, Magid and Millat, are placed as 'strangers' and thus they inhabit an in-between space where they are caught between two distinct cultures and value systems (STAVRIDOU, 2020). Iqbal is firmly determined to teach Islamic teachings and Indian Bengali Culture to his children. On the other hand, being born in a foreign land, the children haven't experienced the cultural values, traditional and religious practices. Majid and Millat both exhibit hostile tendencies to their parents. In order to learn Islamic teachings, Majid was sent to Bangladesh, but he ended up to be an atheist, Millat who lives in London, chooses the other extreme, by joining an extremist organization KEVIN. Their mentality, and thinking process is totally different from their parents. Iqbal is not able to perceive the situation of a generation who is born in London, they grow up plying with the White children. It is natural for Majid and Millat, not to respect their parents' teachings, as they reflect Western behavior, they mimic the prevailing culture, and life style.

The persistent trend of white supremacy causes frustration among the expatriates, they feel humiliated every now and then, when they get in contact with the native people in any social or formal gatherings. Majid and Millat are agonized at home and outside in the White dominated society. Millat realizes as he grows, that he is not acknowledged as equal to white boys. Both of the Children face constant pressure from parents to adhere to their own culture and identity. Their revolt is an outburst to the incompatibility of their mentality with the existing situation. Being an exponent of the expatriates, Smith sketches the predicaments of common immigrants. They will always be considered as an outsider, even if they are born in that land. STAVRIDOU (2020) refers John McLeod's view about *White Teeth*, Smith draws "attention to the less soluble problems of postcolonial London... problems of identity crises and divided consciousness. The second and third generation faces a severe issue of divided consciousness in a society they are born in. Majid changes his name to "Mark Smith" to be adjusted with the surrounding environment. His father retaliates aggressively to the decision, but he wasn't able to convince Majid with his typical way of instruction. Majid feels it more comfortable to be like the majority of children at school. As it is a universal phenomenon that human learn more from their surrounding than from teaching at home or school. He is happy to be called Mark by his friends. The diaspora community is made to lose their identity, in a land where they are instructed to follow certain code and conduct, they hardly have free choice about their social and cultural aspects of life. An assimilation into a dominant culture, and maintaining own cultural identity is almost impossible. The second generation is 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 (Ali, & Ibrahim, 2019). It is vital to retain one's roots to be distinctive and different individual. One's culture is the prime source of identity; new generation of immigrants is occupied with the thoughts of being English by mimicking them.

Homi K. Bhabha states in his work *The Location of Culture* (1994), that colonized can avoid being different when they assimilate into the colonizers' culture. A hybrid cultural background would enable the colonized to have access to the privileges offered only to the colonizers' community. Adopting the life style, rituals, clothing, food, and other daily activity would eliminate the difference between white and non-white to great extent, according to Bhabha. The study examines that there is a partial appropriateness of Bhabha's concept in the case of Iqbal's children. Majid exerts more to mimic the native culture, he attends all of the school's extracurricular activities, from Western culture. Millat feels neglected and disowned among his English surrounding, therefore, he accepts the invitation from the radical organization. He desired to be heard and acknowledged but it is almost impossible in the presence of white hegemony. Millat doesn't find a good company because the superior white community isn't

ready for a companionship with a child of an immigrant. His affiliation to the organization is a result of his frustration and identity struggle in the shadow of powerful and different culture. Bhabha uses a word “mimicry” for assimilation, it is an assimilation in which the minority groups’ culture and identity is endangered. Immigrant is expected to mimic in such a way that he or she looks like the host community. This kind of assimilation is adopted by Majid, he discarded his name, religion, traditional values, and roots. It is considered to be a negative assimilation. As it is stated; Bhabha is mainly interested in understanding the negative side of assimilation and multiculturalism resulting in the Mimetic identity (Mkhailef, & Abbas, 2020). Personal experiences of an individual shape opinion and perspective about culture and identity, a generation born in London think differently from their parents in the novel. The second and third generation believe more on what they observe, rather than the directions and stories of their parents, and elders.

All of the three families failed to raise their children according to their desire, because the dominating impact of Englishness or hybrid culture is inevitable. Samad’s sons reflect or react to their direct interaction with English society. As it is stated; however, though the second-generation characters may not have undertaken a diasporic journey, but they inhabit a border space, a hybrid space, a “third space” (Bhabha, Dutta, 2013, 1990, p, 112). Irie is the one who makes an effort to adjust with all of the cultural, racial, and religious differences. She gives a birth to an illegitimate child; whose father is one of Samad’s sons. She doesn’t mind intimate relation with Millat and Majid. The third generation talk about their ancestors, and indigenous culture, but their actual place is a third space. They have developed totally new culture, a mixture of their own, and English culture. They are hybrid in their genes, their habits, fashion, and world view is neither English, nor Asian, or African. All of the African, Asian, and European new generation have hybrid approach towards life and society.

The absence of clear cultural identity among the immigrants leads to confusion and uneasiness. They don’t feel home, throughout their life. New generation in *White Teeth* feels lost, their origin as children of immigrants’ parents, make their identity hybrid or vague. This otherness is being reinforced by a constant negative behavior of the native group. Even in the current English and American society immigrants face accusation for things that they have never done. They are instantly judged, and sometimes the native society cause great trouble for them. A prominent British journalist affirms in a TV show regarding Islamophobia. He asserts that Muslims are unnecessarily marginalized due to their belief and culture. Islam is being labeled as a religion of extremism he says. (LBC, 2024). Most of the Muslim migrants are always in hardship for any mishap in Europe or America. Muslim expatriates are singled out under the pretext of security situation.

White Teeth depicts the mixed feelings of settlers regarding their existing situation. On one hand they are satisfied with the quality of life, in London, and on the other hand they are faced with the feelings of insecurity, otherness, and less privileged position in society. The novel is a voice of the suppressed thinking of migrants. Being exposed to a constant indifference in London, Millat decides to join an extremist group. Millat is not motivated by the teachings of Islam, but his frustration and absence of personal identity lead him to follow the wrong path. He is fascinated by movies, like godfather, and mafia fashion in media. He started to believe that this might be the way of being heard. His extreme step of joining a radical group is for standing prominent in the crowd. The study explores that once an individual is disconnected from its center, from the cultural, social, traditional, and religious roots, he or she is most likely to land into a wrong place. Millat is fascinated by the Italian mafia world, in which they have power to make difference, and create their own destiny and identity. A radical Islamic group makes him believe that his voice and identity will be taken seriously. Ciribuco (2017) analyzes Millat’s character, Millat, under inescapable cinematic influence, tries to reframe his aspiration for Hollywood-like gangsterism in an Islamic fundamentalist context, as Ray Liotta’s Henry Hill.

Since the immigrants are not grounded with the established culture of West, therefore, they are exposed to any other cultural and social elements. Western media plays vital role to form opinion about foreigners, the stereotypical sketch of immigrants in Western media causes insecurity among the minority.

Ultimately, when individuals are cut off from their cultural roots, they become vulnerable to any influence. Immigrants in the West are not grounded in the dominant culture and are, therefore, susceptible to alternate, often dangerous, ideologies. Smith's *White Teeth* offers an in-depth portrayal of the cultural confusion, hybridity, and identity crisis experienced by expatriates in a multicultural yet racially hierarchical society.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

It is revealed through a comprehensive analysis of the novel, *White Teeth* that Smith succeeded to draw a profound image of life in London. The settlers in London live their life as others, they are reminded their otherness through their interaction with native white people. The immigrants especially first generation, try to stay connected to their roots. Samad Iqbal is obsessed with the Indian heroic figure, Mangal Pande; “Mangal Pande, an unknown sepoy in the small town of Barrackpore, - 29 March 1857 - stepping forward from the throng to make a certain kind of history” (Smith, p, 253). He repeatedly talks about Mangal Pande as a heroic figure, but his friend Archie Jones never agrees with him. Jones gives references from his own history teachers and books. Samad tells the story in his own standpoint. Samad travelled a long distance, there is no absolute return to his previous tradition, values, and identity. He is highly frustrated to see his twin sons, who follow their own way. Knowing less about actual Islamic teachings, Millat is instantly convinced by the program of an extremist group KEVIN, as stated here; 'Yeah, said Millat, despondent. 'I s'pose. Less talk, more action, The infidel are everywhere.' Mo nodded vigorously.....We are two birds from the same bush on that matter.....'. Brother Hifan spoke to me. About the 31st of December. And Brother Shiva and Brother Tyrone.....” (Smith, p, 474). They plan to attack a scientist Marcus who is going to present his “future mouse project” on 31st December in his institution. Millat is ready to eliminate Marcus in that event, but Jones comes forward and receive a bullet on his thigh, and saves the doctor Marcus Chalfen. KEVIN members were migrants from diverse backgrounds, such as Hindu, Jew, and Muslim. Their objective wasn't clear, but apparently, they stand against white hegemony. Millat wants to create a history by shooting Professor Marcus, and become the second Mangal Pande.

Cultural hybridity is a dynamic process, which cannot be hindered in the third place. Samad Iqbal's attempt end up in failure. Englishness is state backed narrative; therefore, immigrants have no other way but to dissolve their identity in Western culture. Moreover, it is natural human instinct to be attracted towards fascinating things. Western culture is comparatively free in regard of making choices, and enchanting for the third generation. The Eastern values are depicted as rigid and their followers are considered conservative, therefore, the one who grows with that dominant trend in more likely to fall for the Western life style.

Western culture promotes its own values, in which keeping girlfriend at early age is normal. Parental control is nominal in Western society. Having strict control over children is a crime of depriving them from their personal liberty. “Mutinous Millat aged thirteen, who farted in mosque, chased blondes and smelt of tobacco, and not just Millat but all the children (Smith, p, 218). Having sex with girlfriend is something normal, it's a prominent culture in the West to have girlfriend. Serious relationship with firm commitment is hardly noticed in that society. As it is stated in the novel; “You hear girls in the toilets of clubs saying, 'Yeah, he fucked off and left me” (Smith, p 262). Samad wants his sons to follow Indian culture, and values, but he himself failed to adhere to the values, and Islamic teachings. He goes to club, drinks, and keeps affair with the music teacher of his children. The anxiety of being in a confused state of mind is expressed in the following lines; “This has been the century of strangers, brown, and yellow, white. great immigrant experiment. ...walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny

Rahman.... Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune" (Smith, p, 326). The novel encompasses, three, cultures, three families, three generations in a pedantic detail, in five hundred and forty-two pages. Smith hasn't left any stone unturned to portray a society with the state of mess, confusion about individuals' identity, and objectives of life. Convincing his children with Eastern civilization is Iqbal's wishful thinking. Millat, and Majid never follow their parents' advices or commands. They got an instinct of free will from Western society. Similar to the White children, they consider themselves free right from their early age. Majid lived in Bangladesh for a long time, but instead of adopting Islamic values, he turned to be an atheist, and worked in Professor Marcus "future mouse project".

CONCLUSION

White Teeth is a debut novel of Zadie Smith, she reflected her glaring artistic abilities in the work, by placing miscellaneous characters. Every character in the novel has its distinctive identity and style. The novel addresses a serious issue of cultural hybridity in a comic way. Homi k. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, third space, and mimicry are examined in every individual character, especially Samad's family encounter with the alienation due to cultural differences more than any other family. Samad is the first generation who carries strong feelings of his roots from India. Misunderstanding among the immigrants, and English people is one of the major factors of cultural clashes, and indifference. Media plays vital role in disseminating certain world views among Europeans, A negative image of Asian society is presented in Eurocentric media. Similarly, migrants like Samad considers Western culture and its dominance the root cause of every problem in their lives. The novel is a phenomenal depiction of present cultural clash, and future generation of the settlers. Irie gives birth to a child, a child with no clarity about father figure, and culture. Smith predicts a kind of culture in which roots wouldn't matter anymore. The difference between White and non-White can be eliminated by mutual respect, and social justice. There is no difference if we look from the perspective of humanity. Thus, *White Teeth* becomes not just a story of immigration and hybridity, but a profound reflection on how identity can evolve in a pluralistic society—where the hope lies not in returning to origins, but in creating a space for inclusive futures.

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