

IDENTITY IN TRANSFORMATION: INVESTIGATING THE FORMATION OF COSMOPOLITAN IDENTITY IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary literature has witnessed a vast contribution to the development of critical concept of cosmopolitanism, which seeks to address the anxieties, contradictions, and disparities arising from globalization. A central tenet of critical cosmopolitanism is its positive recognition of difference, emphasizing belonging as open to diversity and opposing closure and particularism (Delanty 2009: 9). This approach reflects an ethical process of transformation and improvement. Critical cosmopolitanism emphasizes processual dynamics, including cultural interactions and modes of self-transformation which contribute to the transformation of self and others and have the potential to effect broader societal change. It recognizes self-transformation as intertwined with self-problematization and reflexivity, highlighting the continuous evolution of individual identities. Therefore, being a cosmopolitan individual is viewed as an ongoing process of becoming, rather than a fixed identity, characterized by continuous engagement with new perspectives through encounters with the Other (Delanty 2009: 13). Ultimately, critical cosmopolitanism is not only a conceptual framework but also a societal condition that shapes individuals' interpretations of self-identity and self-understanding, leading to new orientations and outlooks.

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Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* (2000) revolves around a diverse cast of characters hailing from various cultural backgrounds, including Bangladeshi, Jamaican, British, and Jewish heritages. The intermingling of these cultures within the narrative challenges the notion of cultural authenticity and homogeneity, with individual identities constantly shifting under intersecting influences. The novel follows three interconnected families – the Joneses, the Chalfens, and the Iqbals – all residing in the London suburb of Willesden. Through their interactions and life choices, the novel explores how characters' self-identities undergo continuous transformation amidst intensified interaction with diversity and otherness. While characters like Samad Iqbal seek to protect their cultural heritage and traditions, others like Irie Jones embrace a more cosmopolitan outlook, fitting to the metropolitan setting they inhabit. Personal narratives intertwine with those of others, highlighting the complexities of diversity and belonging. The novel delves into individual struggles to maintain religious, historical, genealogical, racial, or national authenticity in forming their identities.

This paper examines the role of critical cosmopolitanism in shaping identity and self-authenticity within specific communities and historical contexts, using Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* as a focal point. Drawing from Gerard Delanty's concept of critical cosmopolitanism, the essay explores how imagination in encounters with diversity, and individual agency contribute to the transformation of identity and self-authenticity. It analyzes the influence of factors such as class, ethnicity, and race in Smith's portrayal of self-authenticity, questioning the stability of traditional sources of identity in an increasingly globalized world. The paper also considers the challenges posed by ancestral history to individual self-authenticity, and how reinterpreting historical understanding impacts self-identity. It argues against antagonistic ethnic orientations and rigid cultural assimilation, which impede cultural integration and self-authenticity, and emphasizes the ongoing, dynamic nature of cosmopolitanism in shaping individual identities. Ultimately, the paper suggests that sense of authenticity is always in progressive reformulation through continuous processes of communal interaction, progressive change, and self-transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical reviews of Zadie Smith's fiction explore the multicultural, multiethnic, and multiracial aspects of her novels (Russo 2000; Mason

2005). Smith's portrayal of the current globalized landscape, such as the diverse metropolitan London depicted in much of her fiction, has led critics to view her as optimistic about cultural diversity and pluralism, seeing them as transformative social phenomena in the contemporary era. Head argues that "Smith has found a way of harnessing the novel's capacity to embrace heterogeneity and has used it to give convincing shape to her presentation of an evolving, and genuinely multicultural Britain"; he states that, unlike Rushdie and other contemporary multicultural writers, Smith presents cultural blending as a mutually productive communicative pattern (2000:107,111). Head perceives *White Teeth* in a literary portrayal of hybridity as a positive and constructive postcolonial notion. He goes as far as to state that, in *White Teeth*, "we are all hybrid post-colonials, biologically as well as culturally, and the pursuit of pure ethnic origins is a pointless objective" (114). Bart Moore-Gilbert, on the other hand, points out at "Smith's emphasis on racial mixing", the cultural hybridity found in Zadie Smith's fiction, Gilbert argues, is a "desirable dialectical process in which different traditions, cultures, and identities merge to create a new, superior, unified third term". For Gilbert the cultural multiplicity and hybridity present in Zadie Smith fictions do not uphold the narrative that "preserves the authority of dominant ethnicity as first amongst equals or as the guarantor of cultural diversity within the nation" (2005:108). Additionally, according to Tracey Walter, the way that Smith deals with notions of race, ethnicity, history, or tradition in relation to identity formation reflects a departure from traditional deterministic views. Smith, instead, suggests a fundamental transformation of identity formation, moving away from rigidly defined notions based solely on these factors. (2008: 315). Instead, Smith's exploration of identity construction underscores the significance of cross-cultural and interracial interactions. Another Smith critic, Jeremy David Scott argues that due to her biracial background, Smith has experienced marginalization from mainstream society, yet, ironically, she has emerged as a prominent voice and symbol of English pluralism (2007: 8). Scott indicates that:

The concrete experience of migrancy and exile has become distant and the unbearable weight of roots is no longer felt so acutely. Smith's novel focuses on the experience of moving from a state of transition (a context which Homi Bhabha has termed 'liminal') into one of belonging. (2007: 9)

In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith contributes to the construction of national identity through narrative, as observed by Scott. He suggests that migrant communities, by demanding recognition within national discourse, play a role in reshaping this discourse, often through narrative fiction. Scott argues that Smith's novel critiques the idea of ethnicity as a neutral factor in identity formation. Despite her academic achievements and artistic stance, which distinguish her from her lower middle-class background, Smith's fiction reflects a self-conscious awareness of the various social spheres that influence her writing.

In an interview with *The Guardian Magazine*, Zadie Smith rejects the idea that multiculturalism is merely a fictional genre, asserting its fundamental significance in life due to the diversity of races on the planet. She highlights the concept of hybridity, which challenges essentialist notions of identity, such as Englishness, Jewishness, or Black identities. Smith's novel *White Teeth* explores the complexities of renegotiating individual associations with race, ethnicity, and cultural heritage in an increasingly interconnected world. The novel grapples with the difficulties of living in a community with multiple cultures and the evolving nature of identity within this context. Contrary to previous depictions of multiculturalism that emphasized the superiority of dominant cultures over marginalized ones, *White Teeth* portrays hybridity not as a dilution of authentic identities but as an integral aspect of contemporary life. The novel reveals the conflicting challenges of globalization for characters from diverse cultures as they navigate their sense of belonging and cultural attachments amidst social diversity. While previous literary analyses of *White Teeth* have focused on its exploration of post-colonialism and multiculturalism, this study advocates for a cosmopolitan interpretation of the novel. It argues that cosmopolitanism in "White Teeth" is embedded within social relations, as depicted through the encounters and interactions between characters. This perspective offers insights into identity, history, and self-transformation within the context of cosmopolitanism in the novel.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In his seminal work *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory* (2009), Gerard Delanty presents critical cosmopolitanism as not only a critique of contemporary societal conditions but also as a transformative force capable of effecting profound changes in society. Delanty emphasizes the dynamic interplay between "self-problematization,"

“self-identification,” and “self-understanding” within encounters between the “Self” and the “Other.” He argues that critical cosmopolitanism exists within a realm of tension and transformation, aiming to reshape the present toward a desired future. Drawing from Habermas’s critical theory, Delanty highlights the concept of “world-disclosing” capacity inherent in critical cosmopolitanism (70-71). This capacity aligns with Habermas’s theory of communicative action, emphasizing rational communication, mutual understanding, and consensus as crucial for achieving social justice and democratic decision-making. Delanty suggests that critical cosmopolitanism shares with Habermas’s theory a concern for critiquing social reality and pursuing “immanent transcendence,” which involves viewing the social world as inherently capable of self-transformation. This perspective encourages embracing global principles of justice and exploring new ways to perceive the world, influencing individuals’ experiences, identities, solidarities, and values in contemporary society (Delanty, 2012:3). In this respect Delanty argues that “critical cosmopolitanism is a form of world disclosure that arises out of the immanent possibilities of the social world for transformation” (2009:53). Indeed critical cosmopolitanism relativizes our mainly traditional understanding about fundamental social issues such as sense of belonging or race by invigoration self-reflexivity and generates new possibilities, thus it can be conceptualized as a processual hope inducing world openness orientation towards integration with diversity, so, it necessitates self-reflexivity in any cosmopolitan engagement with the other (Skrbis and Woodward, 2013: 53, 61).

Cosmopolitanism involves adopting a self-reflexive approach to engaging with diverse cultures, which includes stepping back from one’s own culture to immerse oneself in the culture of others (Delanty, 2009: 130). This self-reflexivity encourages critical evaluation of both one’s own culture and that of others, fostering a willingness to question one’s beliefs and learn from different cultures. Reality, particularly social reality, is understood as being knowable through interaction and engagement, as individuals confront problems, challenges, and experiences that compel them to form concepts or theories guiding their actions. In this sense, from a sociological perspective, nationality, culture, history, and tradition are seen as relational social realities that shape an individual’s sense of authenticity. Rather than being fixed or static, authenticity is viewed as a dynamic process influenced by ongoing interactions and relationships with these social realities. Self-authenticity emerges over time as individuals navigate the complexities of social, cultural, and historical influences in their lives.

4. HISTORY AND IDENTITY IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

4.1 Reflections on Uncertainty about Self, Identity and History

Samad Iqbal, a Bengali immigrant Muslim in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, is in struggle with keeping his national identity immune from what he calls the corrupted British culture. To do so he identifies strongly with his ancestor, the Hindu Brahmin Mangal Pandey, who defied British Colonial officers in the 1857 sepoy rebellion. Samad's self-identity is deeply influenced by his pride in Mangal Pandey's heroism. However, he struggles to find self-authenticity, continually seeking definition through the repetition and reconstruction of this national myth. The bond between Samad and his ancestral history serves as a traditional structure transformed into a national myth, shaping his sense of civic loyalty. This illustrates how national mythologies intertwine individual biographies with collective generational narratives (Turner, 2001: 135). A lack of self-definition fosters in him a sense of discomfort, thus, he yearns to publicize who he is and what his past involves. Only in emphasizing his past can Samad reestablish his authenticity, for in London he feels he is an unidentified, physically broken stranger working a job demanding no education. To contest this feeling of absurdity, Samad wants to wear a sign to tell people that:

I am not a waiter. I have been a student, a scientist, a soldier, my wife is called Alsana, we live in East London but we would like to move north. I am a Muslim but Allah has forsaken me or I have forsaken Allah, I'm not sure. I have a friend Archie- and others. I am fort-nine but women still turn in the streets. Sometime. (*White Teeth*: 58)

The definition that Samad presents as of himself refers to different aspects of his past and present and his cultural bonds such as his friendship with Archie to devoid himself of cultural strangeness. By remaining in the past, Samad expresses a disfavor with cultural integration and cultivates his ancestral history as a symbolic context to challenge the dominant ideology, here British nationalism, canceling any desire to reflexivity that would help him to reformulate his identity. His identity is an antagonistic ethnic one which is confused and condensed by the intensified integration and interconnectivity of the urban setting. His failure to preserve his self-relation with what he has supposed to be a pure authentic self, embedded in his past history and tradition, is to valorize the tension between historical belonging and the interdependency of live worlds in process of identity

formation in globalized era, which Smith ironizes with adopting a comic tone in her novel.

Samad believes that cultural differences would eventually lead to corruption of an imagined purity, or detachment from the “communal heaven”, that he imaginatively maintains to have a certain self-identification. (Delanty 2003: 163). He grapples with intense anxiety stemming from the fear that his migrant or ethnic identity may weaken in the face of a more dominant national identity. He is deeply concerned about the perceived corrupting influence of British society on his religiosity and family. These anxieties intensify as he engages in an extramarital affair with his sons’ schoolteacher, Poppy Burt-Jones. He confides in Shiva, expressing uncertainty and turmoil over his actions and the conflicting forces pulling at his sense of identity and morality:

I have been corrupted by England, I see that now my children, my wife, they too have been corrupted. I think maybe I have made the wrong friends [...] Maybe I have thought intellect more important than faith. And now it seems this final temptation has been put in front of me. To punish me. (*White Teeth*: 145)

Samad’s anxiety about British culture originates from his uncertainty about the role of this culture in the moral growth of his sons. Bauman has recognized this sense of anxiety as a condition of “liquid fear” which arises in a situation of social liquidity wherein the solid foundations of social institutions and substantial identities collapse into a plethora of individualized situations and precariousness (cited in Delanty 2008: 682)

In his constant struggle with two opposing cultures, Samad cannot anymore separate his personal values and ideals in facing British culture. His relationship with Poppy Jones eventually resulted in his self-critique of his own ideals and values. Samad perceives British society as corrupt and morally degenerate, attributing this corruption to a detachment from one’s cultural roots. His engagement in an extramarital affair is partly as a response to this perceived corruption. To protect his sons from what he sees as Western moral decline, he endeavors to instill a strong sense of Bengali cultural identity in them, forming a familial community grounded in tradition. However, the irony lies in Samad’s own struggle with his identity despite his emphasis on cultural roots. His fixation on his Bangladeshi heritage leads to a xenophobic view of British culture, reflecting a dichotomy between his nationalism and the required cosmopolitanism necessary for

societal cohesion. This failure to reconcile his cultural background with an acceptance of cultural diversity highlights the limitations of his approach and the need for a more inclusive perspective. It is ironical however, while Magid, who is brought up in Bangladesh, educated in the Bengali traditions, returns to England as an extremist “pukka Englishman” (*White Teeth*: 414).

Samad and Magid lack a reflexive agency in navigating cultural differences, as they adhere strictly to one cultural identity without integrating diverse cultural meanings. Their failure to engage with diversity prevents them from developing a cosmopolitan outlook that could help them adapt to various social, cultural, and ethnic contexts. Samad’s inability to raise his son as a “true” Bengali man challenges the notion that identity is solely determined by one’s cultural roots. Through this irony, *White Teeth* critiques the idea of a race-centric and absolute identity based solely on ethnicity, culture, or religion, suggesting instead that identity is fluid and influenced by multiple factors. The novel promotes a view of identity that embraces multiplicity and acknowledges cultural heritage, roots, and religion as relative rather than deterministic elements of authenticity in a globalized society.

5. PROCESSUAL COSMOPOLITANISM

5.1 Cosmopolitan Imagination of a Reconsidered History

Like Iqbal men, Irie also attempts to develop self-authenticity throughout the novel. She feels like a “stranger” (*White Teeth*: 269) whose struggles comprises not only concerns of culture and inheritance, but also anxiety concerning physical appearance, relationship with Millat, and an intense sense of strangeness. All these matters join to make her feel totally isolated. Ayşe Caglar argues that the contemporary global city functions as “alienation institutionalized, immortalized, fixed. At the individual, psychological level, the stranger experiences the torment of his denial by others in his mind [...] the dark side of cosmopolitan encounter” (2002:206). Yet, despite being confronted with utter diversity and intractable strangeness she starts to develop cross-cultural relationships, both in her public and private life, becomes more reflexive, and ultimately more conscious of herself. Her engagement with Chalfen family and Bowdenism of her ancestral history, designates a processual sociability and multiplicity of social relation in her encounter with others, where she reflects a progressive aspect of learning through encounter.

The generational-spanning narrative of Hortense Bowden serves as a “universal history” through which Irie connects herself to her ancestral history and helps in reformation of her sense of identity. She is in search of a genealogy and what has passed, roots to describe her as her father “could give no longer record of his family than his father’s own haphazard appearance on the planet” and her mother “knew a little about her grandmother [...] The rest was rumor, folk-tale and myth” (*White Teeth*: 345-6). In her response to the “tangled web” that her family has weaved for her, Irie does not endorse herself with an obsessed attachment to her history like Samad. In her reaction to Samad’s tight link to history, Irie suggests a relative and reflexive approach to history. Indeed, by questioning Samad’s obsession with his past, Irie challenges the fixation of characters like Samad, Millat or Magid, as well as redefining the concept of authenticity and its relationship with own’s history.

Irie insists upon a journey to Caribbean to explore her roots and to find the relationship between captain Charlie Durham and her great grandmother Ambrosia Bowden without any demonstration of any extremist urge to any ideologies of roots or cultural belonging. After a struggle with her mother, Clara, Irie decides to move to her grandmother Hortense’s house wherein she finds some records about Durham and Ambrosia’s stories. Consequently, Irie finds a chance to connect herself to her ancestral history, to her roots and to Jamaica which appears to her “as if it were newly made. Like Columbus himself”, just by discovering it she had brought it into existence. Hortense’s historical record helps Irie to embroil her imagination with a cosmopolitan consciousness which functions across spatial-temporal divides that suggests Irie’s potential to actively engage and collaborate with her ancestral history. For Irie, Kingston appears an ideal utopia where differences can intermingle harmoniously free from the compulsion rooted in fixed and authoritative perception of cultural history, roots, or belonging. Irie recognizes her homeland at the very moment of her imagining this place. In doing so, she imposes an ongoing process in self-understanding of personal histories that are not categorized by the authority of their situatedness in specific past time but are reconfigured in every moment of individual imagining of them. Thus, Irie substitutes inherited certitude on history with personal hope which according to Richard Rorty affirms her social growth and personal freedom and informs her pragmatic action that is “hopeful, melioristic, experimental” (1999: 24). Irie’s perception of her homeland “as a blank page” for new beginnings is relevant to Beck’s claim that “there is no memory of global past. But there is

an imagination of a globally shared collective future ... It is the future, not the past, which integrates the cosmopolitan age” (2002: 27).

From her childhood, Irie admires Millat for his physical charm, popularity, and sociability, seeing him as a reflection of her desired self. However, her unrequited love for Millat leads to a complicated situation when she becomes pregnant after sleeping with both twins, unable to determine the father due to their identicality. This uncertainty challenges the authority of familial bounds in determining paternity. Rejecting the notion of roots and cultural stereotyping, Irie looks to the future for her unborn daughter, aiming to free her from the constraints of cultural expectations and familial structures. By refusing to identify either of the twins as the father, Irie rejects the imposition of authority or authenticity on identity formation, emphasizing the inadequacy of such constructs in defining one’s sense of self. Subsequently, Irie, both, transcends already accepted and expected norms in identification of self, especially, in relation to traditional founding sources of identity and paves the way for the innovative ways of formulating identity. Which is as well reflected in her skeptic view of world as she envisions in a dream “a time not far from now, when roots won’t matter anymore because they can’t because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too and they are too tortuous, and they’re just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it” (*White Teeth*: 527). Immanent transcendence as described by Haynes, suggests the ability to overcome unfavorable circumstances not by escaping from the world, but by transforming it to establish non-coercive relationships between individuals and their environment (Haynes, 2012: 8,9). In the case of Irie in *White Teeth*, her journey embodies a process of “becoming” and “excess,” characterized by her engagement with her historical heritage. This engagement is portrayed as a critical and reflexive questioning of accepted norms, leading to a new vision of the future and hidden truths (*White Teeth*: 314). This orientation towards the world is temporal, signifying a movement towards an open future and emphasizing dynamism and transformation. Rather than opposing existing norms, it calls for reevaluation and embraces the ongoing process of becoming.

6. CONCLUSION

In her depiction of Irie Jones Smith’s narrative transcends the ethnic antagonism of characters such as Samad in challenging authority, authenticity, and representation of cultural belonging and attains a

cosmopolitan orientation. By situating transnational attachments across history, Smith infuses globalization with an historical aspect, relating its negative process to earlier history of imperialism and colonialism. In this way, *White Teeth* explores how the cosmopolitan imagination working through trans-temporal narrative avoids globalization's homogenizing attitude of a global finitude in reimagining a future in process. It argues for the necessity of a cosmopolitan imagination for it renders the engagement with different histories and the socio-cultural progression towards a processual possible future. Smith argues for cosmopolitanism to negotiate the actuality within what could be, as well as what is possible and demanded; it stands up and resists the challenging conditions and marks the solutions by changing the already existing conditions or relations for better.

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