



ENTWINED IDENTITY IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

***WINMAYIL.B¹ AND NESA NILAVU.P.D²**

¹Assistant Professor, ²I M.A English

Department of English

V.V. Vanniaperumal College for Women, Virudhunagar
Tamil Nadu, INDIA

*Corresponding author: winmayil@vvvcollege.org

ABSTRACT

Postcolonial literature depicts the reassertion of the identity of the indigenous culture of the once colonised people. At the same time, it addresses the issues over the hybrid identity in a multicultural host land of the immigrants. Zadie Smith, who is one of the successful writers of the Twenty First Century focuses on the identity crisis in her novel *White Teeth*. This article examines the mother-daughter relationship, identity crisis, generational gaps and individual's struggles in forming identity.

Key words: Identity Crisis, Multiculturalism, Zadie Smith, White Teeth.

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial Literature often addresses the problems and consequences that happened during the decolonization of a country. It affects the formerly subjugated people based on themes such as racialism, marginalization and colonialism. It mainly focuses on the Western countries in Asia, Africa, America, the Middle East Latin and Caribbean island. During the 20th century, the post-colonial novels emerged. They depict the complications faced by the colonized countries after

colonization. They portray the struggles faced by the subjugated people. They hold mirror to the lives of colonized people.

POSTCOLONIALISM

Edward said is called as the father of Post Colonialism. From the influential works of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and imperialism*, the process of colonizing and obtaining Independence from the colonizer awaken the aspects of political and cultural phenomena. Post-Colonial Literature mainly focuses on the issues encountered

by European countries in the process of decolonization. Postcolonial literature also includes reasserting the identity of the indigenous culture of the people. Most of the Post Colonial authors have used hybrid dialects to reflect the intertwining of Western and non-Western culture and language. There are certain famous authors who are from the different stream of rivers mostly address the theme of identity crisis.

IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES

An Indian American author Jhumpa Lahiri examines the immigrant's struggles, anxieties, biases and identity crisis in the form of their psychological activity and behaviour. Most of her themes are experienced from her life as she exposed herself once in National Public Radio, Inc. (US), "they've lived here now for more than half of their lives, and they raised a family here and now have grandchildren here..... It has become their home. 'But at the same time for my parents, I don't think either of them will ever consciously think.'"(n.p.)

ZADIE SMITH

Zadie Smith, who is one of the successful writers of the Twenty First Century focusses on the identity crisis in her novel *White Teeth*. She is the recipient of White Bread First Novel Award, Mail

on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys prize, Guardian first book Award, EMMA award for best female newcomer. She is a great storyteller as well as good observer. Smith and her works were understood as responding to a historical movement. She depicts all sounds and smells of the world which surrounds her. She perceives human defeats and victories from a detached point of view, with great understanding and sympathy. Her notable novels are *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, *On Beauty*, *NW* and *Swing Time*. Smith's novels deal with complex plot and her writing style is diverse enough to match the story.

WHITE TEETH

Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* is published in 2000 is about a contemporary multicultural London. It discusses about the life of three ethnically diverse families. She likely feels close to these themes as the daughter of a White English father and a black Jamaican mother. She wrote this novel when she was twenty-four years old and received a huge appreciation around the globe for this novel. It is a story about second generation immigrants to Britain during Post-War London. It deals with multiethnic, multiracial and transnational issues. This article focuses on the mother-daughter relationship, identity crisis,

generational gaps and individual's struggles in forming identity. Identity is a state of mind which basically raises two questions: 'Who you are?' and 'What you define yourself as being?'

WHAT IS IDENTITY?

According to the Oxford dictionary 'identity' refers to the fact of being who or what a person or thing is. It can also be defined as a person's selfsameness or his/her own individuality which unique them from others to show their identicalness. A famous German-American psychologist and psychoanalyst Erikson known for his theory on psychological development of human beings, and for the phrase 'identity crisis', in his work "*Identity and the Life Cycle*", told that identity is not something that comes from the birth or from the physical body and it's not the super-ego or ideal ego alone. It's a constant reproduction of images of self, experienced and put together by an individual. He defines the feeling of identity in two observations, as observation of consistency and continuity of the self. (qtd. in. Mcleod 1)

THE MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

In *White Teeth*, Smith describes London and Willesden city as the places where one's identity is permanently

changing due to the multicultural context. In the novel, she portrays the saga of three families in different generation. She symbolically linked the characters of three different places following Chalfens from England, the Iqbals of Bangladesh and the Bowden from Jamaica. These are the countries which have faced varies troubles by colonialism. Smith has routed the roots of teeth in different perspectives. For example, as molars are grinding teeth which help to digest our food and they also help to gain information regarding our environment. As Magid and Millat caught their father Samad when he was with Poppy and they were eating apples at the same time in which it was described in the chapter called Molar. Smith metaphorically levels this title as a symbol to represent her characters.

IDENTITY CONFLICTS

The close reading of the novel mostly gives the characters' physical and psychological discomfort of the exile. Samad Iqbal was a man who was having a crippled right hand and he had been working as a waiter at an Indian Restaurant. He used to struggle for self-chosen principles. As he was a first-generation immigrant, he displayed the post-colonial identity conflicts. In order to show his individual background, he imagined himself wearing a placard at his

restaurant job that proclaimed: "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 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 named Archie and others. I am forty-nine but women still turn in the street sometimes" (Smith81).

IDENTITY CRISIS IN WOMEN

There are three main women characters Clara, Alsana and Irie have played a prominent role as a wife, mother and daughter. Clara Jones was one of the major characters of the novel, a Jamaican woman who was quite complex in nature. Smith portrayed her as "she was the most beautiful thing he has ever seen, she was also the most comforting woman he had ever met.... Her wide grin revealed possibly her one imperfection. A complete lack of teeth in the top of her mouth" (24). Her father was Hortense Bowden, a very enthusiastic Jehovah's witness. Clara was in need of a janitor to take care of her. So she started dating Ryan Topps who was one among the least popular kids in school. Later she changed herself in Western pop culture. She was a doting mother who wanted her best to be given to her daughter. Clara had undergone the identity crisis after her marriage when she

was completely transformed from Jamaican to English woman.

Alsana Begum, wife of Samad whose life was always predetermined by the desires of another entity. She was open-minded, who even made her husband to understand the pain when she was facing the problems regarding her identity in the family life. She was more charismatic and Judgemental in Nature. She argued against moving to Willesden, which was what Samad wanted to portray as useless, "She is not more traditionalist like her husband. She started but I am not like Samad Iqbal. I restrain myself I live". (235) Alsana when she found that her husband kidnapped one child and sent to other country without her concern, she did not talk to him for many days for the punishment of uncertainty but when both of her children came to England, she started to talk with Samad normally. If it were a problem of Western culture it will end in divorce. But in this particular circumstance, they both became the traditionalists.

Alsana was very conscious and very strong in her roots when her young son Magid once called her 'mum' instead of 'amma', she got terrified and started to cry. Clara too faced the same crisis when she mingled with western pop culture. Even though both Alsana and Clara are

different in many things they are common in few things such as both married to older men, issues off cultural conflicts with their husbands, as women both struggled in search for identity, both of them have sacrificed many things for their family, both faced the same complications in bringing up their children in the Multi-cultural society.

HYBRID IDENTITY VS. INDIGENOUS CULTURE

Irie Ambrosia Jones is the most essential character who was the daughter of Clara and Archie Jones. Though she was born and brought in multicultural land, she faced many struggles with racial and sexual identity. As a child of Jamaican mother and English father, she followed the western culture for some days and later in her adulthood she felt like a Jamaican Woman, but when she was in affair with Joshua Chalfen, she fell in Chalfenism. But she always felt that she did not belong to any of the sides. Later she decided to learn more about her cultural heritage and moved to her grandmother Hortense's house, the same place where her mother ran away. As a daughter, Irie wanted to join in it and she idealized her as a Jamaican and became Jehovah's Witness. She faced the identity crisis as a third generation who was having

a Jamaican features but wanted the admirable beauty of British.

Later, Irie when she was in grandmother's house in Hortense, she discovered her family photographs and other artefacts which made her sense to follow her own roots and an idyllic conception of Jamaica, the place where her family really came from. But in the end, she makes her life to suffer with the more identity crisis as Jamaican, Afro-Caribbean and American. It was due to her illegal relationships with Magid, Millat and influence of Chalfen family. Through her, Smith exposes the real problems that are faced by the younger generation due to the mixed races followed by their ancestors. She struggled a lot for her own identity.

THE ENTWINED CULTURE

Through these characters, Smith clearly portrays that identity is more important for a person in order to have a strong self-esteem in the society. One needs to strongly follow his/her culture and tradition to build an optimistic environment. She also exhibits that cultural identity is equally important to personal identity. This serves as an ethical code for the younger generation. Smith's characters faced the problem of identity crisis due to their ancestors' entwined cultures. The fiction explicitly presents that there are certain roots which are more

essential for women like their four stages of life. They are the roots of self that one came from, the roots of language that one speaks often, the roots of community that one has developed and the roots of culture that one has been practicing so far.

SUMMING UP

Thus, Smith's novel *White Teeth* is a dazzling novel which has a portrait of London in many views: race, ethnicity, cultural identity and prejudice. The narratology of the novel is modern whereas the roots of the narratology are in traditional which makes the readers to move up to the mixed world of both modern and tradition.

Hence, a person's identity can be exposed only by bond of his family relationship or from the bond of his companionship. Smith believes that one needs to be aware of their traditional and cultural background in order to know their identity.

This article concludes the idea to search for identity by depicting that Everyman can reach his/her goal only by forming identity for him/her, though he/she is very rich or very talented or well-equipped person the society needs a background of everyone in order to figure his/her position because identity is a quality and personality for oneself which helps in forming a peer group for oneself. It is something which reflects a self-image or self-esteem of an individual which will be helpful in moulding the life.

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