

Relocating Identity: A study through select novels of Zadie Smith

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Abstract—Zadie Smith is one of the celebrated young authors of Great Britain. British novelist, essayist, and short story writer, Zadie Smith achieved celebrity status with her first publication *White Teeth* in 2000. Her published works including *White Teeth* (2000), *The Autograph Man* (2002), *On Beauty* (2005), *Martha and Hanwell* (2005), *NW* (2012), and *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013) gives her a place in the contemporary British literary scene. This paper attempts to study and investigate the concept of individual identity in three multicultural novels *White Teeth* (2000), *On Beauty* (2005), and *NW* (2012) by the English novelist Zadie Smith.

Key Words--Postcolonial, Migration, Multicultural, Identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The novels tell different stories but each gives us a clear picture of intercultural encounters and multiculturalism. Zadie Smith in her novel *White Teeth* depicts the lives of immigrants in the multicultural society of London. The novel is all about identity and the consequences of colonialism. The characters in the novel are aware of their postcolonial identities. The postcolonial dilemma of immigrants and their offsprings is very powerfully depicted in the novel by Smith where immigration and roots are the main ideas. The first generation characters confront difficulties in assimilating into the British society at the same time to preserve their own cultural values. They continuously feel a sense of "rootlessness" as they are not able to replant themselves in the society of London. On the other hand, the second generation characters are not able to connect themselves strongly to the London society though they were born there. This is how these characters are also affected by their parent uprootedness. The novel reflects how the characters are in constant search of their identity. Her other novel *On Beauty* also deals with cultural issues but is different from *White Teeth* as this novel deals with the question of education, status and class rather than dealing with issues like religion and ethnicity. The story centers around two families and their different yet intertwined lives. This novel deals with the contrasting view on blackness by different characters and the presence of trauma in the contemporary society. Another novel by Zadie Smith is *NW* that deals with the lives of several characters growing up in the NW neighborhood of London. This work will try to study whether it is possible to transcend the lines that divide people, class, race and culture. The novel deals with what it is to define oneself. The paper will try to investigate and explore the construction of cultural identities and the impact of social context and the question of maintaining a religious identity in the multicultural society. The paper will also study the difference in views of the characters regarding identity and how far religion and history contribute to identity formation. Ideas like home, identity, hybridity and migration would be incorporated while investigating the texts by incorporating ideas of postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and Franz Fanon.

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In her novel *White Teeth*, Smith is depicting the difference in views on identity by the first and second generation characters. Characters have migrated to London because of colonialism and these characters are aware of their postcolonial identities. The issue of identity is very crucial now a days and globalization leaves little space for ethnic identities. Moreover, there arise a tendency to protect these ethnic identities and preserving the culture. Throughout this novel, Smith is celebrating the 'third space' and this novel deals with issues such as identity, culture, exile and assimilation. The novel deals with the story of a Bangladeshi family and explores the impact of cultural history on their London born children. Smith's characters are all English and not just Jamaican, Bangladeshi, or Muslim. The issues of displacement, racial discrimination, idea of belonging, question of insider and outsider are depicted in the novel. Zadie Smith though herself born in England, provides a contesting view of this space through the novel. In a way, this novel deals with racial issues, question of identity, and it also addresses the issue of ethnic diversity in London. Throughout this novel, Smith views Britain as a hybrid location and the identity of the characters as mixed identity. The text is a fusion of Black and British literature and becomes a hybrid one. The fluid nature of space and the fluid identities of the characters are presented in the novel. The first generation characters in the novel undergoes a physical dislocation when they leave their own countries. On the other hand, the second generation characters inhabit a hybrid space as they are located in a 'diasporic' space. Irie, Magid, and Millat look back to Jamaica and Bangladesh respectively in order to root themselves in the British society. Smith's characters seems so real and ordinary. Her characters are striving with cross cultural identities. The character of Irie represents the struggle of the second generation immigrants. In a way, Irie represents the struggle of a woman searching for her authentic self. Irie tried to assimilate in the London society but when she failed she starts searching her parents root. She seems like if she can discover her parents root she will be able to know her own self as well. Autobiographical elements are also reflected in this novel. Being the daughter of a Black woman and a White man, Smith's mixed ethnic identity and the multicultural environment in which she lives in also plays a significant role in her works. Irie is the daughter of Clara and Archie Jones. All throughout the text, the character of Irie Jones suffers because of her cultural rootlessness. Irie does not at all look like Western and so she spends a lot of time over her appearance. She feels herself odd among her friends in London and somehow she feels insecure because of her mixed-race in the White dominated London city. She tried to look more exotic, more white and western. Irie moves on to find out the history and past of her parents identity because she thinks that if she can find out their identity she will get to know her individual self. *White Teeth* is a land mark in the history of British literature because of the presence of multiracial London in the similar way like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* had inaugurated a new type of writing in Indian and British literary productions.

On Beauty is a tribute to Foster's novel *Howard's End*. This novel deals with the issue of black identity through different characters in the novel. Kiki, a black feels very isolated being the wife of a White professor in Wellington because she doesn't see black folks like the whites. In a more similar way, Levi also like Kiki doesn't see blackness in the academically elite class of Wellington. Regarding the notion of blackness, Levi and Monty stands contrast in their opinion. Levi thinks blackness cannot exist unchanged in a White dominated society whereas Monty rejects the notion of Levi. In a way, Levi understands his blackness through constant struggle and resistance. Physical appearance also plays a significant role in determining ones identity in this novel. Oppositions such as

black and white, male and female, beautiful and ugly, fat and slim, educated and uneducated are used to shape the theme of identity in *On Beauty*. The interaction of the characters from different world and background is used to frame the theme of identity. Carl and Leonard represents the working class while Belseys represents the intellectual middle class. On the other hand, Wilcoxes and Kippses represents the conservative class. The sense of individual identity of different characters living in a multicultural world plays a significant role in this novel. Howard and his wife Kiki are portrayed in contrast with each other and this is how oppositions are used to frame the concept of self identity. Their children being of mixed descent also suffers from identity crisis. Smith is dealing with the issue of identity of the second and third generation characters in almost all her works. In the novel *On Beauty*, Smith is representing the diverse voice of the characters to bring the issue of identity by using the figure of comparison and contrast. It is easy to find out the issue of identity and postcolonialism as a theory in British contemporary fiction. All throughout history, the concept of identity has always been of great importance. What Smith is trying to reveal is that male or female is not only determined by gender but also factors like social class, ethnicity and culture are responsible. Individual identity can also be referred to as psychological and it is personal identity that differentiates people from each other. The concept of blackness is one of the responsible factor for representing the idea of identity. In the novel, at one point or the other, almost all the characters questions what it means to be black.

Multicultural setting is the basic feature in Smith's novels and *NW* also continues to portray multiracial communities. Question of identity, sense of belongingness, issue of social class and culture, uprootedness are important concerns in her novel *NW*. Smith in her works has developed some strategies that are indebted to modernist and postmodernist practices. *NW* also follows the structure and narrative of *White Teeth*. The novel is divided into five sections where all the four important characters are from the same fictional town of North West London. The first part of the novel is narrated in the stream of consciousness technique while the second part in third person narrative. The third part describes the issue of fragmented identity of different characters from the postmodernist perspective. The last two parts are conventional narratives and this work can be considered as the chronicle of a death foretold. Smith is combining modernist strategies with the techniques of postmodernism. She is following the tradition of Salman Rushdie by dealing with hybrid identity and culture in this novel through different characters. Smith introduces characters of mixed cultural background who often longs for a better condition. In *NW*, Leah married Michel but both of them are struggling to become middle class whereas they failed to rise up to that status. Natalie is another character of Jamaican parents who married Frank, the son of an Italian mother and a Trinidad father. Natalie said Frank is racially confused and according to him, he himself is "divided into half". Smith in one of her essays "Speaking in Tongues" argues that doubled people really "have no choice but to cross borders and speak in tongues". The setting of this novel is multicultural London where all the characters have diverse identity. While Shar is from the Indian subcontinent, Nathan is Afro- Caribbean. There are five Nigerian nurses in the hospital where Leah's Irish mother works and Leah is the only White among the Albanians in her office. During Leah's childhood the Church kids were Africans but now its Polish, Indian, African and Caribbean. Felix's girlfriend is also of mixed identity, half Jamaican and half Nigerian. While searching for self-identity, Natalie says she would love to know the lives of the Somali kids, the Russian lady, the Ukrainian gangster that are there in the streets of London. In a luxurious resort Natalie even refuses to inform the waiters from where she comes

because of her lower class background. Question of identity is the major concern in this novel and Natalie is in constant search of self identity. Natalie's changing her name from Keisha to look more white echoes Smith and this is how autobiographical elements also plays a significant role in this text. Here, dress code also plays a role in construction of identity. Moreover, Natalie is not the only character who is constantly in search of self identity and is going on manufacturing authenticity and identity. Almost all the characters are trying to find out their root in the multicultural and multiracial environment in their thirties. While in *White Teeth* the young characters were mostly concerned about self definition rather than suffering from identity crisis but in *NW* characters are suffering from identity crisis even in their thirties.

II. CONCLUSION

These three novels individually and together present the idea of construction of identities of different characters in a multicultural society. The first novel focuses on British immigrants and more particularly on the second generation ethnic identities by depicting the lives of various rootless characters. *On Beauty* also presents cultural difference by following the lives of a mixed race British American family. *NW* again deals with the issue of race, class and culture. The narrative strategies with the presence of impact of colonialism along with some autobiographical elements act as resistance strategies that the author used to present the identity of the characters.

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