

Multiculturalism: Identity, Language and Culture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

¹Alaa Lateef Alnajm

Abstract

*This paper aims at examining the specific meaning of multiculturalism, identity, language, and culture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, her debut novel. Smith depicts a clear picture of the multicultural society of Britain in general and London in particular. However, the paper studies the ways in which Smith's novel transcends and promotes the limitations of black women. The study investigates how multicultural society of Britain is drawn through the role of each character in the novel; therefore, it shows the complex construction of identity created by Smith to illustrate the relationship built by different races, languages, and religions. The paper also examines how Zadie Smith in her use of language integrates the linguistic process that existed in the intercultural experiences of both the characters and the author herself. Smith highlights the reality of living in a postmodern world; she also makes her characters interact with each other as they live exactly the real meaning of life. Therefore, her runaway success pushed the young writer to the central mainstream of attention.*

Keywords: *White Teeth, Multiculturalism, identity, and language*

1. Introduction

White Teeth is the first novel written by the young writer Zadie Smith in 2000. In her novel Smith shows the role of identity and culture in the city of London; Smith promotes the cohesion and closed relationships between individuals inside society despite the multi-ethnicity and multicultural aspects and the setting of the novel is London. Due to the high position of this multicultural city, Smith chooses it to be her point of discussion and negotiation between characters. London has become the most diverse city in the world. It has become also the home of different immigrants from different nations worldwide. Over the past decades, London has gained more significance and interest; immigrants have dwelt it. After World War II, England has become the land of immigrants especially London. A new multicultural environment has been created by different religions, races, languages and cultures; this has helped to co-exist a multicultural atmosphere inside the society of the city of London. For many reasons, immigrants have traveled to the United Kingdom to begin a new life and this promotes the harmony between different ethnic groups. Smith in her novel reveals the meaning of identity and culture in a multicultural society. She tells her reader to focus on who immigrants arrived in London for various reasons but they didn't lose their languages, traditions, and culture; in fact, these are the main sources or features of constructing their identity.

Perfect mentions the position of multicultural society in London, he in more specifically adds that "London has not always been one of the most diverse cities in the world". Furthermore, though it is important to point out that London was never 'monocultural,' it does not always mean 'multicultural' and it is necessary to explain what we are talking about with this highly-complicated, disputed and sometimes misunderstood word. One of the main benefits of the definition of multiculturalism is to be versatile, but the word is often highly unhelpful. We might use 'multicultural' for example to refer to the coexistence of any community of people who could be characters of various religions, ideas, traditions or social behaviours. Maybe any culture could be characterized as multicultural as such. This in turn, would raise the

¹ Faculty of Languages/ Department of English/ University of Kufa/ Iraq

question of whether any particular category of human beings, however described, can be truly said to be internally without such a difference. If we continue in this way, there is an argument that all three people assembled in a room are multicultural. In fact, if we approved such a definition of the term, it would be extended to meaninglessness" (Perfect, 2016, P.4).

Actually, *White Teeth* is not the only postcolonial novel but, it presents a very unique fictional story about the real meaning of the concept of multiculturalism. The novel depicts the society of London as one house without aroused problems. In general, multiculturalism means to respect all people's values in one society. Embracing all different kinds of diversity, richness in social, ethnic, economic, cultural, and political areas are the main purpose of multiculturalism. Ball indicates that "multiculturalism and multicultural structure in England, having become a postcolonial contact zone has brought about the integration of some issues such as nationality, race, identity, crisis, religious clashes hybridity and so forth" (Ball, 2004, p.15).

Zadie Smith was born to a British father and Jamaican mother. The successful marriage between her mother and her father reflected the shining picture of the writing of Smith; this was represented and embodied in the racial, religious and cultural relationship and experiences of immigrants as the third generation in her novel *White Teeth*. It is stated that "Smith has created characters of mixed races, mixed cultures, and mixed languages :in short, she has created a portrait of hybridity in a North London borough" (Moss, 200, p.18).

2. Objectives of the Study and Research Questions

The current study has three main objectives: (1) to establish and generate new knowledge of how identity in multilingual and cultural contexts is articulated, built, negotiated, and gained; and (2) to evaluate the relative roles of language and culture in this process; and to integrate and refine analytical methods and theoretical perspectives of different disciplines (linguistics, culture). strive to achieve these aims by focussing on the *White Teeth* of Zadie Smith and will discuss the ways in which it provides a modern perception of cultural diversity.

This paper is intended to address the following research questions in order to achieve its objectives:

1. How do language and culture shape and affect communities and individual identities (e.g. narrative, ritual and material culture)?
2. How do multicultural literature and cultural history museums reflect and view the effect of the migrant experience on integration and the development of identity?
3. How do human identities and communities form and affect language and cultural expressions?

In answering the above questions, the researcher plan to fulfill the following objectives:

1. The role of language and culture in negotiating identity, especially in narrative discourse, should be studied.
2. To investigate how identity is negotiated in communication environments through multilingual activities (bilingual/bicultural interaction, literature).
3. Examine how identity in touch environments is conveyed by material culture primarily in national cultural historical museums.

In answering the questions above, I aim to fulfill the following sub-goals:

1. To study the role of language and culture contact in the negotiation of identity in narrative discourse, particularly narratives.
2. To study how identity in contact settings is negotiated through multilingual practices (bilingual/bicultural interaction, literature).
3. To examine how identity in contact settings is expressed through material culture specifically in national museums of cultural history.

3. Literature Review

3.1. White Teeth

Smith was born in North-West London, 1975, her father was an English while her mother was a Jamaican. Her great writing is influenced by living in multicultural London. The characters she chose immigrated to London, however, they were aware of their postcolonial identities, this will affect their ethnic identities because of the multicultural society. The youth of Zadie Smith and the quality of her work impressed critics; of what she has achieved during her undergraduate study. Hamish Hamilton offered her a contract to finish the novel on the basis of the first chapter she published during her senior year at Cambridge University. Smith is an outstanding flexible prose style with a range of voices and races urban slinging and resembles Salman Rushdie in the panorama of its multiculturalism (O'Rourke, 2000, p.166).

In fact, *White Teeth* is received a great account of praises by some critics; it gives an accurate description of the multicultural society, reality, and ethnic identity in the city of London: "Smith has allowed herself certain imaginative freedom" (Mullar, 1999, p.18). In her style of writing, Zadie Smith tries to portray thousands of things in the same manner which is found in comedies. Wood (2001, p.23) refers to the *White Teeth*'s style that "this style of writing is not to be faulted because it lacks reality - the usual charge against botched realism-but .because it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself". England is a multicultural society. Lots of immigrants have traveled to Britain from different countries and nations. The main goal of their immigration is to improve the conditions of living. They expect to get high opportunities; however, they faced many problems such as humiliation, poverty, misery and race. Increasingly, the number of immigrants began to raise in Britain after the World War II.

In this respect, Smith always tries to draw a picture concerning the different cultures co-exist in Multicultural society particularly The city of London; she presents the suffering and misery of immigrants and how they must adapt to live in new circumstances in order to create .better life for them and for the next generation too Many problems have existed inside the multicultural society of Britain, therefore, this has created the cultural conflict between the minority groups coming from different cultures and lived in United Kingdom, this happened after the World War II. *White Teeth*, in one way or another, shows to us the inequality and trauma of the immigrants when they chose Britain as a place to live in (Easthope, 1999, p.148). The work of Zadie Smith, in her novel, is summarized *White Teeth* stating that "this is a multicultural English novel, set in well-off north London, in which the three families are Muslim, half- Jamaican, and Jewish, and in which few nonminority .characters appear; the Irish bar is run by a Muslim" (Bruce, 2001, p.116).

In the following words, Mullan expresses his sensation to talk about *White Teeth*, he begins. *White Teeth* has humorous ambitions and several passages of unalloyed humor. These lead towards the feeling that it is a novel whose image is politically correct. Its marginal features are frequently satirically imagined and are very distinctive in terms of their absurdity. Smith claims that people have the same objectives and wishes as individuals. Thus, personality and the way of life are the most relevant social questions for establishing hybridity exactly in the multicultural exactly in the multicultural society of London "(Mullan: 2002,118).

In fact *White Teeth* goes around three families. The first one is the family of the Englishman Archibald Jones who meets the Bengali Samad Iqbal at army; gradually, Iqbal becomes a very closed friend to Archibald. However, they share common secrets. Race, religion and .history are the main issues that make both Iqbal and Archibald think about *White Teeth* examines contemporary multicultural London. The characters speak different languages, from different race, and of different ages; they want to look world from different ways. The novel is not autobiography, due to her mixed-race family history, her setting .relies on the childhood neighborhood of Willesden Zadie Smith successfully explores the complex interactions between different ethnicities that makes up contemporary British life to show different concepts and attitudes toward multiculturalism.

3.2. The concept of Identity in White Teeth

Identity means "the collective aspects of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitely recognizable or known". Identity is somewhat makes person unique or distinctive. Writers sometimes construct their characters in different ways in order to create false or ambiguous identity; however the identity concept is problematic. Identity is a strong theoretical

concept that makes person's behavior quietly different from others. Self-perception and social presentation determine person's identity; how he/she behaves within society.

Specific identification has been brought by the multicultural world; and this will lead to danger of loss of identity as an ethnic group or person. A national identity is inside the multiplicity of identities, it seems to make people live in one place together in order to create a nation. Nation is defined as "a named human population sharing an historic, territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members"(Anthony, 1996, p.14). Therefore, common language and territory are the main features of a nation. The complex construct of identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* requires to take a look at the most important definition of cultural identity by Hall that "common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us as, 'one people', with stable unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions of vicissitudes of our actual history"(Hall,1989, p.227).

White Teeth explores the influence of Zadie Smith in the tragedy of the Indian Mutiny in however, she uses the same technique and literary devices used by the first;1857 generation of writers who wrote during the time of colonialism to satirize the policy of The British imperialism. Smith embodies the struggle of the third generation of immigrants in her central character Samad, he is repeated compulsively to tell the story of his grandfather and what he did against the British colonization. Therefore, Smith believes that the multicultural identity in Britain plays very important role in building society of different cultures, religions .and languages In addition to displaying the characters in very specific way in her novel *White Teeth*, Smith succeeded to bring two different nations and religions throughout the closed relationship between Samad, a Bengali Muslim and Archie, a British Christian; greatly, they served at the British army during the World War II, Smith states: "The whole of the steamy Indian summer of 1857, the whole of that year of mutiny and massacre would be hauled into O'Connell's and brought to semi-consciousness by these two makeshift historians"(Smith, 2000, p.218).

4.Methodology

4.1.Multiculturalism in White Teeth

The set of state of policy of multiculturalism advances tolerance and advocates the recognition of cultural diversity. Historically, Britain is the race of relations approach to equality(Favell: 2001,p.15). However, the best framework for dealing with cultural diversity and difference, multiculturalism is adopted for these tasks. Over the past few decades, the British political discourse has adopted multiculturalism as a key term. It is very necessary in plural society to have new knowledge of identity among multiculturalism for making ,educational and political decisions. Social science disciplines, including psychology ;anthropology,political philosophy and sociology studied the term of multiculturalism therefore, it is a debated concept (Hall, 2000, p.228). Since the Roman empires,managing the inter-cultural relationships have been the political realities; therefore, multiculturalism is as .old as humanity(Vertovec&Wessendorf, 2010,p.30).

The main goal of multiculturalism is to create peaceful atmosphere between two or more groups; it stands up against any kind of conflict. Multiculturalism means to co-exist society from different culture,language, tradition and religion within one community Society of multi-cultures provides sense of freedom and air; this will build the main stem of living peacefully. The influence of cultures produce positive issues in the life of people particularly in arts,music,sport and style of living; this brings new ideas and wave of inspiration. Some sociologists believe that the influence of cultures of multicultural society will create conflict or tension.

Two generations of immigrants have tackled by Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*; it successfully displays the flaws of the relationship of the immigrants-native to produce an alienated individual and to strengthen their social fabric. Each character in the novel represents cultural extreme in a unique way. The relationship in multicultural London shows how brilliantly the immigrants lived and interact to reflect their values and traditions Clearly multiculturalism presents the cultural diversity and tolerance inside multicultural society. England is the home of multicultural values and identities. Multiculturalism in *White Teeth* accepts the mixing of ethnicity inside the society at the level of individual rather than

nation; however, it focuses on the idea that each of us is multicultural and this will lead us to the multiethnicity. The character Irie Jones becomes completely the symbol of this kind of multiethnicity throughout different texts in the novel.

Additionally, comedy is the main mode of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*; effectively relying on the style and form of Horatian satire; however, the novel deals with the moral dimensions of society particularly hypocrisy, foibles and expediencies of the major characters. Therefore, Smith is influenced mainly by E.M.Forster, she uses literary devices pertaining the traditional English literature that shows her style powerful and unique. Multicultural subject matter of the text is associated with the other modes that shows how Smith takes in her account the English tradition of literature.

4.2. Language in White Teeth

In postcolonial novel, language plays an important role in examining the problems of identity and culture; however, this will affect the life of newcomers and immigrants. In order to looking for what the contribute of characters in novels of postcolonial literature, we must study the accent, grammar, syntax and semantics in writing such novels like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. For example, the majority of characters speak the same words of the original English speaker. George Lamming (1960) says that "English is a West Indies language". Novels of multicultural London are traditional linguistic in which they focus on the question of mental deconolization; the writers of these novels do not include the standard British English. Therefore, the linguistic process that exists in the intercultural experiences and human relations is the main attention drawn by the post colonial writers particularly in multicultural novels of Britain.

Zadie Smith in her novel *White Teeth* informs us that the multiplicity of tongues discover the interlinguistic forms; in other word, the difficulties arising from the linguistic pluralism are the main concerns of writing in the multicultural society. Cynthia James says: "language as battleground on which British and West India cultures and identities clash and make accommodations" (Cynthia, 2007, p.8). In their research, Wilson & Ringrose, discussed the issue of language in *White Teeth*; they present "*White Teeth* is a polyphonic novel, integrating dozens of different voices. The major yarns in its fabric are Bengali English, Jamaican patois and north London slang, three language varieties that surface in the morphology, lexicon, syntax, and phonology adopted by the characters" (Wilson & Ringrose, 2016, p.82).

A survey of linguistic landscape of London after World War II is provided successfully by the novel *White Teeth* as major instrument and narrative strategy, *White Teeth* is a plot-driven novel; it conveys the cultural plurality of the postwar London. We see that the novel *White Teeth* depicts a picture of the multicultural society of London; it resembles of the city of Babel in Iraq in .which its people speak different languages in cultural diversity. One of the most significant use of language is it defines what the human relationship is However, *White Teeth* studies stylistically the features of narrative particularly its simile. The novel *White Teeth* itself contributes through its focus on language on the reflection of what it means to be English Smith provides language as a method of multicultural and religious space for example, she gives some kind of translation through the speak of her characters; however, she writes: "O Allah, I seek refuge in you from the evil of my hearing, of my sight, of my tongue, of my heart, and of my private parts" (Smith, 2000, p.116).

In some ways, the translation can be negotiation of immigrants identity by saying "What has perhaps not been duly considered is the sometimes totally different linguistic cartographies that practices of translation trace when compared to the mappings sketched in source texts and consequently, the extent to which they actually reveal the continuous negotiation of space and identities characterising such linguistically rich and sophisticated novels as *White Teeth*" (Di Martino & Di Sabato, 2014, P.100)

5. Conclusion

White Teeth is a novel concerning the multicultural society in Britain particularly the city of London. Brilliantly, Zadie Smith creates her characters, from different cultures, races, languages and of different ages. However, Smith shows the multicultural history of London .in more realistic way; she successfully brings all the families in the story together *White*

Teeth is a contemporary work of fiction; it is self-consciously working in a tradition of the English novel. However, it combines both the formal techniques and thematic contents to articulate and explore different discourses of multiculturalism. Therefore, we have seen that the novel in its own style and technique used the re-evaluation assumed and inherited in forming the multicultural society.

Effectively, the novel's text has the cultural eagerness attached to construct the multicultural identity; however, it is not an easy one, therefore it is required more realization and accuracy. Smith highlights the reality of living in postmodern world; she also makes her characters interact with each other as they live exactly the real meaning of life. Therefore, her runaway success pushed the young writer to the central mainstream of attention. Specifically, the different perspectives of postmodernists have been embraced by the work of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*; however, her unique works deform the traditional understanding of our world by focusing on religions, languages, race and history of what people think about their lives.

The novel has a great impact in the life of English people in which it received a whirlwind reception; it is considered the multicultural voice of England. Time Magazine describes *White Teeth* as: "the first novel ever written that truly feels at home in our borderless, globalized, intermarried, post-colonial age" (16 October, 2005). In his essay, Head remarks: "Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: multiculturalism for the millennium. On the jacket of the first hardback edition of *White Teeth*, the photograph of Zadie Smith is intended to give out several unmistakable signals. The bespectacled and studious writer, the publisher is telling us, has achieved a level of maturity of vision that is unusual for someone in her twenties. But we also note, if only subliminally, the Afro hairstyle, and the complexion that betokens a mixed race identity. These details become worth remarking upon with the publication of the paperback edition a (...) – year later. Now the author has lost her glasses and sports long, straight, dark hair, Smith now has an Asian look, and this demonstrates an indeterminate ethnicity" (Head, 2003, p.106).

However, we can say that *White Teeth* throughout its characters, language, and style can change the way of life in unexpected and surprising ways; the novel deals with wide range of issues including race, religion, culture and tradition. Therefore, the great account of themes makes the novel difficult and compelling. Due to Pokrivčák "White Teeth may be added to the large number of contemporary British books which seek to address the perplexing reality of multicultural societies. The text abounds with examples of confusion, a sense of exile and alienation which manifest Smith's ,lingering awareness of the perturbation of immigrant communities. Yet, at the same time .the novel also displays the germination of a new era" (Pokrivčák, 2010, p.65).

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