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## MULTICULTURAL IDENTITIES IN ZADIE SMITH'S WHITE TEETH

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**Abstract**

*Post-Colonialism is an academic discipline that analyzes, explains and responds to the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism. It speaks the human consequences of external control and economic exploitation of native people and their lands.*

*This paper focus on the vibrant portrait of contemporary multicultural London, told through the story of three ethnical diverse families. It offers a very tragic outlook on the struggles that people from different background face in Britain in their everyday life. The novel White Teeth by Zadie Smith portrays London as a mixture of different cultures, ethnic group, and religious beliefs. In this novel London described as a multicultural city in the twentieth century which is the outcome of British colonialism. To an extent any society can be defined as a multicultural place as long as it is constructed by two or more different cultures, religions or languages. Smith combines two families—the Iqbals and the Joneses who have different national identities and also different cultural and religious values. Though the characters live in London and have been assimilated still some of them try to hold themselves to their rituals religious beliefs and cultural values in order to protect their roots and identity from external influences.*

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Post-Colonialism is an academic discipline that analyzes, explains, and responds to the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Postcolonialism speaks about the human consequences of external control and economic exploitation of native people and their lands. Drawing from postmodern schools of thought, postcolonial studies analyze the political power that sustains colonialism and neocolonialism, the imperial regime's depictions of the colonizer and of the colonized. As a genre of contemporary history, postcolonialism questions and reinvents the manner in which a culture is being viewed, challenging the narratives expounded during the colonial era. Anthropologically, it records human nations between the colonist and the people under colonial rule, seeking to build an understanding of the nature and practice of colonial rule. Postcolonial Literature is the literature of countries that were colonized by European countries and which exists on all continents, but Antarctica. Postcolonial literature often addresses the problems and consequences of the colonization of a country, especially questions relating to the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated people, and themes such as racialism and

colonialism. Migrants' literature and postcolonial literature show some considerable overlap. However, not all migration takes place in a colonial setting, and not all postcolonial literature deals with migration. A question of current debate is the extent to which postcolonial theory also speaks to migration literature in non-colonial settings.

Zadie Smith is a young British writer who has won many British awards for literature in years. She is popular not only with critics but her readers appreciate her excellent writing, too. She is a great story teller as well as an observer. She depicts all sounds and smells of the world which surrounds her, she perceives human defeats and victories from a detached point of view, although with great understanding and sympathy. She can record it in a way rich in extraordinary expressions and beautiful poetic languages, which makes one laugh, dream, think and envy. She is able to employ all human senses by her writing. She is a master in making her characters sound very authentic by exploiting all possible kinds of dialects and accents so that her readers must feel involved in the story, eavesdropping on what is being discussed. The range of accents Smith uses in her books varies from different ethnic minorities to various social classes and proves her mastery in monitoring specific features and aspects of English spoken by particular groups of people. In addition to her stylistic ability, she shows deep knowledge of human psyche and the way it makes ground for people's deeds. In *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man* and in *On Beauty* she explores different areas of inspiration and her books accordingly deal with different backgrounds and different topics. All of them show Smith's enthusiasm to write about matters she loves and her knowledge intersects in, seemingly, all fields of human life from philosophy, history and art to science and politics.

Multiculturalism is the existence of multiple, cultural traditions within a single country considered in terms of the country, and culture associated with an aboriginal and foreigner ethnic groups. When a jurisdiction is expanded by amalgamating areas with two or more different cultures or through immigration from different jurisdictions around the world. Multicultural ideologies and politics, ranging from the advocacy of equal respect to the various cultures in society, to policies of promoting the maintenance of culture diversity to policies in which people of various ethnic and religious groups are addressed by the authorities as defined by the group to which they belong. Multiculturalism promotes maintaining the distinctiveness of multiple cultures to other settlement policies such as social integration, cultural assimilation and racial segregation. Multiculturalism is described as a "salad bowl" and "cultural mosaic".

The novel *White Teeth* speaks of race and multiculturalism. *White Teeth* as "an uncritical celebration of the bright multicultural color of the Wilesden Street". London is the setting for the whole story with occasional ventures to Jamaica, India and Eastern Europe. The three families: the Joneses, the Iqbal and the Chalfens, evolve and get entangled with one another here. According to John Clement Ball, *White Teeth* is one of the few recent black British novels that attempt to represent the experience of more

than generation and place of origin. The novel describes the relations of white, brown and black Londoners. *White Teeth* is the story of three families from three different cultural backgrounds, the English Jamaican Jones, the Bangladeshi Iqbal and the Jewish Chalfens told mainly between 1974 and 1992 set in Willesden a multicultural suburb in North London where Zadie Smith herself lives for Smith multiculturalism in London is nothing new. She explains herself

"I wasn't trying to write about race. I was trying to write about the country I was born in and the country I live in."

This novel portrays multiculturalism as a concept developing in time, felt and experienced by the characters. Although the main story is set between the years 1974 and 1992, it also covers trips further back in history. Smith prequels the novel with a quote from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, "What's past is prologue". History, therefore, is twofold. It is on the one hand, an account of historical events that occurred during the existence of British Empire until the end of the second millennium. On the other hand, it is the actions and events that influence the characters and that are crucial in informing their present in future. In other words, history provides the character complemented with roots and the past is always reflected in the present. Both concepts can be traced in the novel. The story is divided into four major sections named after one character complemented with two dates. The first date singles the actual year in which the character is located at the particular moment, whereas the second denotes the year that influenced the character the most. Since the development in the society will inevitably influence its members, the historical development is intertwined with the formation of the character's identity.

The story of *White Teeth* takes place in London, a city which lives in both its past and present. London provides a meeting place of cultures, religions, and political viewpoints, and thus extends the opportunity of greater humanitarian understanding toward the characters. Simply due to the city's complexity the city may be considered as a catalyst for hybridity, which in turn enables the second generation of immigrant families to change so radically from their parents. *White Teeth's* second generation, including Irie, Millat, Magid, Joshua Chalfen, the tension between past and present home is less intense compared to their parents.

Irie Jones, the Jamaican-British protagonist of the novel, successfully negotiates her unique identity in the ambivalent cultural space created by the often conflicting values of minority ethnic culture and the dominant white British culture. Irie's ability to maintain, transgress and create new cultural boundaries in the cultural space. Irie the daughter of a white Englishman and a black Jamaican woman, is exposed to two different cultural norms that include attitudes towards marriage and sexuality, religious beliefs, norms of beauty, educational expectations, and a plethora of other ideologies.

Samad Iqbal, a Bengali Muslim from Bangladesh is obsessed by the history of his great grandfather, Mangal Pandey, who allegedly fired the first shot of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Samad, to become more like the English he leaves the immigrant-

dense neighbourhood, East End and moves to the more liberal Willesden Green. Samad voluntarily took part in the Second World War. When he, in the war, became positioned in a tank with Englishman he was not aware of the impact these men were going to have on him. To Samad's disappointment, the Englishman in his tank did not correspond with his expectations of the English; the colonizer, also affected hybridly, had not represented the typical English, it was not only a disappointment that hit him, it was also the fact that he realized that he had been living in the world of unreality. Before the war, Samad's only encounter with the English was in what was in then colonized India, where he was the colonized. In his life he had always lived under English rule; the English affected him and he affected them. Samad feels ashamed of his wife Alsana, as she does not act like the typical Bengali women that he expects from her.

Samad's sons Magid and Millat represent the East and the West of Samad, with some recurrent slippages. Although they are identical twins, their reaction in similar situation is totally different. Millat does not seem bothered by their father's attempts to influence in their lives and decide what they ought to do and not, while his brother gets upset and responds with a silent protest. Magid who is the eldest by two minutes attempts to blend in. Millat instead of trying to blend like Magid, which he knows is going to fail, he does the opposite. He joins a gang called Raggastani, where internal language is a mixture of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English. The group consists of a great mix of culture, a hybridly within itself. Millat makes his escape to different organizations and groups, as a teenager he comes in contact with an organization called KEVIN. KEVIN is an extreme Muslim group, which gives Millat a sense of belonging. The ironic thing about the group is that the founder of the organization was not Muslim from the beginning. He was a man with radical opinions who studied Islam at university, a man who did not fit into society. Even the name KEVIN reveals the hybridity that exists within the Group, the letters stand for keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation. The more time he spends in KEVIN, the more of a fundamentalist Millat becomes. He does not always agree with the opinion of the organization, but it is place where he can express his anger and frustration. The way Archie Jones acts towards Samad indicates that he has respect for him, the kind of respect the colonized has for the colonizer. Archie cannot be perceived as a typical Englishman, nor can he be perceived as anything else, he is a hybrid. Magid thinks that leaving things to its fate is the Eastern way of dealing with problems. This is just what Archie does, leaves everything to fate, every time when he ought to make a decision he flips a coin. Perhaps the most ironic fact in the novel is that it is Archie who releases the Future mouse, when he had a gun shot in his fight. Future Mouse is a project by Marcus Chalfen in which he introduces chemical carcinogens into body of a mouse and is thus able to observe the progression of tumours in living tissue. Archie is the most generic of all the characters, and the most neutral, brings about the final solution. He releases what all the multicultural characters have so vigorously fought for, control. This fatalistic maneuver of Archie's work had put him in his place. It is the oppressed. Samad realizes that the oppressed friend of his, Archie, never really has been the oppressed.