

ROLE OF RACE AND HISTORY IN THE IDENTITY FORMATION IN *WHITE TEETH*

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Abstract:

*The first generation immigrants try to hold to their rituals, religious beliefs and cultural values, in order to protect their roots and identity. They practise their variegated religious and traditional rituals to influence the process of identity formation of second generation and consistently imbibe the importance of their roots. They try to retain their original culture and identity. However, for the second generation the influence of host-culture and values is formidable. The immigrants face the difficulties in identifying themselves with a stable and clear identity. Identity as the concept is unstable and changeable. This phenomenon occurs in multicultural societies and in the families where the parents have different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. This paper attempts to shed light on the identity formation of the immigrants in the multicultural societies and their (in)ability to escape from their history. Identity construction and racism are the central aspects in *White Teeth*.*

Key Words: *Identity, culture, multiculturalism, roots, race, immigrants, diaspora, history.*

Smith herself is bi-racial. She is the daughter of an English father and a Jamaican mother. Smith represents the construction of a new British identity. Her characters, although are living in Britain, a few of them are still locked in their past in their minds that links them to their place of birth and their country. Immigrants retain their links with kinship, religion, culture and territory with their homeland. (Rex 207) Decolonization transforms London into a multicultural city and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* envisages London 'as a world in a city' - a mixture of different cultures, ethnic groups, religious-beliefs. Today, every society is multicultural as it is constructed by two or more different cultures, religions or languages that is what subtly recognized in *White Teeth*. The former British colonies immigrated to Britain after WW-II owing to the familiarity with British language, religion and culture from the time of colonialism. (Caryl 110) The immigrants leave their countries due to different reasons like employment, education, politics, religious clashes and poverty. They find Britain as a suitable destination to begin a safer and happier life. Smith combines two families, the Iqbals and the Joneses, both have different national identities, different world-views and cultural, religious values. These immigrants live in London and struggle for assimilation and integration. Seda Arikan writes:

Smith focuses on the conflict between the first and the second generation of immigrants as well as the third generation. (Arikan 1682-83)

Smith illustrates this problem in two dimensions - cultural history and personal history of the immigrants. The second generation escapes history making their identity more complex that raises the conflicts between immigrants. Samad Iqbal, an immigrant from Bangladesh, desperately tries to retain his tradition, religion and culture. He has a strong desire to return to homeland but his family does not want to return because of economic, political and religious troubles and traumatic experiences they experience at home. Samad struggles for stable and fixed identity in the host land so plans to return. He advocates strongly the inclusion of his cultural, religious rituals even in the school courses so that his children learn

them.

Smith illustrates the issues of race and class barrier through Chalfens and Iqbals. The Chalfens are educated, rich, intelligent and have an elite position in the British society. The Iqbals, unlike Chalfens, belong to the minority groups. The jobs, living place and education show the class difference between them. Racism exists everywhere the immigrants live and work. The three families that Smith presents live at Willesden, in North London - the most diverse area in Britain, where a large number of immigrants reside. Their cultural and ethnic differences and desire to maintain their roots and cultural identities lead to racial tensions. They consistently struggle either to protect their previous identity or to adopt their new identity. This process of prioritizing identity is seen when Samad sends Magid back to his homeland in order to grow up in the Bengali way in his family background and culture so that he would become "... a real Bengali, a proper Muslim." (Smith 215) The tendency for representation is strong amongst the minorities. They want equal rights, freedom of choice and liberty to practise their cultural and religious rituals and traditions without being discriminated against. (Avtar 25-28)

This paper explores the role of race and history in the identity formation of characters. The central questions are - How does Multiculturalism effect and shape the identity of characters? How do race and history play role in constructing characters' identity in the Multicultural society? Zadie Smith focuses on the complex identity of her characters that is based on their heritage and place of origin. Her characters come from different places like Jamaica, India, England and Jewish and she makes them come and live together in North London. This blending of diverse individuals explicates the social, cultural and religious differences between them better. Each of her characters represents a particular identity with his/her own personalized background. The culture, language, religion and place of birth of characters they came from are significant to construct their past and roots. Roots are the determiner of individuals' identity; roots and history form self-identification. In *White Teeth*, Smith uses teeth as a metaphor to represent the identity of the characters. Teeth are the unique part of the body, they are difficult to take out and hard to escape from them. If one tries to leave them, it will be problematic and painful process because the vacuum it leaves behind is not easy to fill. Zadie Smith's characters have different views on their background, as Irie, a dark-skinned girl has Jamaican mother, Clara Jones and an English father, Archie Jones. She wants to escape from her history and the family's past. She is glad that her daughter would not know her father so that she will have not to deal with the problem of roots. Clara is a character who also wants to escape from her roots. Samad believes that roots are necessary and tries not to lose them.

Identity

Identity as it cannot be chosen has become much complicated today due to the global, homogeneous society. Identity as an 'ambiguous' (Buckingham 1) term that can be used for many different purposes. Everyone has their own specific identity that differs from others, such as Samad's sons, Millat and Magid. Millat and Magid have the same prerequisites and cultural background, but each of them has their own identity. Buckingham argues that identity lets people know themselves, who they are and who others are. At the same time, it lets others understand their operating environment differently. Identity is a process; one cannot consider it as a 'thing'. (Jenkins 5) Identity is a process and not a 'found' object simply. (Correa 10) People can find their identity by understanding themselves and their environment. Avtar Brah states that identity is an "enigma" because the individual's everyday experience shows that it is changeable with every situation. (Avtar 20) These scholars argue that identity is a process and not a possession. This process continues through the history to the present and future. Time is something that humans cannot control. Identity is shaped based on experiences of individuals and not on something that an individual constructs. Fearon claims our understanding of *what identity* is based on how we define ourselves and how we answer the question *who you are*. (Fearon 12) However, this question is pluralistic in answers depending on an individual's situation and continual shift according to place and time. Personal identity is not something clear and concrete an individual can say that *this is my identity*; rather people are identified with multiple identities when they belong to several groups or live in different places, this is the experience of

Diaspora. For example, Magid, at the same time, is an ethnic Bengali and behaves as an Englishman. Therefore, identities are multiple and an individual's history and societal influences play seminal role in the development of identity. These identities develop and change during different stages in life, especially the age between childhood and adulthood.

The postcolonial theorist, Stuart Hall argues that identity is a problematic issue and not a transparent. He claims that identity is a production of representation. This production is not complete; it continues as a process in every human life. Even death cannot stop the process of identity as people can get identification after death such as martyrdom. Hall defines “cultural identity” in two different ways: in the first position, “cultural identity” is defined as one shared culture that is hidden inside “selves”. It emphasizes the similarities that make “oneness” of “people.” (Hall 223) Migration, slavery, religious and historical forces create the relationship between racial and ethnic groups that share the same history and heritage.

In *White Teeth*, the minorities of London share a cultural and religious identity, such as immigrant Muslims practise their religion wherever they are. This kind of religious and cultural identity can be seen as a reflection of shared historical experiences and cultural codes. Cultural groups or immigrants, who have left their homelands, probably bring some customs and cultural practices to new countries. Immigrants have symbols and practices as the markers of their origin, especially first generation pays more attention to their symbols and practices which they link to their ancestors and roots. Mostly, diasporic immigration is one of the causes that make individuals show their identity by symbols and practices. (Judith and Thomas 142) The cultural identity has played a vital role in the postcolonial struggle. This sort of identity is more about retelling of the past (the narratives of the past). Cultural identity has second position that emphasizes the similarities and differences within a cultural group, for example, the black Caribbean identity. The differences explain 'what we really are' or 'what we have become'. We cannot form an identity for so long with 'one experience and one identity'. Because identity is a production, not a “thing” that everyone could have or do, it also is an “open-ended” process. (Jenkins 9) Hall elaborates his discussion on, the second position of cultural identity and defines it as “...a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.’” (Hall 224-25) It is understood as an unstable and changeable. Identities are not something that already “exist” but rather they come from a place that has history. This means that it is not a fixed essence but a positioning. We categorize the identity the ways we are positioned by the narratives of the past. Identity that is produced in the past is not eternal, but it goes under the influence of place, time, history and culture. Similarities and differences between identities make cultural identity more complicated. Hall illustrates this with black Caribbean identity as an example, which has two directions - similarity that gives continuity with the past and difference that shows what they share is the experience of discontinuity. Cohen Robin writes Hall argues that slavery and the mixture of immigrants construct new identity labelled as hybrid, diverse and different. For Hall diaspora is:

“...not defined by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves a new, through transformation and difference.” (Cohen 125)

Erik H. Erikson emphasizes the period of adolescence which he believes is the critical stage for an individual's identity development. He asserts that identity crises occur in one's developmental period. He also opines that identity starts from past and extend toward the future. This means:

Identity is grounded in the stages of childhood and will depend for its preservation and renewal on each subsequent stage of life. (Erikson 733)

The period of identity development brings identity crises in the modern world and globalization further aggravates identity crises. Individuals have complex identity due to global changes and population increase. Globalization can be perceived as the factor that has made a difference among ethnic identities. The globalization made the world similar through the process of cultural homogenization:

...with homogenization, one sees the world becoming more alike in dress, language, economic structures and communication. (Burton 7)

Culture and identity are about to fade away as a result of globalization leading to a decline of cultural features and ethnic identities like minority languages, style of life, dress and cultural performance. William C. Watson argues that this is the process of cultural loss. (Watson 71) Local cultures are threatened by cultural homogenization and globalization, so that people fear of losing their identification. This cultural loss has turned the people to embrace their past and cultural roots. The new global era has become a battleground where both minorities and majorities are trying to defend their cultural and social identities. Globalization increases migration and has made the world smaller which has made people adapt different hybrid identities based on the circumstances. Jenkins defines identity as a production that shows the past and present but is incapable of revealing the future. Thus, it signifies where people come from and where they belong but it cannot tell them where they should go in future because identity is in progress and is open-ended and unpredictable, it also depends on individual decisions. Magid is identified by his national and religious identity as Bengali Muslim, but his interests are the opposite; he behaves like an Englishman by wearing suits, having white friends, eating bacon and so on. The importance of identity is in its change, renewal and continual transformation of a person's identity. Jenkins states that without an identity there would be no human beings; therefore, identity matters. (Jenkins 28-29) Jenkins insists on the importance of identity, he writes identification involves individuals, collectivity and history. It is a concept that can be applied for every human creature based on the two criteria, similarity and difference. Jenkins believes that when someone says *who I am*, that person also needs to say *who or what I am not*, so that he/she can differentiate her/him from others. For example, when we identify ourselves it is important to mention with whom we do have shared links and interests with, such as kinship, religion and ethnicity because these are signifiers of the group similarity. The negative aspect of identity is individuals' need to carry their undesirable definitive labels that make them feel different, especially minorities' different identifications. (Erikson 733) Identification in which humans know *who is who* and *what is what* is uncertain and each possesses unlimited characteristics. Though, this leads to think of identity as indeterminate, we focus on the limited characteristics of the criteria of difference and similarity. There is also a limited agreement between the individuals such as culture and shared knowledge. Jenkins argues that communal identity is considered to be similarity which is an important issue in the sense of culture and collectivity. He supports his argument writing that in a heterogeneous society in which diversity is everywhere, life would be complex and unimaginable without a shared culture that can influence the individuals' behaviour. The individuals' behaviour is something that could be distinctive and something in opposition to one's identity. In other words, identity cannot determine one's behaviour. Although, the term identity has been defined differently, it connotes the same idea that it is a process that continues in all stages of an individual's life.

Conclusion

In the process of settlement, the immigrants and the minority groups lost their cultural identity. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* shows immigrants' life in London. It interprets Multiculturalism as a main cause for the characters' identity crises but ambiguity and complexity in characters' roots and history can be the cause in constructing identity crisis of the characters. In *White Teeth*, a few characters try to save their roots, but they are unconsciously affected by Multiculturalism and the dominant British culture in London. The young characters want to escape from their roots, histories and values. These immigrant characters have similarities or differences with other ethnic groups. Sometimes, they join other groups or adapted with the dominant culture of the society. An individual needs to mention both similarities and differences in one's identity to construct it. Each of the characters in *White Teeth* has his/her own identities within a particular individual background. It is important to understand that Samad's identity as the first generation of immigrants is based on the roots of his family, religion and history. But, the identities of the second generation immigrants are based on their interests such as identity construction of Magid and Irie. They have chosen what they are interested in and sometimes their behaviour is the opposite of their public

identity. For example, Magid's behaviour is almost like British children but he is expected to be Bengali and Muslim by his father and Irie tries to appear like a white British girl despite her black skin and Jamaican roots. Samad too has identity crisis he identifies himself as Muslim but he does not behave like a proper religious man. So, identities cannot determine behaviour and behaviour cannot determine identification. Identity cannot be constructed by a will or be planned, because it is changeable based on time and space for example Samad always wants to plan an identity for his sons, but he is unsuccessful in his attempts. Identity cannot be stopped from renewing and one cannot predict a future identity. People may try to change their cultural identity but it is difficult because the roots cannot be changed or denied. The roots and history are inescapable, continuing and recurrent concerns in human life. People can influence identity but they cannot influence and choose their roots and history. For the immigrants, their collective identity is important, such as shared belonging, religious beliefs and a commitment for unity. Immigrants, ethnic groups, though, do not live in their homeland still they practise their traditions and have links with their family identity. Multiculturalism and globalization influence cultural identity of the immigrants and make them mixed with the dominant culture. The Iqbals are Smith's example to explain how two cultures have been mixed. Millat and Magid are under the influence of British culture as they practise dominant culture. The traces of racism and class discrimination make the immigrants practise what the British practise. To conclude, identity can go along with every stage of life and is not a stable concept. One is able to renew and influence one's identity with new interests, places and relationships. It is obvious in Smith's *White Teeth* that the characters change their identity based on their interests, different stages of life and situations. Magid Iqbal has somehow changed his identity consistently. First, he was in London, changed his name to Mark Smith, then he was sent back to Bangladesh to be a staunch Muslim and but he returns with a different identity, his religious identity disappears and he starts to work with the Chalfensemerges opposite to his planned identity. This shows the flexibility of identity, especially for the second-generation immigrants.

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