



IDENTITY CRISIS AND MULTICULTURALISM IN THE FICTIONS OF ZADIE SMITH

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ABSTRACT

Zadie Smith, a multiculturalist by birth, a prominent figure of contemporary British literature, published her fictional debut *White Teeth*, which gives its readers a wide ranging view of multicultural British society. Through the life of the protagonists coming from different social, ethnical, racial backgrounds she describes London and Willesden, a district of a multicultural city in her novels. Zadie Smith's novels discuss the identity crisis of post-colonial subjects. In the multicultural context of metropolitan London one's identity is permanently changing, the conflict with the other and the need for cooperation leads to a heterogeneous identity in which the neighbourhood, the place one is living, and the Joycean use of language becomes a force identity forming.

Key words: identity crisis, multiculturalism

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The purpose of the paper is to highlight the multicultural elements and the identity crisis portrayed in the novels of Zadie Smith. The questions of daily importance to every individual human being are Who am I? What makes me me? The question of what defines us in our personality cannot be answered in a single sentence, or easily. Multiple external factors from the field of culture such as ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexual orientation or history have an effect on who we are, what we identify ourselves or are identified with. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, identity defines Who or what a person or thing is; a distinct impression of a single person or thing presented to or perceived by others; a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person from others.

Depending on a person's social surroundings with all its cultural identifiers, his or

her identity is shaped. In Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* identity is presented and problematised as "In-betweenness". Her work focuses on immigrants and their children, the second generation, and the difficulties they face in their daily life caused by in-betweenness. In-betweenness as a term is quite self-explanatory and depicts ambiguity on several levels like belonging, ethnicity or sexual orientation/habits, to name only a few. This ambiguity entails the social life of the characters as well as their emotional state. On the basis of their behaviour and emotional condition against the background of their cultural affiliations, it will also specify the conflicts and probable advantages the state of in-betweenness entails.

The dilemma Samad (*White Teeth*) is in originates amongst other things from his disappointment in the English working system that

does not give him the opportunities to work in his learnt profession. He's educated. While Samad should not work as a waiter, since he is overqualified for this job, it is the only job he got offered. As a marginal note, Darcus (White Teeth), who does not leave his armchair either, does not speak properly and only watches TV should be put into consideration about the letdown of the English working system, too. These feelings are so strong that, Samad starts to preserve his roots in order to protect himself from any Anglicising.

He [Samad] tries to preserve his religion and culture [...] which should remain entirely untouched by the British culture. With the same aim in his mind, in the past, his great-grand father [sic] put his life in danger. [...] He asks "What am I going to do, after this war is over, this war that is already over – what am I going to do? Go back to Bengal? Or to Delhi? Who would have such an Englishman there? To England? Who would have such an Indian? They promise us independence in Exchange [sic] for the men we were. But it is a devilish deal" (Smith 2000, 112)

After all that has happened to them, also the impossibility of going back to their home countries, they gain a romantic idea of their past, when all seems to have been perfect and clear. Also, as it seems obvious to them that they can't do a lot about their situation, they try to bring their children up the best possible way, to survive in this country, which has not done them any good. Samad is doing that by sending Magid, the first born and cleverer one of the twins, back to Bangladesh, hoping he would grow to be a good Muslim, while he could look after Millat himself. However, both parents' ideals have nothing on their children and so it comes that Magid returns being "more English than the English", Millat joins the fundamentalist Islam group KEVIN ("Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation").

"There are no words. The one I send home comes out a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer. The one I keep here is fully paid-up green bow-tie- wearing fundamentalist terrorist. I sometimes wonder why I bother," said Samad bitterly, betraying the English inflections of twenty years in the country, "I really do. These days, it feels

to me like you make a devil's pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started... but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. [...] it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children unrecognisable, you belong nowhere." (Smith, p. 407)

These failed attempts to preserve his as well the roots of his children, bring Samad to take more drastic actions about themselves.

While Samad turns to god, "is in his own world" and only answers his son by yelling at him. It has to be said that preserving and being distraught about his situation does not help him to improve it. Yet, Samad's personal disappointment is so big, that for himself he sees no other solution than to preserve and hide, to suffer from his ambiguous life. Apart from Islamic fundamentalism, the novel also explores the politics of representation. While London claims to be a multicultural society, it is questionable whether ethnic minorities receive equal treatment, and how they are portrayed is often a manifestation of deep-rooted racist discourses in society. The discrepancy between first generation immigrants and their children in their attitude towards issues of identity and belonging proves to show an interesting contrast in the novels. The first generation immigrants all try hard to fit into the discourse of multiculturalism, but most of them fail miserably in their efforts to assimilate and integrate into British society. Samad Iqbal in Smith's White Teeth laments that London is 'a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated' (White Teeth 407).

When Millat reaches the age of eighteen he has joined a Muslim fundamentalist group called KEVIN ("Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation") and is ranked quite high in the group (Smith, 2001, p. 245, 368). He did not join the group because he is a Muslim but because he loves clans and the outfit the KEVIN group wears (black suit and a green bow tie). Trying to live as a 'proper' Muslim by the teachings of the Quran is the most challenging part of his membership to the group. Millat admires western film industry, especially

movies about gangsters and mafia, but as a member of KEVIN he should abandon all western influence.

As for KEVIN's more unorthodox programs of direct action, Millat was right in there, he was their greatest asset, he was in the forefront, the first into battle come jihad, cool as fuck in a crisis, a man of action, like Brando, like Pacino, like Liotta. [...] It was his most shameful secret that whenever he opened a door [...] the opening of Good Fellas ran through his head and he found this sentence rolling around in what he presumed was his subconscious: As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster. (Smith, 2001, p. 368).

Millat clearly wants to gain the acceptance of the group by 'sacrificing' a part of his personal identity, the 'western' part. He is acting out like a 'proper' Muslim to his KEVIN group members (enacted frame), but at home, in the privacy of his own bedroom, he lets the West out when nobody sees him (personal frame). Like for example when he is playing a gangster from a mafia movie in front of a mirror and saying to his reflection
You lookin' at me? You lookin' at me?
Well, who the fuck else are you looking at, huh? I can't see anybody else in here.
You lookin' at me?
(Smith, 2001, p. 380).

If his KEVIN brothers were to witness this moment, it would be devastating. He would lose his face and respect in front of his peers, so, he keeps his love for the western cinema to himself.

Millat's father, Samad, has similar problems with his identity. He talks a lot how to be a proper Muslim and live by the teachings of the Koran, but in reality, as his son Millat puts it
He's a bloody hypocrite, man [...] he prays five times a day but he still drinks [alcohol] and he doesn't have any Muslim friends [...] And he wants me to stop hanging around with KEVIN. I'm more of a fucking Muslim than he is. (Smith, 2001, p. 277).

Samad realises this himself too and likes to blame the English cultural influence for his and his sons' bad behaviour as we saw in one of the captions in Personal-Relational Identity Gaps part above (pp. 34-35). He thinks he is weak for giving in to the English influence and gives big rants at home that whole family seems to have forgotten what the

Koran says. On the surface, he seems to be acting like a proper Muslim by praying and seeking consultancy at the mosque (enacted frame), but then come afternoons and his daily meetings with his long-time friend Archie Jones at the O'Connell's pub where they eat and have beers (personal frame). In a way, Samad is a Muslim in theory but not in practice.

Millat's mother and Samad's wife, Alsana, is also a complex character. Her personal-enacted identity gap is witnessed, for example, when in a parent-teacher association meeting, she grudgingly supports her husband's suggestion of not celebrating an English holiday at the school. When this happens, some women "[...] looked over to her with the piteous, saddened smiles they reserved for subjugated Muslim women" (Smith, 2001, p. 110). The truth, on the other hand, could not be further from what they think because Alsana is far from being subjugated. In fact, Alsana[...] was not as meek as he [Samad] had assumed when they married [...] Alsana [...] was prone to moments, even fits [...] of rage. [...] In his naiveté Samad had simply assumed a woman so young would be...easy. But Alsana was not... no, she was not easy. (Smith, 2001, p. 51).

White Teeth is the novel of assimilation and identities in formation, written with slightly comical and ironic overtones. While the parents' generation thinks that their different nature manifested in contrast to the dominant white culture is an inevitable attribute, their children fight it at first. "What was wrong with all these children, what had gone wrong with these first descendants of the great ocean-crossing experiment?" – asks the novel. (Smith, 2000, 218.) The half Jamaican, half British girl dreams of having a white body and smooth straight hair, while the son of Bengali parents rejects his parents' religion. However, by the end of the novel, the members of the second generation realise that neither the unreflective acceptance of traditions, nor the assimilation to the white culture would lead to success, thus they themselves must decide on which aspects of the different (inherited, receptive, desired, etc.) cultures they embrace. At the same time, there is a greater distance between the deliberately formed, "customised" identities,

than between the traditional identities that are inherited and considered to be unquestionable. Archie and Samad manage to stay friends for a lifetime even though the rapprochements of their families, value systems and cultures often fail. Among the members of the new generation there is an insuperable, consciously chosen distance connected to their innermost values.

White Teeth naturally fit into the range that in the 50s and 60s was still called "black British" literature, not differentiating between British Caribbean, British Asian, or British African authors and subjects. Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul were primarily the reason why the culture of immigrants received more and more attention and appreciation through the works and personalities of immigrant authors from different South Asian countries.

According to David Morley and Kevin Robins as western culture comes to be recognised as but one particular form of modernity, rather than some universal template for humankind, and as Britain attempts to adapt to its sense of displacement from the centre of the world stage – and at the same time, tries to come to terms with its own ethnic and cultural complexity – a whole new scenario begins to emerge." (Morley, Robins, 2001, 3.)

This new scenario manifests itself in the construction of cultural memories, as much of the western multicultural diversity goes back to previous colonial sway, causing an "asymmetrical relation to an apparently shared history" (Sharratt, 2001, 314), as each ex.colony's relation to the global history was connected to the metropolitan power but not necessarily shared in any specific way with those other histories.

At the end of the 1980-s it can be noticed a shift of emphasis away from the dominant discourses of black/immigrant experience which tended to identify this experience with social problems towards a perspective which presents instead the way first and second generation black people experienced settlement in the United Kingdom and how the second generation young black people were not accepted as British, despite the fact that they were born in Britain.

This emphasis on the immense differences between the historical, social and cultural experiences of black people also marks the end of what Stuart Hall called "the innocent notion of the essential black subject." (Hall, 1989.)

Zadie Smith's creations can be seamlessly integrated into this range of works, as her later novels (*The Autograph Man*, 2002; *On Beauty*, 2005) capture the same colourful, culturally and linguistically diverse, socially multilayered and, at the same time, ever-evolving "multicultural" metropolitan world. However, she emphatically seeks dialogue with the classical, modernist English literary traditions at the level of language. *On Beauty*, for example, is a tribute to E. M. Forster's novel, *Howard's End*.

"It should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love of E. M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other. This time I wanted to repay the debt with homage" – says Smith in the preface of her novel. (Smith, 2005.7.) *On Beauty* does not depict the London known from her previous works anymore; instead it captures Boston's academic world through the family histories that reflect and reformulate the plot of the aforementioned Forster novel. The pretentious liberal professor of West Indian origin, Howard Belsey from Boston and Sir Montague Kipps, the conservative and homophobic Christian from London are academic adversaries, both being recognised Rembrandt-experts. Just like in Forster's work, the two families come into contact through love affairs and friendships during the Kipps family's stay in Boston. The conflict of their different value systems and the family members' own, personally motivated actions inevitably affect both families. In addition to painting, music plays an important identity-forming role in the novel.

The youngest Belsey child tries to build his own black identity by fraternising with Haitian rappers and denying his middle-class intellectual background. For his sister, rap is a project of career-building and love; to her, it is a matter of prestige to be included into the circles of an acclaimed poetess, a group with whom she attends slam-poetry evenings where she falls in love with Carl, the suburban rapper, who is seen by her as the way

towards music/poetry, self-expression and (an eventually failed) advancement. Thus, the novel makes many references to art and beauty, however, we can constantly feel the analytical rigidity of the perspective. The characters (especially the two opposing professors) know much about the aesthetic approach of the concept of beauty, but they are less familiar with its manifestations in everyday life. What happens around them – adolescents in search of their identities, marriages collapsing, deadly diseases, a series of social injustices – is anything but beautiful, though Smith describes these occurrences in a balanced calm tone, setting off comic scenes, not denying the readers humorous remarks either.

In her new 2012 novel, *NW*, Zadie Smith returns to the location already known from *White Teeth*: the London district Willesden. With a postal code in its title, the London novel *NW* is an urban novel, although it would be more appropriate to call it an urban district novel, the novel of a micro-world, as to the characters nothing is significant but what happens in their immediate environment, the rest of London being alien, practically unknown and completely uninteresting to them.

While in Zadie Smith's earlier novels self-definition was the concern of adolescent characters, here we come across the identity crisis of characters in their thirties. The four main characters of the novel, Leah Hanwell, Keisha/Natalie Blake, Felix Cooper and Nathan Boggle grew up in the same suburban residential area, and the common physical space of their interconnected and occasionally intersected life paths is Caldwell. The white, Irish-born Leah is an underpaid social worker; her childhood friend, Keisha/Natalie is a lawyer due to her diligence and perseverance; Felix is an unsuccessful film director and former drug addict who is trying to find a new foundation to his failed life; and finally, Nathan, once the girls' favourite, is a homeless drug addict pimp in the residential district of their childhood.

Thus, *NW* is an urban novel in terms of the "endangered species" (as it is also shown by the predominantly black main characters). This is what one of the characters, Frank De Angelis, the son of a Caribbean railway employee and a rich Italian

woman, calls himself (and other blacks in a similar position). He feels like they are the target of a well-meaning social plan of Britain, a plan that aims at virtually cancelling out racial identities using the disguise of "globalism" and "multiculturalism".

Conclusion

Instead of a large overall multicultural diversity or structures based on cultural self-expression, Smith appears to emphasise the principles of small communities, personal decisions and "community cohesion". Beginning from the 2000s, spreading awareness of "community cohesion" has played an increasingly important role in British politics, in contrast to the principle of multiculturalism, which is hard to define and hard to put into practice.

Critics have repeatedly held against Smith's novels that they have some sort of didactic feature, nevertheless, her works often present a light and digestible version of multiculturalism ("multicultural light") with a tendency of sweeping problems under the rug.

In turn, multiculturalism is a concept hard to define: it can be used descriptively as an attempt to describe cultural diversity, but it can also be used normatively/prescriptively as referring to a set of ideologies and measures promoting diversity. In this sense, a society is multicultural if it is "at ease with the rich tapestry of human life and the desire amongst people to express their own identity in the manner they see fit." (Bloor, 2010)

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