



RACE AND ETHNIC DISPARITY AND IMPACT OF WESTERN CULTURE IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

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ABSTRACT

Zadie Smith is an emerging British writer known for her treatment of race, ethnicity and culture in her novels. She explores the different minority groups within a multicultural society. She makes the readers realize the traumatic effects of migration. Smith has portrayed the positive and negative aspects of her immigrant characters and their experience. Race and ethnicity are one of the key terms in post colonial theory and cultural anthropology. The terms race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably but they have different meanings. Ethnicity or ethnic group is a term defined by their distinctive cultural attributes such as language and religion. On the other hand, race is understood by most people as a mixture of physical, behavioral and cultural attributes. Moreover, race is a physical difference, and ethnicity is a cultural difference. Race and Ethnicity cannot substitute for each other. Race cannot be replaced by ethnicity. This paper delves deep into Race and Ethnic disparity and impact of western culture in the novel White Teeth.

KEYWORDS: Race, ethnicity, culture, tradition, multiculturalism, cultural identity, cultural diversity, immigrants.

INTRODUCTION

Zadie Smith is a British writer, born to a Jamaican mother and an English father. Her debut novel *White Teeth* (2000) fetched her many awards and honors including The Whitbread First Novel Award, Commonwealth Writer's First Book Prize. The setting of the novel is Willesden, multicultural London. England is known for its class structure and racism is deeply embedded in British culture. Race and ethnicity play a crucial role in the modern world even amidst globalization.

RACE, ETHNICITY AND WESTERN INFLUENCE IN *WHITE TEETH*

White Teeth is a maiden novel by Zadie Smith. The novel focuses on three different families of mixed

ethnicity, race and culture. Race and ethnic disparity is evident through the portrayal of the characters. The novel opens with Archie Jones, an English man and World War II veteran who takes decision by flipping coins. Being an Englishman Archie experiences a string of disappointments in his life. He is unable to find better employment even in his own country after World War II. This makes him feel as an immigrant in his own country. He works in a paper folding company and gets a meager salary. Archie is not even successful in married life. He fails in his first marriage, and remarries Clara Bowden.

Clara Bowden is a black immigrant from Jamaica. Though Clara was born in a highly religious family, she wants to be free from her religious Jamaican mother, so she agrees to marry Archie Jones.



Clara breaks away from her life of piety when she gets exposure to western culture. The reason behind Clara's second marriage is she wishes herself to be addressed as English rather than a Jamaican. Even before marriage, Clara meets Ryan Topps, a white student at her school who introduces her to drugs. She indulges herself in consuming drugs which is totally against her religion and family. Consuming drug is one of the daily routines in western culture. The People of Jamaica are exasperated by racial discrimination. So they are not willing to marry or mingle with English people, for instance, Hortense Bowden; Clara's mother disagrees with Clara and Archie Jones's marriage, because Archie is an English man. It is evident as Clara finds "In Jamaica it is even in the grammar: there is no choice of personal pronoun, no splits between me or you or they there is only the pure homogenous I (327).

Irie Jones, the daughter of Archie Jones and Clara Bowden. She resembles her black mother, a typical Jamaican. Irie is a fat hopeless young woman. She is afflicted by her own racial identity. She does not accept her identity as a Jamaican. She attempts to straighten her hair in order to meet the white people. Though Irie is hopeless, she is quiet intelligent and bold. She desires to seek out her own place in the world especially in England because Irie is dominant by British culture and its people. Irie admits her ugliness in every place because of her big size, her buck teeth, glasses, braces and her dark skin. However Irie is deeply interested in her own family history and lives with her grandmother, she has a flair for western culture. She aspires to create her identity as an English girl rather than a Jamaican. This is evident through her decision to become a dentist, at the suggestion of Marcus Chalfen, a white man. Irie is fascinated by the Chalfens and wants to merge with them. "When Irie enters the threshold of the Chalfen house, she feels an illicit thrill, like a Jew munching a sausage. To Irie, the Chalfens were more English than the English" (328).

The Chalfens are from a white upper class family, they believe themselves to be liberal, cultured and highly educated people. They create a strong impression on immigrants through their westernized culture. Marcus Chalfen is a white Oxbridge (refers to Oxford and Cambridge) scientist. He constantly works on the project called Future Mouse. He strictly controls the project. Marcus effectively colonizes the animal in the name of science and technology; this shows that the colonization of western countries on non-western countries in the name of helping these countries' development. "The Chalfens had no friends. They interacted mainly with the Chalfen extended family

(the good genes which were so often referred to: two scientists, one mathematician, three psychiatrists (314).

Joyce Chalfen, Marcus's wife is an acclaimed botanist and writer. She is interested in the process of cross-pollination in order to create beautiful gardens. This is evident as she says, "now we are more adventurous, positively singing the praises of cross-pollination where pollen is transferred from one flower to another on the same plant ---- The birds and the bees, the thick haze of pollen- these are all to be encouraged (309). She is contrast to her husband's views and ideas. Marcus instigates people from other countries to follow his own culture and cultural ideologies, whereas Joyce Chalfen is fascinated by people of different cultures and ethnicities. Every Chalfen proclaims that they are mentally healthy and emotionally stable. The children have their oedipal complexes early, and they adore their mother and admire their father, unusually this feeling only increase as they reach adolescence.

The vast majority of Bangladesh's inhabitants are Bengalis, who are largely descended from Indo-Aryans who began to migrate into the country from the west thousands of years ago and who mixed within Bengal with indigenous groups of various racial stocks. Samad Iqbal is a World War II veteran and an immigrant from Bangladesh. Racism greatly impacts the Iqbal's lives. Being a Muslim Samad finds it difficult to lead his life in England. As an immigrant he is unable to get better employment in London but only finds employment in an Indian restaurant owned by his cousin. Samad's family is a lower working class family but he takes pride in his job, whereas his sons are ashamed of their position in the society and they want to reconstruct their identity.

Throughout the novel, Samad struggles with his religious beliefs, his Bangladeshi heritage, and his role in western society. On the other hand, he is religious, determined and eager to preserve his Bangladeshi culture. But Samad finds it difficult to follow his cultural ideologies in an alien land. In order to keep away the corruption of western society and to preserve his culture and religious beliefs, Samad sends his elder son Magid to Bangladesh. In contrast, Magid is reluctant to follow his own religion and becomes an atheist and a scientist without considering his father's ambition. However, Samad is also drawn to certain aspects of western culture. This is evident through his affair with his children's white teacher Poppy Burnt Jones and loses his moral values. When Samad's twins sons' witness this extra marital affair, they intend to



create their identity as English or British rather than Bengali in multicultural London.

Except the Chalfens, every other character in the novel is attracted towards western culture. Alsana is Samad's wife and an immigrant. She is twenty years old when she marries Samad. Though she is younger than her husband, she is strong, determined and unafraid of expressing her own opinions. In certain parts of India, the house wives never express their views or questions their husbands whereas Alsana often finds aspects of western culture and this is evident when she raises her voice against her husband and demands respect from him.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *White Teeth* recapitulates race, ethnic disparity and western influence in the modern era. Throughout the novel, teeth symbolize people. Teeth are white even if a person's race, culture or ethnicity is different and it is a common phenomenon. In *White Teeth*, Smith tells her readers that people whoever comes to England as immigrants try to create their identity as British even amidst race and ethnic disparity. The reason behind this transformation is the impact of western culture and people from different cultures are integrated with the advent of globalization. The novel ends with a ray of hope for a peaceful multicultural world.

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