

**Reshaping Multiculturalism through Accommodation, Encouragement and Respect:
An Analytical Study of Zadie Smith's White Teeth**

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Abstract

Multiculturalism is the idea of distinct identities. It seeks cultural groups to be differently acknowledged, preserved, and supported in society. Zadie Smith's White Teeth tells the story of subtle racial tensions in contemporary British society. These tensions are reflected in several ways: race, gender, ethnicity, religion, generation, citizenship, and immigrant status. In particular, immigrants face an identity crisis and do not find favorable circumstances to establish their values. There is a gap in understanding between families of different racial identities and even within a family. Smith tries to fill these tensions and multiple levels of gaps orienting the characters to the ideals of racial harmony and mutual understanding. The objective of the study is to reshape multiculturalism applying the theoretical concepts of Chris Barker and Conrad William Watson, Will Kymlicka, Keith Banting, and John Hotronto to analyze Smith's portrayal of "the multicultural problem." Smith's White Teeth has attempted to offer a multicultural ethos formed around the ethics of cultural plurality, care, and respect for others and their differences in their terms. Smith's novel reflected the multiculturalism through different lived experiences of diverse characters. The study concludes that accommodation rather than assimilation, encouragement rather than mere tolerance of difference or a form of white paternalism, and respect for others in their terms are some of the ways to reshape multiculturalism.

Keywords: multiculturalism, multicultural ethos, toleration, assimilation, authentic self

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Introduction

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) presents a realistic picture of the multicultural Britain after World War II. In the novel, Smith shows the cultural conflicts between three different families—the Iqbals, the Jones, and the Chalfens—as they grapple with the changing social and cultural landscape. This research argues that Smith convincingly represented the debate of multiculturalism as it is experienced by the three families in the advent of the shift towards a new social order. And, Smith makes multiculturalism amenable to both praise and criticism by situating it within the complex and dynamic culture of London.

The Jones, the Iqbals, and the Chalfens represent the challenges of adjusting to a new cultural order and ethos. The Jones family, for example, shows the difficulty of a relationship between two different races. Archie Jones, although a British, has not properly settled in England. Married to Clara Bowden, a black Jamaican woman much younger than him, they embody the tensions between a British and an immigrant black Jamaican as they grapple with their cultural differences. Their daughter, Irie Jones, carries certain challenges to identify herself in the multicultural society. Next, Samad Iqbal is a Bangali, who came to England with his wife Alsana Begum. They have twin sons Magid and Millat. Samad always desires his family to follow Islam which he finds difficult to maintain in Britain. That is why, he sent his son Magid to his homeland Bangladesh. Unfortunately, Magid becomes more English than the identity his father desires him to hold onto. Alsana does not like English. She wants her sons' upbringing to be according to their ways. They wish, in return, that there were the second-generation immigrants. Contrarily, Millat, Samad's second son, in his teenage, becomes chain smoker and abuses girls in the school. This experience of being badly treated in the Chalfen's house brings him the realization that the imposition of English value over immigrants has had psychological toll. This same experience turns him to be a radical Muslim. Finally, the Chalfens family, the Jewish family, neither to the Iqbals and the Jones, signifies North London. Marcus, Joyce and their son, Joshua are the representative characters in this family. Both the parents are busy, so they do not have time to Joshua's difficulties.

The Multicultural Problem

The characters in the novel suffer because they do not find the proper settlement in the migrated land, London. They face identity and existential threat. They lose their dignity. They struggle until the end of the novel, when they come to some form of self-reflection and learning brought about by their lived experiences. Replicating a typical traditional plot line, we see reconciliation as the novel concludes. In this respect Smith depicts both conflict and accommodation and acknowledgment. She suggests that multicultural societies should show respect for the people from different cultures and different ways of doing, being and valuing.

In the meantime, she critiques the desire to preserve the past while it is already compromised in the move.

White Teeth has amassed wider acclaims from critics and commentators. John Clement Ball (2006) writes that *White Teeth* is one of the few recent British novels that attempts to represent experiences of more than one generation and place of origin. For him London provides a meeting place of cultures, religious and political viewpoints and thus extends the opportunity of humanitarian understanding towards the characters. Ball praises the novel's reflection of multifacetedness: The racial and cultural differences represented by the white, brown and black; and the emotional, the familial, the generational, and the intellectual differences embodied by the featured characters. Ball's intimation is that Smith does a great job by situating the story in London, which is a dynamic, contemporary metropolis where diversity spreads in all different ways.

Likewise, Irene Perez Fernandez brings in the need to value the existence of "third spaces", the credit of which goes to Homi Bhabha's theory of third space, which Bhabha sees as a space of hybridity and in-betweenness. Fernandez posits (2009), *White Teeth* also draws upon the changes in social space in terms of the evolution of a multiethnic society. Smith describes immigration and its consequences with certain optimism; the ethnically diverse characters portrayed in *White Teeth* relate to each other in an often funny, sometimes shocking and naïve way. Smith's intention is to present a multicultural Britain where ethnic differences are deemed insignificant. The space where people belong is an important factor in a multicultural society because spaces in such setting are an ongoing process of negotiation and change. Immigrants feel uncomfortable with the new environment with their most immediate community, or their family need to negotiate a different sense of identity within their own spatial location. Fernandez's point reveals the false representation of Britain, and in this specific text, London as multicultural.

Culturalism as Opposed to Multiculturalism

The term multiculturalism, used in conjunction with other words such as multicultural curriculum, multicultural education, and multicultural society, generally refers to the inclusion of people of several races, religious, languages and traditions. It acknowledges plurality of cultures and distinctiveness of each culture. It consists of cultural equality as well as inequality whereas inequality is acknowledged.

Conrad William Watson in *Multiculturalism (2002)* states to speak multiculturalism multicultural society then to speak of a society a state, a nation, a country, a religion or even a simply bounded geographical location on such as town or a school- composed of people who belong to different cultures.

Generally, culture includes knowledge, language, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, behaviors, and other habits acquired by a member of a society. It grows out of a

systematically encouraged reverence for selected customs and habits. While this definition of culture (as a noun) tends to neutralize the power and politics, we need “culturalism” to understand how the same idea of culture was used to develop cultural and civilizational hierarchy and exert influence over other cultures, such as evidenced in the history of colonialism.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997) observes that there are two attitudes and functions of culture when viewed as static and evolving. The former encourages origin, roots and purity and does not tolerate changes and the second encourages changes, dynamism, and learning and growing from other. As for multiculturalism, as some commentators observe, on the one hand, multiculturalism encourages heterogeneity. It legitimizes sense of differences. On the one hand, it leads to homogenization of ideas, institutions, morals and practices, and forms of life. As Chris Barker (2002), in *Making Sense of Cultural Studies* writes, appreciatively: The idea of multicultural society has become official policy in many West cultures and presents a liberal democratic attempt to promote ethnic/ racial equality. It is premised on the idea of displaying tolerance towards a range of cultural practices within the contexts of the nation- state. As policy approach it has been influential in the education and cultural spheres where it has underpinned attempts to introduce people to a range of different beliefs, values, customs and cultural practices. For example, the teaching of multi-faith religious education, the performance of rituals and promotion of ethnic food became facets of educational policy. As such, multiculturalism aims to express respect for and indeed celebration of difference. Thus, multiculturalism as a policy promise to offer a liberal process to promote ethical and racial equality. It is a principle to balance between group-differentiated minority rights and individual human rights.

Multicultural Disposition

Multicultural disposition provides different people with a common space. In Smith’s *White Teeth* we come face to face with three families who struggle to find a common multicultural space. In *White Teeth*, cultures create strong emotional relationships as well as misunderstandings. In effect, Smith tries to convey the sense that creating a common space of understanding and mutual dialogue involves adopting negotiating, and adapting to one another. Barker (2002) states, “Culture is both a name for the domain in which contestation over value, meaning and practices takes place and a tool by which to intervene in social life” (pp.69). The novel shows cultural conflict as an inevitable part of living in or in a multicultural zone because people do not have the same beliefs, values, and ideals in their lives. But while they come to know each other, they find shelter in each other. This novel has realistically presented both positive as well as negative consequences in that sense.

Reshaping Multicultural Ethos

Critics of multiculturalism see it as a tool for gradual assimilation. They think that multicultural leads people gradually to a common culture. For example, the migrated family

Samad and Alasana are hegemonized by the mainstream culture though they highly value the Islamic norms and values. In contrast, younger generations Irie, Millat, and Magid practice cultural differences and try to remain open. They acknowledge cultural differences and perceive their culture in their way. In this context, Watson (2002) introduces the differences between the two terms “multicultural” and “multiculturalism”. Watson points out that *multicultural* refers to the visible and universally accessible products of cultural diversity that carry positive feelings-- food, clothes, music, theatre—because it has a consumerist undertone: a happy consumer of world food or music, for example. *Multiculturalism* directs our attention to “the deeper philosophical and engagement with the world, and how those differences jostle for recognition within national and global boundaries, sometimes in relative harmony with each other, sometimes in real conflict” (107). The novel itself is a nuanced representation of multiculturalism rather than just the multicultural in the sense that it’s deeper than surface-level diversity of cultures.

To understand the effects of multiculturalism and its various implications in *White Teeth*, characters are presented in a way that they belong to different groups. Irie, the young character in the novel wants to be like English but when she knows her mother is from Jamaica, she loves to visit there then she acknowledges the cultural variation. At the end of the novel, she stands as a strong, independent, and self-decisive girl. She decides to give birth to a child whom she does not know whether it is of Millat or Magid. In this context, it is found that multicultural conflict is challenging as Jonathan (2018) states “Approaching multiculturalism with honesty and integrity means accepting that it is not a decorative but a permanent feature of our public social world” (pp.57). Multicultural rights seek to accommodate a variety of distinct cultural practices within larger states. Through the characterization of Magid, Smith critiques the rigidity of root and presents him as a liberal character. He is neither fully obsessed with the root culture nor adopts English culture. Smith presents him as a representative character of a multicultural society.

Similarly, Millat does not find his self-identity in English society. He attempts to go against the Englishness and is involved in extremist group KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation). Smith here portrays Millat as extremist Islamic as he grows older is an example of one's choice to live in a multicultural society. In the same way, Jousha, a child of Chalfen family even does not like the way his father's scientific research. He goes against his father and revolts for the preservation of animal rights. These representations of revolt and resistance are important markers of what happens when certain authorities, whether they are scientific, religious, linguistic, or national try to exert control over other choices and ways of doing, being, and valuing.

Elsewhere, such as in describing Archie's marriage to Clara through racial judgments, Archie does not have any motivation to marry a black Jamaican girl. And in the case of Clara as well, marrying an English man is not associated with the acceptance of

everything acquired by the English values. Smith describes, "Clara Bowden was *beautiful in all senses except maybe, by virtue of being black*, the classical. Clara Bowden was magnificently tall, black as ebony and crushed sable, with hair plaited in a horseshoe which pointed up when she felt lucky, down when she didn't" (pp.23). Clara feels he has no interest in beauty, youth, and love.

Clara regards beauty, youth and love as white ideals. However, Clara has her own misconceptions about others. When she sees Samad with an Indian, she asks, "Why do you spend so much time with Indian?" 48). Clara might have misunderstood about Indians so Archie replies "I've known Sam for years...they are not the royal family, you know they are not those kind of Indians" (pp.54). While riddled with misunderstanding until late, most of the characters resolve (rather than dissolve) their differences. As Maisha (2021) writes, Smith's *White Teeth* connects multiculturalism as certain postmodern sensibilities. These sensibilities acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of human existence. Multiculturalism in the work of Smith needs analysis through the postmodern lens. Her writings express cultural dilemmas and simultaneously hint at the negotiation between different cultures. And the strong message Smith perhaps is leading us to is the reality that it takes multiculturalism some learning and time to work better for a greater number and in some cases, especially if people's experiential stories are not ideal (such as when indirectly led to submission), it may not even work. The learning has to go through a curve of understanding and through a process of unlearning one's presumptions and stereotypes: "Samad and Alsana Iqbal, who were not those kind of Indians as in Arcire's mind, Clara was not that that kind of black, who were, in fact not Indian at all but Bangladeshi, live four blocks down on the wrong side of Willesden High Road" (pp.55).

Clara has different perspectives about the West. But when she comes close to Alsana's family, she finds they are good. In the same way, Alsana also has a negative attitude when she meets Clara for the first time. After having conversations she finds the difference. It narrates, "Black people are often friendly, thought Alsana, smiling at Clara, and adding this fact subconsciously to the sort 'pro' side of the pro and consist she had the black girl from every minority she disliked, Alsana liked to single out specimen for spiritual forgiveness" (pp.65). Barker (2002) states, "Culture is both a name for the domain in which condensation over value meaning and practices takes place and tool by which to intervene in social life" (pp.69). Culture is a kind of value in the sense that it makes social life easy as well as difficult. The characters after understanding the value of culture become social in their life.

The characters' way of understanding each other created room for the appreciation of difference and active learning. Samad desires to listen and understand various languages like British, Spanish, American, French, and Australian. Smith narrates, "From six in the evening until there in the morning: and then every day was spent asleep until daylight was as rare as

a decent tip" (pp.55). Samad wants to hide his profession as a waiter and wishes to be known as a scientist, soldier, and student. But at the same time, he feels it is important to be a waiter, to listen when someone says, "Lamd Down sock and rice with chips. Thank you. And fifteen pence clicked on china. Thank you sir. Thank you very much" (pp.58). This time he realizes the importance of understanding other's language and respects them as they are.

Samad does not like the education system of the West and hesitates to celebrate Western festivals. He says to the teacher, "What is all about this Harvest festival? What is it? Why is it? And why must my children celebrate it?" (pp.129). He thinks it is not their tradition to follow others' festivals because it is not in favor of his religion. In such doubt of Iqbal, the headmistress Mrs Owens replies:

Mr Iqbal, we have been through the matter of religious festivals quite thoroughly in the autumn review. As I am sure you are aware the school already recognizes a great variety of religious and secular events: amongst them, Christmas, Ramdan . . . death of Matrin Luther King. The Harvest Festival is part of the school's ongoing commitment to religious diversity, Mr. Iqbal. (pp.129)

The underlying message is, that just doing some multicultural observations and festival and events will not make us multicultural at heart. It takes more than that. And that cultural stereotype, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding is a matter of process and reeducation.

Precisely because culture is associated with people's emotion, their past and sense of nostalgic loss, their sense of identity and belonging, it is a difficult matter to settle without some form of tension. *White Teeth* shows a natural progress from nostalgia to a refined sense of multicultural ethos and what some might call cosmopolitanism. It questions both nostalgic and nationalist tendencies. For multiculturalism to function, people need to recognize the significance and importance of differences in their life and other's. Particularly, the novel connects an emotion of culture and they come to recognize an importance to each other. Sezen (2024) writes, Zadie Smith's first novel *White Teeth* has been interpreted as a metaphor for national unity in a multicultural society, suggesting that the layers of racial and cultural differences hold commonalities, like the "white teeth" that symbolize unity within the notion of diversity. When cultures do not share equal power, the fear (and the reality of colonialism) that one might lose their culture overpowers.

Samad should not be dismissed as a radical alone. His fear that he and his family will be affected by western culture is genuine. He highly respects his religion; that is why he wants his family also follow the same value. He shares his guilt to his friend Shiva in such a way, "I have been corrupted by England, I see that now- my children, my wife, and they too have been corrupted. I think maybe I have made the wrong friends. Maybe I have been furious. Maybe I have thought intellect more important than faith. And now it seems this

final temptation has been put in front me. To punish me" (pp.144). He carries the guilt with him. In his mind to follow Islamic religion is an important priority. He warns his son to go to Haj but Magid did not want to do so and said "It is not fair. I cannot go on Haj. I've to go to school. I don't have time to go Macca. It is not fair" (152). The tussle between the father and son is obvious given the adverse time and place he is currently situated in. In this context, Mkhilef (2020) writes: *White Teeth* highlighted the cultural confusion and immigration struggles to reclaim their own heritage, culture and history. And it is associated with personal identity and national identity. The conflict between two generations is an extension of a deeper conflict arising from being in a unique and unfamiliar cultural situation. Samad thinks that diversity might hamper his family values. A good reminder in this content is John Horton (2001) writes, "Multiculturalism becomes a problem when conflicts between groups about values or their interpretation cannot be comfortably accommodated within a particular social structure" (p.3). The sense of loss of self-esteem and dignity and feeling of degradation and guilt and shame are part of this process of navigating difference. And some not all stories are meant to have a happy ending.

Smith highlights the issue of forming an authentic self in a multicultural society where they could have choice to live as they are. The message seems to be agency and sovereignty is key to maintaining a functioning multiculturalism. If we do not allow difference in their own terms, it would mean loss of diversity. In the meantime, it is important to note that, multiculturalism is evolving over time. As Banting and Kymlica (2006) write:

...even as state seek to curtail the perceive 'excess' of multiculturalism, they typically emphasize that they are not reverting to older homogenizing and assimilation models of immigration, and accept the need for public institution like the schools, media, health care, and police to adopt to deal better with the realities of ethnic diversity. Immigrant groups are no longer expected to hide their ethnic identity in public life, and can expect reasonable forms of recognition and accommodation in public institution.
(p.8)

Banting and Kymlica's (2006) indication that immigrants are aware of the older model of multiculturalism that ends up being assimilation. They continue, "As with national minorities and indigenous people, a baseline level of 'recognition' and 'accommodation' for immigrants has increasingly been accepted as an inevitable and legitimate aspect of life in liberal democracy" (p.9). Key in this observation is the shift from, say, a tolerance to different, to an approach that *recognizes* and *accommodates*. As John Horton (2001) argues, Traditionally liberalism has been pictured as celebrating much of this diversity, or as at least tolerant of many differences which might not be thought valuable. Yet it has become clear

that the relationship between liberalism, pluralism, especially multiculturalism, and toleration is much more problematic than this simple and confronting picture suggests.

The traditional notion of multiculturalism, liberalism or pluralism is in trouble nowadays because there is not always be possibility of celebrating the differences.

Along with the critical argument about Smith's multicultural novel, the author herself recognizes the limitations of multiculturalism. Smith confesses, "That the whole kind of 60s, 70s, liberation ethnic that you will be released by knowing your roots, that you will discover yourself. I just always thought was a crock basically and its partly true, but your roots come with baggage. And the baggage is not always fun" (interview). Smith admits the underlying motive behind her work is that rootedness remains independent for place and often, if not always subjectively drives people. Rootedness does not, however, necessarily assist in the search for authentic self unless it is interpreted to do so.

To conclude, the novel *White Teeth* presents the complexities and dark side of multiculturalism. While living in a multicultural society, there is impossibility of purity in a conventional sense. The characters of the novel identify their authentic self through mingling of the past and present, a rootedness which clings to both personal histories and present circumstances. Smith further illustrates the understanding each other's culture well. The characters in one or another way struggle to adjust in each other's culture. Even though Smith's characters have difficulties in negotiating the different components of their lives, as a consequence of their inability to accept ambivalence, negotiation seems to be of fundamental importance within the world in which they live. The contact between roots and routes necessarily requires a negotiation in order to shape identity and to interact with others. Therefore, negotiation appears to be essential when dealing with the issue of identity formation and consequently also with one's relationship with others. Smith criticizes the earlier notion and practices of multiculturalism that led to homogenizing and assimilation of other cultures into the white culture. She attempts to raise minorities' cultural values and give them space to develop their lives as who they are. There is conflict and there is contact. That way, Smith's *White Teeth* redefines multiculturalism.

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