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## SELF-IDENTITY, ALIENATION AND GENDERED MEMORY IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*: CHARACTER ANALYSIS OF IRIE

JAYA KUMAR ANDRU<sup>1</sup> & Dr. D. JYOTHIRMAI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of English, Adikavi Nannaya University, Rajamahendravaram  
[a.jayakumarjohn@gmail.com](mailto:a.jayakumarjohn@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English, Adikavi Nannaya University, Rajamahendravaram  
[jyothirmai.dakkumalla@gmail.com](mailto:jyothirmai.dakkumalla@gmail.com)



JAYA KUMAR  
ANDRU



Dr. D. JYOTHIRMAI

### ABSTRACT

The multi-cultural structure of the erstwhile colonial powers, of late has been a significant factor of discussion and analysis in literature and other branches of knowledge. The new multicultural structure of Britain gave rise to literature not only by the native English white wo/men but also by some others belonging to different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Thus the contemporary literary studies has acquired a multicultural structure and this resulted in a literary category named as 'multicultural literature or postcolonial literature'. Many writers in England and USA are contributing their part in producing a repertoire of such literature, and Zadie Smith is certainly one among such significant writers. Her real life experiences provided the major source for her works which portray the identity crisis confronted by the black Britishers in the covert racial discriminative London society. Though England is not considered as a country of racial discrimination like America the instances of discrimination are not rare. People of other races, colours are always looked at in a way that one is persistently hinted at their dark/black skin or other features that differentiate them from the native white wo/men. Confronting these realities while living in London, This paper is an attempt to bring out the self-identity, self-alienation and cultural longing of the black immigrants through the experiences of Irie - one of the major characters in *White Teeth*.

*Key words:* Black British Literature, Self-Identity, Alienation, Gendered Memory and Assimilation

"This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white .... of the great immigrant experiment." (*White Teeth*; 326)

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary England sans the 'Empire' in the geographical sense (post-empire Britain) remained an empire - metamorphosed as the 'home land' for many of its colonized subjects who embraced it as their 'father/mother land' which nurtures in multifarious ways. In the post colonial period many of the once colonized countries though

independent politically, could not guarantee a peaceful or abundant life to their citizens either in terms of material wealth or in terms of individual independence and dignity. As such, many of the African, Caribbean and Asian post colonial sons/daughters have voluntarily migrated to this prosperous and civilized 'father/mother land' anticipating a dignified, independent and wealthy life. In fact for many of the independent post colonial subjects the 'master's land' stood as the dream land to be migrated to. None the less, how

far the migration helped them to fulfil the 'pleasures of exile'? It is the most significant issue contemplated by many Black British writers of England. In spite of the contestations and denials of the tag 'Black British' by many contemporary British (especially colored/black) writers from the nation; for its profound discriminative and segregating implications - this branch of Contemporary English Writing has gained global momentum from 1970s among the English academia. Though its origins are traced back to the Slave Narratives of Nigerian born Equiano and Sancho, it is the twentieth century or to be specific the post war writers who had contributed to the development of the repertoire of 'Black British Writing' (BBW) that portrayed the miserable plights of 'lonely Londoners'. Despite the fact, that the broad coverage of this branch of writing is truncated with the continental or national identities sought by many Asian writers, it still remains as one of the significant branches of Literature/s being produced in English.

Enriched by the oeuvres of iconic figures like: James Berry, Naipaul, Rushdie, George Lamming, Selvon, Hall, Braithwaite, Una Marson, Paul Gilroy and Wallcott etc., who belong to the first and settler generations of writers, it paved way to the writings of 'Britain made' third generation writers. Some of these significant figures include: Caryl Phillips, Kwesi Johnson, Emecheta, Dhondy, Ben Okri and Zadie Smith. Since its origins the BBW has rendered discourses on themes like: longing for the roots, frozen image of the mother land as an ideal place of living / culture, identity, alienation, assimilation, discrimination, segregation, exploitation and stereotyping etc., in their immigrant mother/ father land. Some of these themes remained pivotal in the writings of immigrants belonging to first, second, and third generations as inevitably prioritized under the spatial and temporal circumstances confronted in their lived-in experiences in the familiarly unfamiliar social, religious and political milieu of the post-empire Britain.

Thus the third generation immigrant multicultural sons and daughters of England are emphatically writing the 'present.' Undaunted by the existential traumas in the London immigrant

circles these 'made in Britain' writers are constructing the stories of multi cultural/racial identities as Smith did in her award winning novel *White Teeth*. As Sunita Sinha mentions, "Smith's brilliance is in her vibrant depiction of the multicultural society that is now London".<sup>1</sup> Smith, born in 1975 in northwest London has grew up in an hostile environment especially for young black Londoners. Here, writers like Smith are always haunted and immersed in the constant self-inquiry of their self-identity (roots) and alienation which the narrator of the *White Teeth* declares as "... the immigrant fears - dissolution, *disappearance*" (p. 327).

#### THE CONTEXT

Considering the prevailing discriminating identity politics Smith in her novel *White Teeth* depicts the emerging themes such as: identity, alienation and strong ties with the colonial/cultural past. As a postcolonial and multicultural novel, *White Teeth* presents historical consciousness in two dimensional manner; racial history and personal history. Irie one of the major characters of the novel constantly longs to know her roots/history and her ancestors. Smith confirms the traces of this longing in her interview to *Atlantis: A women's Studies Journal* stating:

If I see kids walking down the streets, the first thing I think, if they are slightly brown, or have slightly Asian eyes, I want to know where their parents are from, how they got here; I'm totally obsessed with it. Partly because people asked me so often when I was child, where I was from, what my parents about, how come one was black one was white. It makes you attentive to those details.

(<http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu>)

Smith transforms the character of Irie as an alter ego. Her personal experiences of self- alienation, cultural longing and racial discrimination are made evident through this character. Irie Ambrosia Jones was born and grew up in multicultural London. Her first name is a patios word simply means

<sup>1</sup> Sunita Sinha, Post-Colonial Women Writers: New Perspectives, Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi 2008, p. 232.

"everything OK, cool, peaceful" (p. 64) but the paradox is nothing is cool or peaceful in her life. She is the daughter of Archie Jones - white English father and Clara Bowden - black Jamaican immigrant mother. As the novelist puts it Irie's Jamaican roots will not let her remain peaceful as England the "gigantic mirror" will not offer a reflection for her and she feels like "A stranger in a stranger land" (p. 266). This feeling of strangeness (in other words alienation) that Irie undergoes is generated from the biracial parenting and for many second generation immigrants' children, this turns problematic because in the multi-cultural society many will be probing into these details. Thus bi-racial children like Irie remain native (rather jamaican) in body and white in spirit being sunk in perpetual dichotomies while living in London. Their self identity remains in flux in the so called multicultural London society where white wo/man/culture is the prescriptive norm.

#### ANALYSIS

As it can be noticed in the novel that Irie though a Black Jamaican girl in her outward appearance, has never been to Jamaica her ancestral mother land. She is ignorant of her mother's 'history', as her parents are preoccupied with their present, never initiate to educate her in this regard. Further, her white father being the offspring of colonial exploitative parents may never wish to reveal the past malicious intentions of his forefathers and her black mother being the victim of colonial exploitation and migration will remain reluctant to reveal her roots to the daughter. Moreover Irie's mother being a part of the first generation of women migrants from Jamaica always wishes to forget the Jamaican 'black identity' and her marriage with a white man is symbolic for her 'Fannonian' desire of whitening her race. The mother's migration is symptomatic as she flew away not only from the geographical space but also from the exploitative colonial cultural entanglements in Jamaica.

None the less, Clara's daughter Irie -the second generation immigrant contradicting her mother is obsessed with people's origins/identities. In fact her fascination for her cultural and familial roots or identity springs from the moment she sees the family tree of Marcus Chalfen traced back to

1600s. Irie's childhood is spent in multicultural society cohabited by the people of many races. Consequently the outward contrasting elements like: colour, physical features and hair remain matters to be explored. This becomes evident when Irie encounters her English teacher while she is teaching Shakespeare's sonnet in the class room. When the teacher talks about the 'dark lady' of Shakespeare's sonnet Irie tries to relate it to herself and she questions the teacher about the complexion of 'dark lady'. Her question to Mrs. Roody the teacher, "Is she black?" is an attempt to find her identity and the curiosity whether Shakespeare wrote a poem about a black woman like her or her mother even. However the teacher's polite denial, her expectation that Irie should have the knowledge of blacks living in contemporary England and the teacher's polite but peevish statement that the possibility of Shakespeare's writing a sonnet on a slave woman after writing sonnets on the Lord is unbelievable at that time proves pinching on the child's mind. The teacher's response, "No, dear, she is dark. She is not black in the modern sense. There were not any Afro-Caribbean's in England at the time, dear. That is a modern phenomenon, as I am sure you know." (271-272) helps the reader to understand why Irie feels alienated in the British society. She feels that she is a mis-match not only at home (biracial parents) but also at school amidst friends/classmates. Besides, her enthusiasm to find out a recognizable figure in the literature she is reading is also disproved by her teacher. Mrs. Roody's address of Irie as "dear", her emphasis on the word 'dark', her awkward pronunciation of the word Caribbean and her presumption that Irie as a Black child (though she is mixed-race off spring she is counted as black/coloured) must be aware of the modern phenomenon of black people in England. It brings out the absurd living conditions and troubled identities of many immigrants in London.

Irie stifles in the identity crisis and feels like an odd one in the London society. Her insecurity and the feelings of alienation stem from her mixed racial identity in the white dominant England. Assimilating in the immigrant (mother) land turns complicated for these multicultural postcolonial immigrant grand children of mixed racial genesis. At

some instances, this novel looks at the concept of beauty and how being beautiful can be woven into both race and identity. Irie, living in 'white London' gets infatuated with the beauty of white women with straight hair. She wants to change her appearance as an English woman with straight hair that is unkinky and beautiful (Smith-283). She wants to show her beauty for someone (Millat) who looks at beautiful girls. The novelist presents the whole episode of Irie going to beauty salon to have her hair straightened with much irony and humour.

Irie is forced to look at her own identity and she acknowledges that her idea of beauty is formed through compulsion of an outside group that recognize her as a misfit. Irie herself lives in England - a gigantic mirror that could show her social image that is shown like an English person, though in reality she has her Jamaican reflection that distinctive look because "she has big butt, big hips, big thighs, and big teeth" (Smith-265). Hence she considers herself as a "A Stranger in Stranger Land" and her half English roots could not help her to become familiar and thus the nation (the birth place) remains a foreign land.

From the arrival of Empire Windrush in 1948, that brought the first large wave of Jamaican immigrants to the UK, people like Irie are/were to be classed as immigrants regardless of their half Englishness. As Holbourne says in 1970s London people applied labels like half cast, half print (p- 5), Irie also feels like half-English or not English at all. She turns a stranger in her own father/mother land, being constantly haunted by the 'white gaze', which would never consider her as a native Londoner. Because Irie has half Jamaican roots, her half English roots did not matter to the London society. This was evidently shown later on in the history, where racial inequality was highlighted by the 1981 Brixton riots (p-6).

Irie's roots from her great grandmother Ambrosia, grandmother Hortense and mother Clara are represented to the reader in terms of their relationship with white men. Irie is not particularly interested in her paternal past which is the white male history, and their presence in her maternal genealogy was disappointing or rather exploitative. Consequently she eagerly searches to know about

herself exploring her family's past and in the process she comes to know more about her mother's family rather than her father's family. Irie's tendency of leaning towards maternal history according to Hirsch and Smith is the cultural memory to be gendered, which in a way helps in framing the present in Irie's life. The importance of linking oneself to one's past is discussed by Greene who finds that "to lose the connection between past and present is also to lose the narrative thread that supports identity and reality" (294). Irie's thread begins with Ambrosia's past and connected her to Hortense's life and thus to her mother Clara's. Every woman's present is connected to her mother's past which is an important aspect for Smith who writes that these women have the ability to fit in each other, like Russian dolls, making them whole.

Irie's maternal past is filled with exploitative white male figures who with an occidental nature tried to civilize/educate her great/grandmother but not without violating their bodies and souls even. The imperialist white male's exploitative nature is memorized through the culture especially in the female Jamaican lives as Hortense Bowden ruminates. When she is brought into the world she has already learned things by osmosis through her mother - Ambrosia, whom the white master attempts to rape just before the onset of labour pains and was saved by divine intervention in the form of an earth quake. Hortense thus has memorized some of her mother's emotions regarding men even before her birth and this substantiates the fact that the Bowden women have a deep connection to each other. Hortense's assertion that she remembers events that happened while she was in her mother's womb adds considerable weight to the argument that the Bowden women have a deep connection to each other. Indeed, Hortense's relationships with men in her life can be traced back to her fetal existence as one of her first memories is repelling the advances of Sir Glenard. Hortense asserts that she has a memory of Sir Glenard's advances towards her mother: "(She) remembered well the feel of that fat hand landing hot against her mother; she remembered kicking out at it with all her might" (p. 360). Hortense believes that she remembers these

events as they happened to her mother. According to Smith: " ... any root canal of Hortense must go right to the very beginning, because . . . she remembers; the events of 14th January 1907, the day of the terrible Jamaican earthquake . . . clear as a bell" (p. 359). In fact Hortense believes that her religious faith sprang from her mother while she is in her womb itself, as the mother felt the presence of God in the earth quake that saved her from Durham. Despite her early aversion to men, Hortense ends up marrying a man who is content to leave her behind while he moves to England. Hortense's husband, Darcus Bowden, leaves his wife and daughter (Clara), in order to move to England and set up a home for them. But, in the tradition of the Bowden women's men, Darcus disappoints; This is in fact the cultural memory gendered even in Irie and this influences her to seek her own roots after she unknowingly confronts the truth of her mother's fake 'white teeth'. The lie dawns the truth of their fake identities in the London society - a strange land and compels her to seek her own past - the reality. It transforms Irie - from the immature teenager who seeks superficial identity in the skin colour, body size, straightness of hair etc., to the matured woman who works hard to earn money for her trip to Jamaica. For this she continues to work with Marcus Chalfen a white male even after realizing that this scientist is also not an exception to the white male gaze that constructs Irie as a female object with big breasts sans the big mind. This is the gaze that has been constructing the black female as objects of sexual pleasures. yet Irie swims in the troubled waters at times succumbing to the teenage fancies, bodily pleasures and at times repudiating all of them to emerge as a stubborn youth to confront the issues of identity and alienation.

#### CONCLUSION

Thus *White Teeth* exposes the issues of identity, alienation and gendered memory of all post colonial subjects of multicultural London society through the character of Irie. She is presented as the representative to showcase the immigrant citizens' dichotomies with which they linger in their immigrant lives. In this age of post post-coloniality they stifle for their identity, feel alienated by the prescriptive white standards that reminds them of

their strangeness in their so called mother/father land.

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#### ABOUT AUTHORS

**A. Jayakumar** has done post-graduation in English literature from Andhra University, India. Now, he is pursuing PhD in the area of Black British literature, Dept. of English, Adikavi Nannaya University. His interested areas like Black British literature, Dalit literature, Post Colonial Studies, and Indian Writing English.

**Dr.D Jyothirmai** is working as Associate Professor in the Dept. of English, Adikavi Nannaya University. Her research areas include, Feminist/Womanist literary criticism, Post Colonial Studies, African Literature, Indian Writing English, Dalit Literature etc., she published research Articles in the above areas. She is also interested in Telugu Literature and keeps doing comparative research work.