

## **The Portrayal of Multiculturalism and Diasporic Elements: A Study of Zadie Smith's Select Novels**

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### **Abstract**

The research paper entitled “The Portrayal of Multiculturalism and Diaspora Elements: A Study of Zadie Smith's Select Novels” deals with the way Zadie Smith has incorporated multicultural, diasporic and postcolonial elements in her works particularly *White Teeth* and *The Embassy of Cambodia*. She has included in her fictional works especially *White Teeth* and *The Embassy of Cambodia* cultural, social, political and religious elements. Her characters suffer from racism, cultural integration problem, hybridization, loss of identity, rootlessness, religious intolerance and belongingness in a multicultural society. Her strength lies in her language and witty dialogues through which she has explored the immigration issues in her works. Her characters have been victimized by the multicultural society of London and Willesden. They have confronted segregation, marginalization, cultural alienation, brutality and inhuman treatment in the multicultural societies of London and Willesden. The paper will explore her literary tradition and the way she has discussed the contemporary challenges for the multicultural societies.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, diaspora, postcolonial, hybridization, cultural alienation.

Zadie Smith is a prolific British novelist, short story writer and an essayist. She was born on 25 October 1975 as Sadie Smith in North-West London to a Jamaican born

woman Yvonne Bailey and an English origin man Harvey Smith. Zadie Smith has begun her fictional world with her most acclaimed work *White Teeth*. It is published in 2000. *White Teeth* has become popular all over the world. It is based on the two war time friends Samad Iqbal from Bangladesh and Archie Jones an Englishman. It deals with the complications of their families in the multicultural society of London. *White Teeth* focuses on the upheavals and confrontations that are confronted by the people of Asian and Caribbean backgrounds in the culturally diverse society of London. The story of the novel begins with Archie Jones, a forty seven year old man who is left by her Italian wife. Archie makes his most important decisions with the flip of a coin. He has served in the World War Second with his friend Samad Iqbal.

On another side, Clara Bowden wants to make her relationship with Royan Topps so she has abandoned her religiosity. But their relationship is broken as Royan becomes a member of Jehovah's Witness (religious organization based on Christianity). After this, Archie Jones and Jamaican born Clara have married to each other and have a daughter Irie. Irie becomes friendly with Magid and Millat from her childhood. Her racial identity has become a challenge for her survival in London society. She has suffered from discrimination, marginalization and prejudice in the multicultural society of London. She has been treated badly by the people from Asian background like Millat, Maxine, Neena and others. Her genealogy and racial identity have alienated her in London society. She has questioned her Jamaican roots and culture as she has not been acknowledged and respected by the people. Her black identity has been ridiculed and mocked by the people. It has made her embarrassed and guilty conscious. She wants to change her black identity so that the society should accept her. This racial and cultural harassment with Irie has created dilemmas in her life. Stefanie Brunn writes that the novel expounds the upheavals in the lives of first and second generation characters as they desperately search for their homeland in the "multicultural society" of London (*White Teeth-Irie as an Example for 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation* 1). Irie has suffered from depression because of her racial identity. She has struggled for her recognition in London society. She has confronted segregation and marginalization in the diverse society of London from different

people. She has become traumatized as Neena, Maxine and other people have dehumanized her on the basis of her genetic identity and colour.

Moreover, Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi Muslim has immigrated to Willesden, North West London after serving in the World War Second with Archie Jones. Samad has married to Alsana Bagum in a traditionally arranged marriage. He works as a downtrodden waiter in a 'West End' curry house. He strongly loves his culture, roots and religion. Samad has great regard for Indian history as well as for the freedom fighter Mangal Pandey, who has ignited revolt of 1857 against British colonial rule. Samad considers Mangal Pandey a hero and freedom fighter but Archie Jones regards him to be a traitor and coward. It has developed identity crisis in the life of Samad. He does not tolerate anybody can belittle and mock about the legendary figure of Mangal Pandey. Samad Iqbal migrates to Willesden from Bangladesh with his wife. In Willesden, Samad Iqbal has confronted racial discrimination so he has shifted to London. Samad likes her traditional values of Bangladesh and religion. But Samad has been victimized by the system and culture of London society. He becomes involved in drugs and masturbation in the new society of London. He has become corrupted in English society. He has not been able to follow the Islamic principles in London society. Samad begins an affair with a school teacher Poppy Burnt Jones. He has suffered between the Western and the Eastern cultural values in London society. Due to this, he suffers from anxieties and depression. He has lost the moral and Muslim values of life in the multicultural society of London. It is the result of masturbation, liquor addiction and his affair with a school music teacher, Poppy Burt Jones. His children Magid and Millat are hybridized by the cultural values of London society. It has created dilemma in his life. In the multicultural society of London, Samad is dragged from his cultural identity, belongingness and roots as a result it has developed hollowness and void in his life. Irene Perez Fernande writes that the novel *White Teeth* of Zadie Smith focuses on "feelings of displacement, elements of racial and ethnic discrimination or questions of belonging and exclusion" in the multicultural London society. Question arises between the "insiders and outsiders" in British society in which the space for the outsiders have become problematic though "hybrid location that is an inherent part of British

contemporary society". Moreover, Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* emphasizes on "second-generation characters" and the planning's "they develop in order to negotiate their identity status and portray their daily lives in a plural location" (143-160). Both first generation Samad and his second generation children Magid and Millat, who are born in London society have confronted turmoil in their lives. Samad Iqbal has felt marginalized and disharmony in the society of Britain. He is completely shattered by the anxieties about his children. These dilemmas have developed in his psyche due to victimization of his children to another's life style. He has felt culturally dislocated after immigrating to Britain. He does not want to integrate with the system of British society.

Samad Iqbal wants to protect his children from the Western cultural values. Magid is the elder son of Samad and Alsana. He wants to live a typical English life. Magid wishes that his parents should be English in style and should follow English norms. But Samad has sent Magid to Bangladesh to keep him rooted to the traditional cultural values of his homeland. Ironically, second generation Magid has turned atheist and has become a staunch believer of science. He has rejected cultural values and Islamic beliefs of his father. Magid becomes a suit wearing, secular and English intellectual. He wants to live an independent life of his own. This has aroused cultural conflict and identity crisis in the relationship between first generation Samad and his second generation son Magid. After Magid has returned from Bangladesh, he has joined to Marchu's 'FutureMouse' project as an assistant researcher. He has become hybridized by the system of London. Zadie Smith has presented the dilemma of Samad Iqbal as "Weren't you listening to my dilemma? I am corrupt, my sons are becoming corrupt, we are all soon to burn in the fires of hell. "Religion is the opium of the people" (*White Teeth* 192-193). Samad and his children in London society have turned away from their Muslims values. He describes his anguish to Archie about the victimization of his family to cultural values of British society. London society has tormented and traumatized Samad Iqbal. He does not want that his children should get away from their Bangladeshi roots and traditional values. Zadie Smith depicts that religion and traditional values have made Samad confused in London society. He has felt marginalized and

segregated in the cultural diverse society of London by looking at his children the way they are corrupted and contaminated by British cultural values.

Second generation characters Millat, Magid and Irie have suffered from cultural clashes. They have felt unable to assimilate with British culture though they have been born there. Cultural dislocation, religious identity and East-West cultural values of life have traumatized their lives. Their identities have been damaged by British values so they have not been able to relate with either of the cultures. Each character in the novel suffers from identity crisis. Everybody questions his personality and wonders about their identity. Identities of the second generation characters have turned fluid as they have lost their recognition between the multiple cultures. Millat has turned militant and fundamental in London society. He has left his home and remains busy in the company of rouge people. He has felt excluded and segregated in the new society. Brad Buchanan in “Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and the Posthuman” writes that *White Teeth* deals with the “postcolonial issues, in particular the concept of hybridity” (13). Hybridization to second generation characters Millat, Magid and Irie has created hollowness, anxieties and dilemmas in their lives. They have suffered from psychic wounds and disharmony in-between the two cultures in London society. They do not know whether to follow English way of life or their parent’s cultural values.

Samad Iqbal, Millat, Alsana, Archie and Irie in British society have developed prejudice and malice against one another in terms of their race, culture, religion and nationality. Cultural differences have created conflicts and identity crisis in their lives. Brad Buchanan states that *White Teeth* conveys a message towards “liberal democracy” so that everybody should live together with peace and tranquility instead to create violence on behalf of traditional values and religious practices with one another (16). But, groups such as FATE (animal rights group), ‘KEVIN’ (Islamic group) and Jehovah’s Witness (religious organization based on Christianity) have created havoc and have disturbed social harmony in the lives of these three families in the multicultural society of London.

Besides the above works, she has published a novella *The Embassy of Cambodia* in 2013. It is highly praised and acclaimed by the writers. It is a story about the life of a

slave woman Fatou in Willesden, North West London. She has greatly suffered in her life as her father has “taken her from Ivory Coast to Ghana. . . Libya and then on to Italy” (15-16). It has made her plight pathetic. She is traumatized by this journey of life as she has confronted meanness and wickedness from every side in her life. After migrating to Willesden, she has worked as a domestic servant in the Derawals family. Derawals family has treated her badly. She has got worse treatment and has suffered from modern day slavery in Derawals family. Her passport has been snatched and her wages are “retained” from her by the Derawals family. Derawals family has abused and ridiculed Fatou even she has been slapped by her owner Mrs Derawal. She has been exploited and discriminated on the basis of her skin color by the family of Derawals. Abigail Ward in “Servitude and Slave Narratives Tracing” writes that this is a story of a young woman who has been treated inhumanly and marginalized by her owner. She has confronted bad remarks and curses from the children of her owner. It depicts “the new slavery” in Britain in which people suffer from “physical freedom, economic exploitation and violence” (1). Her liberty has been crushed by her owner. She is only allowed to go for shopping and to visit the Church. On rest of the days, she has been confined and incarcerated inside the house by her owner.

Fatou being an African and black in color has been looked as inferior. She has been victimized in Willesden society. She has felt isolated and traumatized in the Derawals family. Bethanie Blenhard asserts that the story *The Embassy of Cambodia* revolves around an “African-born Fatou” who works “as a maid and nanny for an upper-class family in Willesden”. Many a times, she thinks about her slavish origin. It has created anxieties and dilemmas in her life. Fatou is completely drowned in her thoughts of the past. She thinks and even discusses with her friend Andrew about the marginalization and discrimination against blacks in the past. The treatment she has confronted from Derawals family developed wounds in her psyche. Moreover, she has not been paid for her work. Her passport has been taken away from her. Smith brings the question of historically created division of “old and new people” that means those who really belong to Willesden and those who are not the part of this city. This is the case of Fatou who is an “outsider” gets inside, once

“watched and now watching” the brutality and segregation in Willesden society (“Review: Zadie Smith’s *The Embassy of Cambodia*”).

The story also focuses on the “genocide in Cambodia, Rwanda, Hiroshima, and The Holocaust” (Smith 6-29). Fatou has discussed with Andrew that people on the basis of anti-semitism, racism, cultural, political and ideological differences have killed millions of people all over the world. During the Holocaust more than six million Jews have been slaughtered. They have been slaughtered by the Nazi forces.

Zadie Smith depicts the violence and barbarity human beings have created in the world in terms of racial prejudice and enmity against one another’s race. Fatou says to Andrew that “no, man! Big bomb. Biggest bomb in the world, made by the USA, of course. They killed five million people in one second. Can you imagine that” (29). Fatou believes that human beings have lost their human values as countries have turned against one another and killed one another’s people to maintain their hegemony and power. This has brought destruction and havoc in the world. Boyd Tonkin writes that in the novella Fatou discusses with Andrew about “Nazi genocide” and asserts that it is painstaking while Fatou replies that same is the case of Hiroshima, “they killed five million people in one second”. Smith has brought “global metropolis” in which people search for recognition and respond to it. The “collective voice” of Willesden has been raised by the writer in the book (“Book review: *The Embassy of Cambodia* by Zadie Smith”). Ideological differences and power struggle have created divisions among the countries. United States has dropped atomic bomb on Japan thousands of Japanese people have lost their lives. It is the result of animosity among the nations on the basis of race and ideological differences. United States and Nazi regime have killed millions of Japanese and Jewish people. They have destroyed the human values and humanity in the world. This has developed indelible scars in the lives of Japanese people.

This novella explores the issues of modern day slavery, racism, cultural clashes, identity crisis, black identity, genocides in the world, politics of difference and multiculturalism. Fatou is the protagonist of the novella *The Embassy of Cambodia*. She has suffered from discrimination, economical exploitation and violence in Willesden society from Derawals family and people of other races. Segregation and

color discrimination with Fatou in Willesden society have traumatized her. Bad treatment with Fatou has evolved dilemmas in her life. Everyone escapes from the company of Fatou. Beatriz Perez Zapata in "Decolonizing Trauma" states that Fatou in the novella has been treated as "Other" so she has become "dislocated immigrant" in Willesden society (523-534). This dislocation and 'Otherness' have created depression in the life of Fatou. She has confronted segregation in Willesden society as no one except Andrew talks to her. It has made her to question her own roots and identity.

### **Conclusion**

Zadie Smith, a great cultural and social writer of contemporary times has brought a revolution in the field of English literature. She has brought in her fictional works especially *White Teeth* and *The Embassy of Cambodia* cultural, social, political and religious elements. Her strength lies in her language and witty dialogues. Being a young writer, she has become a voice for the people of black ethnicity. She has depicted traumatization of immigrants, cultural conflicts, identity crisis, racism, ethnicity, fundamentalism, religious intolerance, assimilation problems and rootlessness in her works *White Teeth* and *The Embassy of Cambodia*. Her characters have been victimized by the multicultural society of London and Willesden. They have confronted segregation, marginalization, cultural alienation, brutality and inhuman treatment in the multicultural societies of London and Willesden. Her works have been packed with the deep knowledge and philosophy. The atmosphere she has created in her fictional works is multicultural. Through cultural diversity approach, she has given a new dimension to her works and received popularity among the masses. Her approach of looking at the diverse societies is that cultural differences among different societies, communities and ethnicities have developed wounds in their lives. In short, she has maintained her individuality and integrity in the literary world through her language by describing cultural perspectives in her works.

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