

Unveiling Cultural Identities: Structuralism and Hybridity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Abstract

Zadie Smith delves into the characters' internal conflict as they try to come to terms with their family's past. However, while one's family history, genetic makeup, and cultural background may appear to play a significant role in shaping one's development, chance and individual choice are ultimately more consequential factors that can ultimately lay claim to superiority over a more predetermined life path. This means that fate and history are always continually interacting with one another throughout the novel's plot, which is a bildungsroman. Identity formation in a multiethnic community is the focus of this research, which analyzes the novel "*White Teeth*" by Smith. The novel is dissected in this work using hybridity and ideas of structuralism. The final section of the report is the conclusion, which provides a brief overview of the findings.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Hybridity, Structuralism, *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith

كشف الهويات الثقافية: البنيوية والهجنة في رواية "أسنان بيضاء" لزادي سميث

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ملخص:

تتعمق زادي سميث في الصراع الداخلي للشخصيات بينما يحاولون التكيف مع ماضي عائلتهم. ومع ذلك، بينما قد يبدو أن تاريخ العائلة والتكوين الجيني والخلفية الثقافية تلعب دورًا كبيرًا في تشكيل تطور الفرد، فإن الحظ والاختيار الفردي هما في النهاية عوامل أكثر تأثيرًا يمكن أن تدعي التفوق على مسار حياة أكثر تحديدًا. هذا يعني أن القدر والتاريخ يتفاعلان باستمرار مع بعضهما البعض طوال حبكة الرواية، التي هي رواية نمو. تشكيل الهوية في مجتمع متعدد الأعراق هو محور هذا البحث، الذي يحلل رواية "White Teeth" للكاتبة سميث. الرواية تُحلل في هذا العمل باستخدام الهجنة وأفكار البنيوية. القسم الأخير من التقرير هو الخاتمة، التي تقدم نظرة عامة موجزة عن النتائج.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رواية التكوين، الهجين، البنيوية، الأسنان البيضاء، زادي سميث

Introduction

Zadie Smith, an exceptionally gifted young Anglo-Jamaican writer, earned her degree from Cambridge in 1997. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, published three years later, focuses on white working-class Londoners of the twentieth century. Many

readers and critics agree that this work excels as a panoramic depiction of the experiences of multiethnic Britons in modern society.

At an earlier age of 24, Zadie Smith impressed the literary world with her debut novel, *White Teeth*, which earned commercial and critical success. In 1997, Smith rose to prominence after agreeing to a sizable advance on a 20,000-word draft of the novel that would become her first publication. The substantial financial backing provided to Smith, before a word had ever been printed, ensured the attention of literary reviewers everywhere would be directed at the bespectacled northwest Londoner and her work when it was released. The novel's success guaranteed her future works within the realm of literature. The book sold over a million copies and was nominated for several awards (including the prestigious 2000 Whitbread First Novel Award), and it is widely regarded as an exceptional work. Moreover, it's an A-level set text in classrooms across Britain, and thus the book has sold over a million copies and has been translated into over twenty languages.

According to Susie Thomas, however, Smith's first novel seemed to be met with acclaim as if it had sprung onto the scene without precedent or precursors. Thomas argues that the novel's enormous debt to the work of writers like Salman Rushdie and especially Hanif Kureishi was missed in the novel's frenzied reception, which the literary establishment continues to praise as new, fresh, and creative.' Thomas contends that emphasizing Smith as the spokesperson for a multicultural Britain is not only inaccurate but also diminishes the significance of the seminal works that influenced Smith's first book. (Gunning, 2012, p. 127)

Three families of varying ethnic backgrounds live in north London, and their experiences are chronicled throughout the novel. Smith, in contrast to other Black British authors, offers a new perspective on the experiences of Black youth in Britain. Her debut work, which clocks in at over 500 pages, reads like a sketch of her life. In her novel, Smith delves into a wide range of topics such as biogenetic engineering, radical religious fantasies, the diaspora experienced by the previous generation of migrants, and the internal struggles of multigenerational families. The work stands out for its complex structure, which includes multiple timelines, a large cast of characters, and a wide range of viewpoints.

Smith explores the internal conflict of the protagonist as they try to define themselves in relation to their family's past. While it may appear that a person's ancestry, history, and cultural background all contribute significantly to who they become, the truth is that chance and individual preference are far more

consequential factors, including the potential to stake a claim of superiority over any actually prearranged life course. Through the course of the novel's bildungsroman storyline, fate and history are constantly interacting.

Smith exports a vivid picture of early twenty-first-century British culture. People from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds coexist in this culture, sharing their unique traditions and customs. She contradictorily asserts the idea of hybridity, suggesting that multiculturalism can sometimes strengthen coexistence rather than undermine it; however, Mohammed Sabbar states that “Being unknown in the time of catastrophe does weaken the bonds of coexistence and intensifies the hardships of post-apocalyptic times as well” (Abdulbaqi, 2022, p. 18).

In Salman Rushdie's article “The New Empire” (1982), *White Teeth* serves as an example of the type of work produced by *Midnight's Children* (1981). During this “critical phase of its postcolonial period,” Rushdie writes, “Britain is undergoing a crisis of the whole culture, of the society's entire sense of itself” (Jansen, 2018, pp. 9-8). The central difficulty in both *White Teeth* and *Midnight's Children* is the struggle between an individual and society at large. To achieve this, he or she looks for everything and everything that will help them stand out and feel true to themselves.

1. Hybridity serves as both a theoretical and methodological framework.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a *hybrid* is “something manufactured by fusing two distinct components.” Hybridity functions as a noun in this context. As an adjective, “hybrid” describes someone with complicated traits. The word “*hybrid*” likely comes from the Greek language; however, its exact origin is uncertain. It was first used to describe the offspring of two distinct species in the eighteenth century. The term was first used to describe the offspring of diverse human races about the middle of the eighteenth century. (Quinan, 2020, p. 17)

Later, post-structural theorists used the term “*hybridity*” to describe the cultural outward signs that resulted from colonial interactions. Hybridity is taken up by social scientists studying diaspora, migration, globalization, and transnationalism since it is a multifaceted topic with lively discussions over its value as a term. In this study, we use the hybridity theory as the lens through which we examine *White Teeth* to better understand the film's exploration of the role of institutionalized racism in the formation of individual identities.

2. Cultural Hybridity in Multicultural Societies.

Smith, the novelist, makes effective use of numerous tools to represent the lives of immigrants and refugees. To explain the people the author has created, *White Teeth* combines elements of the historical book, the bildungsroman, and the family history. As such, the novel offers a wide range of insights on the experiences of both the first and second generations of these migrants in Britain. Smith utilizes her work to explore issues of self-determination, diaspora, and the building of individual identities. The author eloquently depicts the plight of those of “different” origins, who are symbols of the misrecognition and bigotry that white culture has adopted in its treatment of these individuals.

Smith’s novel is significant because it elucidates the migrant workers’ effort to assimilate into the dominant society. In addition, it shows the generational conflict between migrants’ increasingly conservative views. There are generational divides in how people view the dominant culture. The older generation strives to maintain its distinctive culture, while the younger generation looks to assimilate into mainstream Western society to shed its “different” reputation.

The book can be interpreted as a bildungsroman because of its emphasis on coming into one’s own and developing one’s sense of self. The novelist’s manipulation of the novel’s structure—such as by titling a chapter “The Miseducation of Irie Jones”—is crucial to the novel’s style. This header describes this classical style. The author divides the novel into distinct sections. (Assmann, 2018, p. 273)

Each section describes a pivotal moment in the protagonist’s history. As the story progresses, the reader learns that the first two sections center on the male characters’ identity crises and the subsequent struggles to discover a new way of life. The book’s final two sections, however, focus on the next generation, the predicament of today’s adolescents, and the path to adulthood.

Some reviewers have referred to White Teeth as a historical novel. This book profiles three households in the Willesden Green neighborhood. However, Smith does not deviate from the standard novel structure, which entails recounting a character’s biography in chronological order. She’s navigating between different timescales at once. (Werdermann, 2011, p. 4)

In addition, the author retrieves historical intercessions that assist in providing specifics to the present identity crises of the characters and their connection in the lives of each other by drawing parallels between locations and generations. The author’s primary focus is on examining the cultural definition of a family. She accomplishes these objectives by illuminating the difficulties and dysfunctional

structures that exist within families. She demonstrates the interdependence of the Chalfens, Joneses, and Iqbals.

3. Exploring Hybridity and Structuralism in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

The novel's greatest significant achievement is its depiction of post-colonial Britain as a highly stratified society populated by individuals of varying ethnicities, cultural observances, and religious beliefs. They included people of various sexual orientations and ages, people of various nations, and people living in Britain (Arikan, 2013, p. 6). As a result, the story depicts a multiethnic community. The author employs a multi-family immigrant saga with three intertwined families. Because of the impact of several religions and civilizations, our protagonists and antagonists are unable to confidently claim membership in any particular social group. Some individuals relocated within the physical setting, triggering an identity crisis where some embraced foreign cultures while others firmly held onto their own. Members of society who adapted to new cultural norms and institutions created a new hybrid identity and social structure. Smith, on the other hand, built both structuralism and hybridity theories on the backs of immigrants. Given that this incident took place in the post-colonial era following World War II, Smith also reveals the significance of the colonizer and the colonized in terms of establishing one's identity. (Hadjetian, 2014, p. 61)

Post-colonial British families had a difficult time feeling like they belonged anywhere after WWII, and structural theory explains why. Samad, a Bangladeshi, and Jones, an Englishman, both served in World War II, but it wasn't until 1945 that they met and quickly became close friends. Both men returned to Britain after the war and formed families there; Jones wed a Jamaican woman named Clara, and Samad wed a Bangladeshi woman named Alsana. While Jones's daughter Irie integrated into the hybrid community, the Samad twins had a harder time finding their place in this multiethnic environment, prompting their parents to send one of them back to Bangladesh. (BAŞTAN, 2020, p. 41)

The kid Samad was planning to raise as a Muslim at their home became an atheist instead, while the son Samad sent to live with his doctors in Britain became a fundamentalist Muslim. Irie, on the other hand, is multiethnic and thus struggles with her sense of self. She is a member of the second generation of children born to immigrants of many races and nationalities. The second generation faces a racial stigma due to the overwhelming preponderance of white people in Britain. As a result, it helped strengthen anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation. We can trace these post-colonial sentiments back to the colonial era. Thus, it was during the

colonial era that disparities in race, religion, and culture first came to the forefront. As a result, the colonized had a pessimistic view of structuralism ingrained in them. It fueled an alienating stereotype of people of other ethnicities. Clara is a prime example of this; she did not alter her views of other cultures simply because she got married. She tries to persuade Irie to adopt her faith rather than her father's. (BAŞTAN, 2020, p. 42)

Thus, Smith was able to prove that the majority of people in multiethnic countries continue to derive their sense of self from their ancestral traditions and practices. Parents worried that their kids were losing their culture and religion as they assimilated into mainstream society.

Religion was an important part of post-colonial British culture since it was crucial to the formation of the nation's distinctive identity. Many different faiths were represented, which muddled the identification structure. Samad's multiple citizenship changes (from Bangladesh to Indiana to Pakistan) complicated his attempts to maintain his Islamic faith. The fact that he had not lived in Bangladesh for very long was a significant issue and showed how strongly national identity is tied to place of birth. (Khaleel, 2018, p. 5)

To a large extent, one's sense of self is tied to the place where they were born and raised; Magid, a student in Bangladesh who is presumed to be a militant Muslim, turns out to be a lawyer who collaborates with a prominent scientist. In contrast, his brother was raised in Britain with the expectation of receiving a superior education and becoming a professional, but he instead became a radical religious individual who showed no interest in pursuing the engineering career that their father encouraged him to follow. The problem of the characters' original country served to accentuate numerous discrepancies in their understanding of who they are. As a result, structuralism is useful for depicting a society's intellectual structure.

Structuralism, on the other hand, promotes authoritative norms for social interaction. Tolerance levels and social norms are determined according to cultural groups. Therefore, Smith demonstrated that the multicultural society failed to consider all the requirements that various cultures imposed on their members regarding intermarriage. Smith was able to show how hypocritical post-colonial British culture was. The generation that stubbornly clung to their traditional religions and customs was deceived (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 2).

At first, Samad, who gave every appearance of being a hardcore Muslim, secretly had an affair with the Christian teacher of one of his sons. He became a big drinker in later life, which is forbidden in Islam. Observing the treatment of the powerful in this society, Millat made the decision to join the KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation). Millat decided to acquire the physical sense of power in KEVIN, contrary to the accepted norm of his culture and faith, which held that one should value the spiritual sense of power more than the physical one. Hortense, on the other hand, based her actions on a belief that had not worked and had been proven false in her own eyes, all so that she could reassure her inner self that she was doing the right thing or was expected to do so. The author showed that there is a big divide between those who are aware of cultural shifts and those who are not (Scheingold, 2010, p. 184), demonstrating that structuralism is based on this knowledge gap.

Having multiple tongues spoken in the same place contributes to *White Teeth's* hybridity theory. Millat joined the hybrid group Raggastani as a way to conceal himself and exercise his independence. English, Bengali, Jamaican, and Gujarati were the four languages that went into creating Raggastani. Because it combines elements from four distinct ethnic languages, it has been able to absorb the cultures of those who speak them. KEVIN, supposedly a radical Muslim organization, shares this trait in that it has adopted an English name and is open to many forms of cultural exchange. And the group's founder was a man of mixed ancestry, not a devout Muslim. The hybrid generation struggled to establish a clear sense of identity, even within their own mixed backgrounds. Millat did not feel at home in the faith of his parents, nor did he seek solace in the faiths he explored on his own. When he finally settled with the KEVIN group, he found it difficult to agree with all of their views (Gøttcke, 2025, p. 28).

The Chalfen family played a significant role in highlighting the novel's hybridity idea. Marcus Chalfen was emblematic of a new generation interested in science and technology. His wife was impressed by his ability to fuse embryos and produce mice that obeyed Marcus's commands. As a result, the hybridity component actively sought to shape the current generation into the ideal it had envisioned for itself. As a result, hybridity became the norm for dealing with any issue that arose, including medical ones. However, the author did caution that there were both positive and negative aspects to hybridity. (Allen, 2008, p. 18)

Smith gave an example of how hybridization benefits society by showing how it led to the emergence of new species that were better able to adapt to their surroundings than the originals had been. However, the novel's central theme is the

fifty-year relationship between Archbald Jhons, a Londoner from the working class, and Samad Iqbal, a migrant Muslim from Bengal. Despite their proximity, the differences between these two men are stark. They share a passing similarity with one another. Archie is a laid-back, easygoing figure with a clear view of the world. You can gain a favorable idea of who he was and what he was like from just one sentence: “He was a man whose significance in the Greater Scheme of Things could be reckoned along conventional ratios: beach pebble. Archie’s significance in the larger scheme of things can be compared to a beach pebble or a raindrop in the ocean. Haystack: Needle” (Zadie, 2003, p. 11). However, he does have one major shortcoming, and that is his inability to exercise self-control and make a choice. Convinced that random chance ultimately governs his life, Archie frequently gambles on the outcome.

The reader is given a clear picture of Archie’s personality. Archie is less likely to push himself beyond his limits or allow himself to be dominated since he has a strong desire to control his destiny and establish concrete life objectives. He hasn’t meddled in the world’s affairs, and he’s destitute. He doesn’t try to force his agenda onto the story by manipulating the other characters’ goals. His haphazard upbringing does not point to a serious identity dilemma. Ironically, the loss of his first wife prevents Archie from taking his own life. Archie, who is experiencing a midlife crisis, views his survival as a second opportunity.

After everything that has happened to Archie, the circumstances of his life have changed drastically. In this passage, the narrator is employed by the author to inform the readership that “a new Archie is about to emerge.” The author cites Zadie (2003) on page 18. Archie, who is 47 years old, marries a Jamaican girl named Clara Bowden, who is 19 years old. They uprooted to a new home in Willesden Green. They birthed and nurtured Irie there. However, neither Archie’s second marriage nor his new role as a father aids him in having a transformative rebirth of his identity. There are no major shifts in his personality. His most recent beginning does not amount to a second chance that significantly improves his life thus far.

Here, hybridity was employed for the greater good, such as in the struggle against racism and other forms of bigotry. Irie Jones is a shining example of how to thrive in a multiethnic society since she accepts people of all backgrounds and religions. Therefore, hybridity gave rise to a new method of identifying oneself in which one’s culture, religion, race, or nationality is not taken into account. The revelation exposed the weakness and closed-mindedness of people like Samad, who advocate for a pure-blooded society. Smith uses cultural hybridity to show how a population

may be strengthened and more resistant to social diseases like racism and ethnic prejudice, much like how scientists in the novel use a hybrid to create a stronger variety of animals. Because of Irie's incestuous relationship with one of Samad's twins, social hybridity quickly surpassed scientific hybridity. (Tew, 2013, p. 27).

The novel's depiction of a civilization structured by hybridity theory is striking. Jones and Samad's relationship was compared to that of colonizer and colonized. Even though he was a man of English descent, he did not conform to the norms of English society. To begin with, he wed a woman of a different race, and his closest friend and confidante was Samad, a man of Arab descent. Thus, he was a part of the first generation, but he was also a hybrid. Magid claims that those of Eastern descent tend to put their trust in chance rather than seek solutions to their difficulties. However, Jones, an Englishman, is accustomed to such situations and has consistently relied on chance to make decisions. Smith draws parallels between the scenario and the future mouse that Jones let go of after being shot in the leg. Like the mouse whose DNA was altered by exposure to carcinogens, Jones stood for a population that, like the mutant mouse, would constantly look for a middle ground when faced with a problem. (Jay, 2014, p. 159)

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion and examples suggest that hybridity altered the social fabric. The public now has access to the multicultural features that so much effort sought. It made leadership and control accessible to everyone, eliminating the need for dominance seen during colonial times. Although it did provide certain benefits, it also contributed to a growing sense of anonymity by increasing confusion. Irie struggled to establish her place in the English culture. However, the local English population met her with widespread hostility and stigmatization. But Smith was quick to contradict her, explaining that she was confusing him with a shipwreck victim who had been marked with an X. Irie was reluctant to give up what she saw as her true identity. On the other hand, the mouse of the future reflected the necessity for hybridity and cross-cultural origin. The mouse symbolized the optimism and apprehension felt by members of today's multiethnic society. Despite its release, the mouse was unable to evade its inevitable demise at the dawn of the new millennium.

Therefore, the civilization had no choice but to embrace hybridity to ensure its survival; otherwise, it would meet the same genetic end as the mouse. The author has effectively depicted the identity framework within a multiethnic, multireligious community. Making a name for oneself in a society like that is bound to be

challenging. There are numerous features of such a society that make life miserable for its inhabitants. *White Teeth* sets out to depict this anguish, and in that respect it succeeds admirably.

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