



**Reconstructing Feminine Identity Through the Critique of Unrealistic Beauty Standards in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty***

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**Abstract in English**

**Paper Info**

**Abstract:**

Reconstructing female identity is one of the most important issues of our time. Because of their gender and race, the majority of women from developing countries face immense challenges. Black and other women of color, who are oppressed by white society, struggle to integrate and feel a sense of belonging within this often harsh society. Adopting English beauty standards is one way these women find solutions. Zadie Smith, a postcolonial writer, sheds light on racial discrimination and the treatment of women from minority backgrounds in the developing world. She aims to empower marginalized African American women and challenge prevailing stereotypes about them. In her book *\*White Teeth\**, Smith focuses on the marginalized woman and how she is perceived as a shadow in her own culture. This research demonstrates the impact of beauty standards on the reclamation of female identity.

**Keywords**

*Identity, Black Female Beauty Mimicry reconstruction, Hybridity, Postcolonialism, Subaltern .*

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**1. Introduction**

**RECONSTRUCTION OF KIKI'S AND ZORA'S IDENTITY IN *ON BEAUTY***

Zadie Smith's third novel, *\*On Beauty\**, follows *\*White Teeth\** and *\*Automaniac Man\**. Written in 2005, *\*On Beauty\** was critically acclaimed. Frank Rich, in his New York Times review, called it "a return to form." Critics praised Smith for writing a novel that rivaled her debut, *\*White Teeth\**. John Freeman of the San Francisco Chronicle described it as "a warm, heartfelt, and thoroughly enjoyable read that will be a welcome relief for those

disappointed by her second novel, *\*Automaniac Man\**" (Walters, *\*Writers Today and Their Works\**, p. 87). Even Zadie Smith herself acknowledged her growth as a writer with this novel. In an interview, she said she "learned how to liberate her thoughts and make them more coherent." She also stated, "It's the first book I've written that I'm completely satisfied with, that feels like real writing, that I'm finally a real writer, not just some quirky computer kid" (p. 88).

Like Zadie Smith's other novels, *\*On Beauty\** focuses on a variety of themes, ranging from identity and alienation to racism and art. Smith's *\*On Beauty\** is perhaps her most nuanced and compelling portrait of American society, employing her captivating descriptive skill to depict a middle-class family in the United States. Smith's writing is informed by her own identity: born in Britain to an English father and a Jamaican mother who lived in the United States. *\*On Beauty\** is thus a direct study of the fluidity of relationships within English-speaking culture, a phenomenon emphasized and reinforced by British and American academics. The world of *\*On Beauty\** reveals how people live in a precarious position between the United States and England. The novel's atmosphere deliberately highlights the complex relationships between people from diverse backgrounds—Commonwealth countries, Britain, and the United States—especially those with African roots. *\*On Beauty\** presents a complex picture of the struggles of the new millennium in the United States.

In *\*On Beauty\**, Smith places race at the crossroads of identity for both British and African Americans. Smith focuses on the conflict between two different families. These conflicts stem from complex definitions of identity, race, idealism, and beauty—key concepts that will be discussed in this essay. Indeed, "On Beauty" offers insights into the United States to readers both within and outside its borders through its portrayal of the dimensions of its characters. As Charles Greene observed, "Smith moves with consummate skill from one character to another, creating imaginative figures of academics, frustrated wives, aspiring rappers, and budding feminists, with biting honesty, astonishing precision, and even love" (184).

## 2. Literature Review

In-depth academic analyses of *\*On Beauty\** have focused on the theme of identity, specifically in relation to race, culture, beauty, and hybrid identity. There is a general critical consensus that Smith portrays identity as complex, adaptable, and constantly evolving, rather than fixed or permanent. Research has explored issues of identity in multicultural societies. Thasleema and Khan (2022) suggest that globalization and migration lead to a fragmentation of identities, particularly for immigrants and their children. These individuals may feel isolated as they attempt to reconcile their cultural background with their current social context. This idea is reflected in *\*On Beauty\**, where the children of Belsey struggle to establish their identities within a diverse society.

Another line of research focuses on hybrid identity and cultural negotiation. Davie (2018) explores how Smith portrays identity as a product of the interaction of cultural, ethnic, and ideological forces. As Davie posits, the novel's characters are constantly negotiating between conflicting value systems, particularly in academic and domestic settings. Identity is thus portrayed as dynamic and constantly shaped through social interaction. Furthermore, several academics explore the relationship between identity formation and beauty. Bosniak (2021) examines how self-perception is influenced by prevailing beauty standards, particularly for female characters. According to the study, personal identity is largely shaped by cultural expectations of physical beauty, often leading to internal conflict and insecurity

Race is also a major theme in the literature. According to Fahma et al. (2022), racial identity in the novel *\*On Beauty\** is influenced by both individual experiences and structural injustice. Their research suggests that Black female characters, in particular, experience marginalization and stereotyping, which impacts their self-perception. Similarly, some critics point out that characters like Levi, who attempts to forge an “authentic” Black identity, often play roles and negotiate their identity in response to societal expectations (Smith, 2005)

Furthermore, other studies have placed Smith’s novel within a broader, postcolonial, and global context, highlighting themes of integration, self-discovery, and belonging. These studies argue that identity in *\*On Beauty\** reveals the complexities of living in a multicultural world, where individuals must reconcile multiple and sometimes conflicting identities (Thaslima and Khan, 2022)

Overall, previous studies agree that *\*On Beauty\** portrays identity as multifaceted, dynamic, and collectively constructed. Whether shaped by race, beauty standards, or cultural influences, identity is depicted in the novel as an evolving process rather than a fixed essence

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

#### Most Important female Characters in *On Beauty*

##### 1- Kiki Belsey

Kiki Belsey, an African-American nurse from Florida, is the wife of Howard Belsey, a white, British art history professor. A hardworking wife and mother of three children—Jerome, Zora, and Levi—Kiki adores her children and is always by their side. Despite knowing of Howard's infidelity, she stays with him for their sake. Early in life, she was beautiful and attractive, especially in her youth. Intelligent, she lacks self-confidence. Because of her African heritage and skin color, Kiki feels self-conscious among Howard's colleagues at the University of Wellington. Over the years, Kiki's weight increased

significantly, reaching 113 kilograms. After meeting the Kipps family, she formed a close friendship with Carlene Kipps (Walters, p. 90). In her personal life, Kiki is like an "everyday goddess" (Smith, *In Beauty*, p. 227), meaning she is kind and beautiful, and her beauty lies in her ability to give love to her family and children—a love stemming from her compassionate outlook on life.

Throughout the novel, the poet Claire Malcolm, who is in a relationship with Kiki's husband Howard, portrays Kiki as the sun, a Platonic symbol of goodness, saying: "You look wonderful! What an outfit! It's like a sunset—red, yellow, and orange-brown—Kiki, you are setting" (Smith, *In Beauty*, p. 52). This suggests that Kiki is a symbol of spiritual strength in the Belsey family. Indeed, her presence brings a spiritual and psychological warmth to her family. Kiki is a self-aware woman who is not only focused on herself but also deeply attentive to her surroundings. Kiki plays the central role in the novel; she is its heroine, as Charles Greene asserts: Kiki embodies Smith's greatest artistic ability in "On Beauty," namely, her capacity to imbue characters with emotional depth. Kiki is not simply a former Florida woman, a mother, a wounded wife, or an academic wife. She moves between all these overlapping roles" (184-185).

Kiki doesn't commit to a single role; rather, she plays multiple roles throughout the novel. She collapses when she learns of her husband's infidelity. After discovering his first affair, she tried to continue her relationship with Howard as his wife. But after learning of his second affair, she feels betrayed and realizes that she sacrificed many of her own desires and many years of her life to preserve her family and support Howard's career. In the end, she decides to leave her husband and children to start a new life (Walters, *Book of the Day*, 90-91).

## **2. Zora Belsey**

Zora is Kiki and Howard's daughter. She is younger than her brother, Jerome. Zora is precocious and blunt. She is ambitious, intelligent, and a diligent student at Wellington College. She wants to study art history and strives to be like her father and follow in his footsteps. Zora is an active, stubborn, and impulsive student. She was raised to manipulate others. She sees herself as a girl of great importance. Zora is another individual. From the Belsey family, Zora is just as unlucky in love as her brother Jerome. She falls for Carl Thomas, a talented young Black rapper from a poor neighborhood in Boston, specifically Roxbury. Then, Zora is devastated when she learns that Carl has a crush on Victoria Kipps (Walters, *Book of the Day* 93). In this research, the reader observes that Zora is desperately

trying to improve her appearance for her second year at the University of Wellington. She thinks about her physical appearance; "For a full twenty-three seconds, the last thing on Zora's mind is herself" (Smith, *On Beauty* 133). Thus, she is obsessed with her looks and features, trying to find herself.

### **The impact of Physical Beauty on Reconstruction of Both Kiki's and Zora's Identity**

Issues of physical beauty and identity are central themes in the novel "On Beauty." Physical beauty has a profound impact on the characters, especially the women, and their relationships throughout the story. There are numerous standards of physical beauty that women believe contribute to shaping their identity, such as skin tone, ideal weight, hair type, and youth. These are the standards of physical beauty that influence a woman's personality and identity. In "On Beauty," Kiki serves as a vivid example of the struggles women face with aging and how it affects their personalities and identities. Kiki confronts various conflicts, most notably an internal struggle with her husband and children. She also struggles with the world around her, namely contemporary society.

Kiki's problems stem from her age, weight, and skin tone, as she believes these significantly impact her mental well-being and relationships. Kiki, the protagonist of "On Beauty" and the wife of Professor Howard, is overweight. Numerous studies demonstrate the direct impact of menopause on weight gain and bodily functions, as well as its contribution to psychological problems such as depression and feelings of isolation. The same applies to Kiki. Many studies confirm this; for example, Wing et al. confirm a clear link between weight gain and menopause, which results from aging. Furthermore, their study indicates that "women of color gain more weight than women of color" (101). Davis et al. also state in their study that "increased abdominal fat appears to be a direct consequence of menopause" (425). Indeed, another characteristic resulting from menopause is emotional instability, which many studies acknowledge as a common disorder affecting women. In her study "Menopause Myths and Facts," Karen Matthews asserts that "menopause occurs in midlife, a time when many women experience changes in roles, responsibilities, and relationships—changes that generally accompany aging, and especially the growing up and departure of children" (1). Consequently, these changes can alter "a woman's identity, self-confidence, and social and family relationships" (Matthews 1). Thus, menopause causes weight gain, leading to a loss of self-confidence and self-esteem.

By making Kiki the protagonist and presenting her as an African American woman living in a predominantly white college town, Kiki is portrayed as a Black, overweight, middle-aged woman. This portrayal allows for character analysis. To illustrate the issues surrounding Kiki's weight and identity problems, Smith points out that Kiki has gained weight, particularly around her abdomen. Kiki tries to hide her weight from her husband, Howard.

Smith asserts that Kiki's weight problems and menopause affect her beauty standards and sense of self.

Kiki and her daughter suffer greatly. Both are dissatisfied with their bodies and feel that this impacts their self-confidence, personality, and identity. This stems from societal perceptions. However, Clay and others argue that girls have lower self-esteem than boys simply because they are girls, and because they believe they will be judged based on their appearance (425). Zadie Smith portrays Kiki as an African American woman who was beautiful and well-regarded throughout her youth. However, as she ages, she gains weight. Now in her fifties, this causes her numerous problems in her personal life, marriage, and self-image, and threatens her position as a woman in society. Kiki constantly feels that her appearance, which is described repeatedly in the novel, affects her as she ages. She even began to notice that people treated her differently than before, to the point where she became unsure how to communicate with them. Because she is Black, her community treats her with racism. She cannot express herself because, according to Spivak, she is considered an outcast. Therefore, she believes that perhaps by changing her appearance, she can gain a voice in that community.

In fact, there are several instances in the novel that confirm Kiki was considered attractive in her youth. For example, when she speaks to Carlene, she tells her, "Between you and me, I was beautiful" (Smith, *On Beauty*, p. 172). Indeed, even as she grows older, and despite being a Black woman, her face is often the first thing people notice.

### **Comparison between Kiki and Claire**

Claire looks remarkably youthful because she learns from her students how to present themselves attractively. She is influenced by their lifestyle and liberal views. Claire makes a point of meeting with her students at a Moroccan restaurant, which she finds fascinating. She finds herself in a minority as a white woman, especially in her middle age. Despite the contrast between Kiki and Claire's appearances, this leads us to one conclusion: both women are experiencing the same fundamental issues of self-identity. At that time, "she was grateful for yoga; yoga allowed her to sit cross-legged on a floor cushion as a younger woman, disguised among her students" (Smith, *On Beauty* 220). This means she is keen to maintain her figure through yoga to appear younger, which enhances her beauty and other privileges as a white woman. Claire uses and practices yoga for health reasons, as well as as a means of maintaining her youthful appearance. As Willocks and Laird emphasize in their study, "The Impact of Images of Extremely Thin Women in the Media on Women's Self-Esteem: Identification, Social Comparison, and Self-Perception," "Interestingly, women who exercise are more likely to experience greater body satisfaction as they age, while the opposite is true for women who do not exercise." This is because "exercise may also benefit

older women's perception of their bodies" (562). Thus, yoga makes Claire feel good and helps her cope with the physical effects of aging.

Claire possesses a remarkable self-confidence, described by Smith as "absolute confidence" stemming from "her age and strength" (Smith, *On Beauty*, 233). Indeed, self-confidence can be a powerful force. Being white, thin, beautiful, and younger than Kiki, she has opportunities to attract men. Initially, she has a romantic relationship with Howard, but then she reaches a turning point in her life. She marries Warren, and their marriage is happy. Finally, she made a decision and achieved her goal as a woman: "I reached a stage of personal happiness" (Smith, *On Beauty*, p. 223). As a white woman, she enjoys the privilege and self-confidence to express herself and make her own decisions. This contrasts sharply with Kiki, who is portrayed as a marginalized woman. Despite knowing everything about her husband's affairs, she remains silent until the end of the novel. These Black women remain voiceless, giving white men the opportunity to dominate them. They are unaware of their place in society. As Spivak explains, "I tackled the problem of the marginalized woman's consciousness tactically" (p. 296). Indeed, Clare is another character whose identity is defined by her physical appearance and beauty standards, but her youth helps her find a suitable partner in the later stages of her life. One can observe that it is very difficult for anyone to change their lifestyle simply to please someone else.

Like Clare, she has spent many years cultivating her identity, which is evident in her physical appearance, culture, and self-confidence. She managed to attract Warren, who suited her personality: "At last, at last, I found this wonderful blessing, this angel, this gift, Warren Crane" (Smith, *On Beauty* 223). Unlike Kiki, she could never satisfy her husband because of her weight, and because she was a Black woman, he turned his attention to white women. Issues of race have been present since the beginnings of feminism, where "in matters of racial and economic inequality, women of color often felt they had more in common with their brothers, sons, husbands, and fathers than with their middle-class white 'sisters' who dominated the movement in the late 1960s and 1970s" (Downs 2010: 23). Thus, things like gender, race, and beauty standards such as thinness, obesity, and skin color can determine social status, success, and standing among people.

When Kiki was in her thirties and early forties, she considered herself a beautiful and attractive young woman, as the novel states: "Kiki, whom Howard had carried on his shoulder twenty-eight years earlier like a light rag... today she weighed two hundred and fifty pounds and looked twenty years younger than him" (Smith, *On Beauty*, p. 14). She felt that others looked at her the same way. But, because of her changing weight and skin tone, she felt she was no longer as beautiful as she once was; as if she had lost her identity. No one recognized her anymore as a woman with her own being and identity. Indeed, Zadie

Smith emphasizes that the connection between a woman's identity and her beauty is very strong, as women are known by their physical attributes and their beauty. However, this connection that women have with their beauty is so important because they believe it defines their identity.

#### 4. Theoretical and Practical Frameworks

##### Postcolonial Feminist

Since postcolonial studies gained prominence in academia in the late 1980s, it has become the most diverse and controversial theory in the cultural and literary fields. This theory transcends the boundaries of literary and cultural studies, addressing other issues such as the economic, political, and social aspects of colonizers and colonized peoples. Among the important issues addressed by postcolonial theorists is the place of women in society. Thus, during the postcolonial period, the image of women occupied a significant place in the attention of many critics, and the issue of women became more important than ever before. Postcolonial and feminist theory now follows a term coined by Ashcroft et al., "the convergent evaluation path" (249). Postcolonial feminist criticism examines how women are presented in postcolonial culture, literature, and society, and how women challenge all the assumptions and roles imposed upon them in postcolonial society. Postcolonial feminist theory points to the continued marginalization and stereotyping of women. Ironically, many postcolonial writers present women in this stereotypical image, in a call to challenge all forms of oppression. Thus, postcolonial feminists challenge traditional white Western feminists, given the latter's association with political liberation movements. There are many parallels between postcolonialism and feminism, as both are anti-oppression and anti-injustice movements. In diverse societies, women, as subjects of colonialism, have been marginalized to the status of "the Other" by various forms of patriarchal power (Ashcroft, 249). As Neal emphasizes, Lazarus asserts that "feminist and postcolonial theory address the issues of representation, voice, marginalization, and the relationship between politics and literature" (201). Postcolonial feminism portrays Third World feminism, arguing that women in this world are subject to imperial colonialism and the dominance of patriarchal systems.

Postcolonial feminist theory not only focuses on patriarchy as a primary source of oppression, but also addresses social injustice and its impact on economic, political, and cultural aspects (Quaison, 12). It essentially calls for a postcolonial response to colonialism in its political and economic sense, while feminist theorists rebel against gender colonialism. Postcolonial feminism examines the intersection of colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class, and race in the diverse life contexts of women (Rajan and Park, 53). Both postcolonial and feminist theory began by attempting to overturn existing hierarchies of gender, culture, and race, and gradually embraced the post-structuralist call to reject the binary oppositions underlying patriarchal and colonial

power (Gandhi, 83). The aim of using a postcolonial feminist perspective is to “give a voice to racially marginalized women who have been silenced, and to provide an analytical lens for examining how politics and history have shaped our positions [we racially marginalized women], and how they have affected our lives, knowledge, opportunities, and choices” (Anderson 145). Thus, the purpose of this theory is to challenge the dominant practices of Western societies in marginalizing non-Westerners and non-whites. Postcolonial women writers have made a significant contribution to the process of liberating culture and traditions from the effects of colonialism. Indeed, these writers address issues of tradition and custom, and modify Western literary forms through the types of content and themes they explore. The writers’ stances, particularly regarding the celebration or critique of customs and traditions, vary according to their social class, history, level of education, political awareness, and commitments. Their works and writings focus on challenging a dual hegemony: the patriarchal system that preceded and persisted after colonialism, and the dilemma within the capitalist economic system, which has worsened since the colonizers imposed it. These writers emphasize the burdens and suffering women endure throughout their lives, for example, their roles in urban environments, the increasing oppression in cities, the marginalization of women's meaningful political participation, and other issues (Ashcroft, Reader of Postcolonial Studies (256-257)).

Postcolonial feminist theory analyzes the portrayals and representations of women in colonized countries and Western regions. Postcolonial feminist theorists have grappled with two main issues: the concept of "woman" as a global entity, specifically the concept of "Third World woman." First World feminists...

## 5. Conclusion

Zadie Smith’s novel *\*On Beauty\** offers a profound and nuanced critique of unrealistic beauty standards and their impact on the construction of female identity. Through its complex characters and intricate narrative, the novel illuminates how societal expectations of beauty, often rooted in race, class, and gender, can distort self-perception and restrict individual freedom. By highlighting characters who either struggle against or resist these standards, Smith deconstructs conventional ideals of beauty, offering instead a more inclusive and multifaceted vision of womanhood. Smith’s work invites readers to question the cultural frameworks that shape women’s identities and to consider the liberating potential of embracing diversity in appearance and self-expression. *\*On Beauty\** is not merely literary criticism; it is also a cultural intervention that encourages the reconstruction of female identity on more empowering and authentic foundations.

*\*On Beauty\** explores the crucial issues faced by its female protagonists. All of them struggle for their place and their voice in society. Kiki, a Black woman, tries to break down

the racist stereotypes prevalent in Western society. Eventually, she decides to accept her body, her skin color, and even her identity as a Black woman. She also tries to convince her daughter, Zora, of these ideas. Zora constantly strives to meet Western beauty standards and spends a great deal of time on her appearance. Zora struggles with her skin color and other African features, especially when she's in a group or among her friends. Towards the end of the novel, Zora becomes more comfortable with her appearance and identity, and she no longer pays much attention to her makeup or appearance, nor does she concern herself with these matters anymore. Ultimately, both Zora and her mother, Kiki, come to terms with their mixed identity.

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### Abstract in Arabic

إعادة تشكيل هوية المرأة تُعد من القضايا المهمة في العصر الحديث. وبسبب جنسهن وعرقهن، تواجه غالبية النساء المنحدرات من دول العالم الثالث العديد من التحديات. فالنساء السود أو ذوات البشرة الملونة، اللواتي يتعرضن للاضطهاد من قبل المجتمع الأبيض، يبذلن جهوداً كبيرة للانتماء إلى هذا المجتمع القاسي. ومن بين الوسائل التي تلجأ إليها هؤلاء النساء لإيجاد حلول، إعادة بناء هويتهم من خلال تقليد معايير الجمال الإنجليزية.

تُعد كاتبة ما بعد الاستعمار زابدي سمث ، حيث تسلط الضوء على التمييز العرقي والمعاملة التهميشية التي تتعرض لها النساء في دول العالم الثالث. وتهدف من خلال كتاباتها إلى تمكين النساء السود الأمريكيات اللواتي يُعتبرن من الفئات المهمشة (التابعة)، بالإضافة إلى تغيير الصورة النمطية السائدة عنهن.

وفي روايتها ، تركّز سميث على المرأة المهمشة وكيف يُنظر إليها كظل داخل ثقافتها. كما تُظهر هذه الدراسة تأثير معايير الجمال على إعادة تشكيل هوية المرأة.

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