



Zadie Smith's "White Teeth": Identity, Structured trauma and Double alienation

Gulrukh Boltaeva Erkin kizi

MA Graduate, Webster University

Abstract: The paper analyzes *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith as a critical investigation of nationality, racism, and diversity in modern-day Britain. It argues that the novel examines postcolonial and British identity politics through the unique experiences of its immigrant protagonists. The first part of the analysis is on Irie Jones's life path, showing how her shift from assimilationist aspirations to self-acceptance challenges the idea of "structured trauma" and promotes a culturally unique definition of identity. The article then explores the Iqbal family's battles with "double alienation," a conceptual synthesis of postcolonial and Marxist theories, describing the ways in which Samad Iqbal and his sons, Millat and Magid, use a variety of inward and outward coping strategies to deal with their alienation in the colonial center. In this study *White Teeth* is concluded by offering a reflection on the shortcomings of liberal multiculturalism and the enduring effects of racism, class, and colonialism on people's lives in Britain.

Key words: nationality, racism, structured trauma, identity, double alienation, British identity, postcolonial and Marxist theories.

Introduction

The well-known novel *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith is a thrilling examination of nationality, ethnicity, and multiculturalism in the complicated context of modern-day



Britain. Through the unique and frequently contradictory perspectives of its varied immigrant characters, this article suggests that the novel provides a nuanced critique of postcolonial and British identity politics. We will explicitly examine Irie Jones's journey through different phases of identity development, from her early assimilationist aspirations to a deeper self-acceptance (Aguiló Mora, 2009).

The article will also explore the challenges faced by Samad Iqbal and his sons, Millat and Magid, as they deal with the significant consequences of "double alienation" in the colonial capital (Bağlama, 2019). Through the examination of these characters, this study will provide the ideas of the assimilation to acceptance journey as a means of achieving personal identity and the widespread effects of double alienation on the colonial subject.

Irie Jones's Life Story and Her Resistance to Structured Trauma

The notion of "structured trauma," which is frequently proposed by postcolonial theory, argues that the identities of second-generation immigrants are unified by historical, transgenerational traumas (Aguiló Mora, 2009). Nonetheless, Irie Jones's story highlights her nuanced development toward a unique identity that rejects a fixed national or ethnic classification. Irie's experience demonstrates that it is possible to live in a "neutral present" that is not exclusively characterized by a painful past (Aguiló Mora, 2009).

Irie's journey starts with a need to fit in with a stereotypically British identity. For instance, she tries to straighten her Afro-Caribbean hair which is a humiliating event. For Irie, this seemingly insignificant hair care task becomes a "political crisis" and a "question of survival," highlighting her need to fit in and adhere to prevailing beauty standards (Lowe, 2001).

Then Irie encounters the difficulties associated with integration policies. She is forced to spend time with the white Chalfen family as part of her high school curriculum, which is shown as an extension of colonial power settings. Marcus Chalfen makes an effort to



"educate" Irie, promoting a "Chalfen way of thinking" that gradually restricts and objectifies her (Smith, 2000). At first, Irie internalizes this, even rejecting her own family in an attempt to "merge with the Chalfens" (Smith, 2000). Nonetheless, Irie's path takes a significant turn when she decides to accept herself. The finding of her mother Clara's fake teeth, which serves as a metaphor for Clara's desire to hide her own ancestry, serves as the catalyst for this change. Like her mother, Irie understands that she cannot fully escape her past (Smith, 2000). She returns to her grandmother Hortense's home in order to learn more about her heritage through books, photographs, and oral tradition (Smith, 2000). Initially, she romanticizes this history, but she eventually realizes that it is not a "blank page" and that the notion of having a single country is a "lie" itself (Smith, 2000).

Irie eventually tries to find her identity outside of these "past rooms" (Machado, 2006; Smith, 2000). According to Aguiló Mora (2009), she aspires to be "simply Irie," free from the weight of her ancestry and the need to demonstrate her blackness more than white people do.

Irie's experience challenges essentialist ideas of a single, unchanging identity and emphasizes the critical importance of "culture-specificity" in comprehending British identity (Aguiló Mora, 2009). Smith imagines a "neutral space where there is not 'everybody's old historical shit all over the place'"—a "New Britain" where hybridity is accepted and not racialized—through Irie (Aguiló Mora, 2009). Irie's ultimate choice to pursue a career in dentistry, a field centered on "white teeth" that are both universal and distinctively shaped by personal histories, represents her capacity to "clean and re-define" these narratives and create new power structures (Aguiló Mora, 2009).

The Iqbal Family's Double Alienation and Escape Strategies

In *White Teeth*, Samad Iqbal and his sons Millat and Magid share their experiences that shed light on the idea of "double alienation," which is a theoretical synthesis of



postcolonial theory and Marxism (Bağlama, 2019). According to this paradigm, a colonial subject's deep alienation stems from both their ethnic heritage in the colonial center and their social position inside a capitalist society (Bağlama, 2019). Samad, Millat, and Magid live in London in a state of "loss, atomization, meaninglessness, and powerlessness", despite the attempt to overcome the negative effects of this dual alienation (Bağlama, 2019) and various "outward and inward escape mechanisms" to deal in their pursuit of self-actualization and acknowledgment (Bağlama, 2019).

Samad's main external escape method is his internalized sense of patriotism. Despite being a Bengali Muslim immigrant, Samad embraces a feeling of patriotic duty and proudly shows his connection with the British Empire as a World War II soldier (Bağlama, 2019). In addition, he feels "significant, valuable and acknowledged" through the heroic family stories, especially those about his great-grandfather Mangal Pande (Bağlama, 2019). He claims to be able to "fight like any Sikh. Better! Stronger!" and boasts with his officer items (Smith, 2000). Such behavior paradoxically reinforces the hegemonic narratives of colonial capitalism rather than opposing the colonial system, since his need for recognition is framed within the exact systems that marginalize him (Bağlama, 2019). According to Bağlama (2019), he feels that judging the accents of others is a representation of this external mechanism because it enhances his status and gains him the favor of the "civilized" white world. Samad's growing devotion to Islam, especially his strict observance of Islamic rituals, serves as an internal coping strategy. As a "spiritual remedy" for his moral, social, and economic problems, this religious isolation offers relief from what he perceives to be British (Mirze, 2008; Bağlama, 2019).

The "socio-cultural and political orientations of white supremacy" are also internalized by Samad's children, Millat and Magid, as they search for their identity (Bağlama, 2019). Magid tries hard to speak "perfect Queen's English," for example, since he thinks it will make him "whiter, closer to being a real human being" and "more English



than the English" (Smith, 2000; Bağlama, 2019). In addition to it, he tries to materialize himself as a member of the colonial center and participates in the Chalfen family's FutureMouse initiative (Bağlama, 2019). He feels a sense of belonging to the governing nation due to this mimicry and his need for a recognizable "other," which gives him an identity and a false sense of comfort (Bağlama, 2019).

Millat, on the other hand, angrily rejects Western values. Feeling nameless and voiceless in Britain, he connects with the term "Paki" and uses his rage as a source of power (Smith, 2000). He becomes a member of the Raggastanis – a group of young people of mixed races who resist perceived injustices by using physical violence (Smith, 2000; Bağlama, 2019). Later he becomes a devoted member of the militant Muslim group KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation). In this way he can gain exposure and overcome his inferiority issue, and make his own "mark" in "this bloody country" (Smith, 2000; Bağlama, 2019).

Millat's actions, including his hypocritical sexual encounters and his continued use of gangster language, expose the contradictions within his "resistance," which ultimately stays within the boundaries of postmodern capitalism (Bağlama, 2019).

The struggle of both sons serves as an example of how self-otherization and self-abjection result from internalizing normative preconceptions and prevailing racial significations (Bağlama, 2019).

Conclusion

White Teeth by Zadie Smith skillfully uses the unique, yet connected experiences of its protagonists to offer a complex critique of British culture. Even though Irie Jones's path from assimilation to self-acceptance offers hope for creating a unique identity outside of "structured trauma" and the Iqbal family's battle with "double alienation" obviously demonstrates how historical and social structures, especially those originating from racism,



class, and colonialism, continue to shape the search for identity. The work serves as a critique of liberal multiculturalism's shortcomings by showing that, in spite of stories of acceptance and tolerance, historical injustices and structural disparities, there is still an influence on people's lives in Britain. This forces characters to look for acceptance through both internal and external escape strategies that might not fully free them from their alienated circumstances.

References:

1. **Aguiló Mora, Francisca.** "Simply British: Structured Trauma and Colonial Past in *Zadie Smith's White Teeth*." *The Grove: Working Papers on English Studies*, no. 16, 2009, pp. [9-26]. University of the Balearic Islands. ISSN: 1137-005X.
2. **Bağlama, Sercan Hamza.** "Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: The Interpellation of the Colonial Subject in Multicultural Britain." *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2019, pp. 77–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20512856.2019.1638007>.
3. **Lowe, Jan.** "No More Lonely Londoners." *Small Axe*, no. 9, 2001, pp. 166–180.
4. **Machado, Elena.** "Bittersweet (Be)Longing: Filling the Void of History in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*." *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2006.
5. **Mirze, Z. Esra.** "Fundamental Differences in *Zadie Smith's White Teeth*." *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*, edited by Tracey L. Walters, Peter Lang, 2008.
6. **Smith, Zadie.** *White Teeth*. London: *Penguin*, 2000.