



DIASPORIC TRAUMA AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN *WHITE TEETH*: A POSTCOLONIAL READING

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ABSTRACT

Zadie Smith's White Teeth (2000) explores the intersections of race, migration, and identity in contemporary London. The novel presents a vivid description of families who were immigrants from several countries, negotiating cultural, social, and intergenerational challenges in a postcolonial urban environment. This paper determines the terms of diasporic trauma and cultural hybridity in Smith's novel through the lens of postcolonial theory, drawing on Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity, Stuart Hall's notions of diaspora and identity, and contemporary trauma studies. The study contributes to the fields of postcolonial literature, diaspora studies, and cultural identity research by offering a clear understanding of how literature reflects and shapes discourses on multiculturalism, hybridity, and diasporic experience.

Introduction

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is widely known as a masterpiece in contemporary English literature, engaging with themes of race, migration, and multicultural identity. The novel was published in 2000 and focuses on two London families — the Iqbals and the Joneses — whose lives differently across generational, cultural, and social life path. Smith presents London as a multicultural, postcolonial city where historical legacies of colonialism, migration, and global interconnections continue to influence individual and collective identities. Problems of diaspora, conflict between generations, and negotiation in culture are the main object of this novel. The author made this ideas ideal for postcolonial analysis. Diasporic communities mostly have conflicts in preserving inherited cultural traditions and adapting to the host society. This tendency can result in trauma, confusion in identities and conflict, yet it also opens spaces for cultural hybridity, creativity, and self-expression. This paper examines how *White Teeth* represents diasporic trauma and cultural hybridity, claiming that Smith portrays diaspora not only as a site of struggle but also as a space of creative identity formation. The analysis mainly focuses on postcolonial theory and trauma studies, thus exploring how the novel negotiates cultural, generational, and social complexities in contemporary Britain.



Methods

During the analysis of this article several methods are implied, which comes in handy in comprehending clearly.

Theoretical and Analytical Method. The study draws on key tenets of postcolonial theory (H. Bhabha, S. Hall) and trauma studies (K. Caruth, D. LaCapra). This method allows for the interpretation of literary text as a space for representing cultural hybridity, diasporic experience, and various forms of trauma.

Textual and Narrative Analysis. The work utilizes a detailed analysis of the literary text, including: character analysis, analysis of narrative strategies, interpretation of symbols and motifs (memory, silence, body, history). This method allows for the identification of how trauma and hybridity are embedded in the narrative structure.

Contextual Method. The novel is examined within the socio-historical context of postcolonial Britain in the late 20th century. The processes of migration, multiculturalism and rethinking of imperial heritage are taken into account, which contributes to a deeper understanding of the diasporic issues of the text.

Analysis

The analysis of *White Teeth* includes three interrelated theoretical frameworks: postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and trauma studies.

1. Cultural Hybridity

According to Bhabha, hybridity appears within cultural contact zones—those intermediary spaces where different cultures meet, interact and even live together. This concept is exemplified in *White teeth* through character development, language, and cultural negotiation. Archie Jones, a British-born white man, navigates multicultural London while creating close ties with immigrant families. His hybrid social interactions illustrate how individuals negotiate identities beyond fixed categories. Language in the novel also reflects hybridity. Multicultural vernaculars, slang, and dialects are converged in this novel, thus capturing the complex interplay of cultural identities in London. Characters like Millat adopt elements of both Bangladeshi heritage and British youth culture, producing hybrid identities that challenge rigid definitions of race, nationality, and tradition. Through hybridity, Smith does not portray multiculturalism as problematic, instead he makes it creative and dynamic. The novel gives the term of “third spaces” where characters inhabit, specifically, they can reconstruct identity, forge new relationships, and reinterpret cultural heritage.

2. Diaspora and Identity

According to the theory of Stuart Hall (1990), it is claimed that diaspora as both a historical and contemporary experience of displacement, emphasizing the uncertainty and multiplicity of identity. Diaspora studies focus on the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of living between worlds. It often includes intergenerational tensions, cultural preservation, and adaptation to host societies where they should adjust themselves. When it comes to the term itself, diaspora carries with it an inherent sense of trauma. Different causes contribute to the deep psychological distress experienced by diasporic individuals, such as existing in an in-between space, giving questions of identity, trying to redefine one’s place in the world, and continually facing othering and social



marginalization. Mostly it appears in second generation where Samad Iqbal's children face several problems at school. Furthermore, through close analysis of key characters such as Archie Jones and Irie Jones, the work demonstrates how Smith describe London as a place where historical legacies of colonialism, migration, and globalization are converged.

If specifically analyses this trauma, there are several salient examples: Samad is obsessed with his ancestor Mangal Pandey and constantly emphasizes his heroism. This is an attempt to compensate for a sense of historical injustice and restore lost dignity. His decision to send his son Magid to Bangladesh is a desperate attempt to "save" him from assimilation, which he believes destroys identity. Here, the trauma of diaspora manifests itself as nostalgia and idealization of a homeland that, in reality, no longer exists in its former form.

Samad's sons demonstrate different responses to diaspora trauma: Magid grows up in Bangladesh but becomes rational, secular, and "Western"; rejects his father's religious identity. Example: The irony is that Samad's attempt to preserve traditions backfires: Magid becomes more British than his brother. Millat grows up in London; experiences racism and cultural marginalization; radicalizes and joins an extremist group. For instance: Millat uses radical ideology as a way to find meaning and belonging, demonstrating how unprocessed diaspora trauma can transform into aggression.

Although Archie is not a migrant, he represents a post-colonial Britain experiencing the loss of its imperial identity. His friendship with Samad highlights a shared trauma: the futility of war; the lack of heroism; the loss of clear direction in life. For example: Archie's suicide attempt at the beginning of the novel symbolizes an existential crisis associated with a sense of uselessness and emptiness—a condition that echoes Samad's diasporic trauma.

The Chalfen family embodies a dominant culture that: perceives multiculturalism superficially; fails to recognize the depth of diaspora trauma. Indeed, their "interest" in the children of migrants appears as a form of cultural superiority, which only reinforces feelings of alienation among members of the diaspora.

3. Trauma Studies

The novel "White Teeth" explores trauma as a multilayered phenomenon that shapes the characters' personalities, behavior, and interpersonal relationships. Zadie Smith demonstrates that trauma isn't always the result of a catastrophe—it can be slow, everyday, and inherited.

One of the mostly shown trauma is the trauma of war and the loss of meaning by hero Archie Jones. Archie Jones is a World War II veteran. His trauma is not expressed through over memories of violence, but manifests through: emotional emptiness, passivity, lack of purpose in life. Archie's suicide attempt at the very beginning of the novel is a key traumatic gesture. It occurs not because of a single event, but as a result of accumulated existential trauma. Archie is unable to integrate his war experience into his identity, so he chooses indifference as a survival strategy. From a trauma studies perspective, this is an example of "silent trauma"—a trauma that is not spoken, yet defines the character's entire life.



Zadie Smith shows how unprocessed parental trauma is passed on to children. Theoretically, it is called intergenerational family trauma. Because of constant fear of moral failure, Samad makes rigid controls over his children, which results emotional instability and making contradictory decisions. His trauma—the fear of historical and moral insignificance—is transmitted to Magid and Millat, but manifests itself differently: Magid chooses rationalism and cold distance, Millat—aggression and nihilism. Without doubt, this corresponds to the concept of intergenerational trauma, where children "inherit" not the event, but its psychological consequences.

During analysis of the novel one can see the trauma of split identity. The life of Irie Jones can be a salient example. She suffers from body rejection, feelings of "wrongness" and comparing herself to normative images of beauty. Her attempts to change her appearance (straightening her hair, the desire to "disappear") are forms of bodily trauma, where the body is perceived as a source of pain and shame. In trauma studies, this is linked to the concept of bodily memory of trauma, where the body "remembers" social violence better than the mind. Many characters in the novel experience trauma not because of migration per se, but because of the inability to reassemble a coherent self.

Moreover, in the novel, many characters do not speak of their trauma, but repress it: Archie – through indifference; Clara – through religious fanaticism; Samad – through moral rigorism. Indeed, this trauma called the trauma of silence and repression. The lack of sincere dialogue between parents and children creates a space of traumatic silence, where tension only mounts. According to Caruth, trauma returns not as a memory, but as a repetition – and this is precisely what we see in the characters' lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* offers a multidimensional understanding of the diasporic experience in the context of postcolonial modernity. Analysis has shown that trauma in the work manifests itself not only as a consequence of migration, but also as a result of historical memory, family conflicts, and existential uncertainty. Cultural hybridity, as understood by Homi Bhabha, serves as an important mechanism for identity formation in the novel, allowing the characters to exist in a "third space" between cultures. At the same time, hybridity does not eliminate traumatic experience, but rather transforms it into a form of ongoing cultural and psychological negotiation. Stuart Hall's theory of diaspora helps us examine the characters' identity as a fluid and fragmented construct, shaped by the past and the present. *White Teeth* thus demonstrates that trauma and hybridity are interrelated elements of the postcolonial experience. The novel portrays diaspora not only as a space of loss and conflict, but also as a source of new forms of identity and cultural interaction. Ultimately, Zadie Smith's work confirms the importance of fiction as a tool for understanding the complex processes of multiculturalism and postcolonial identity in contemporary society.

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