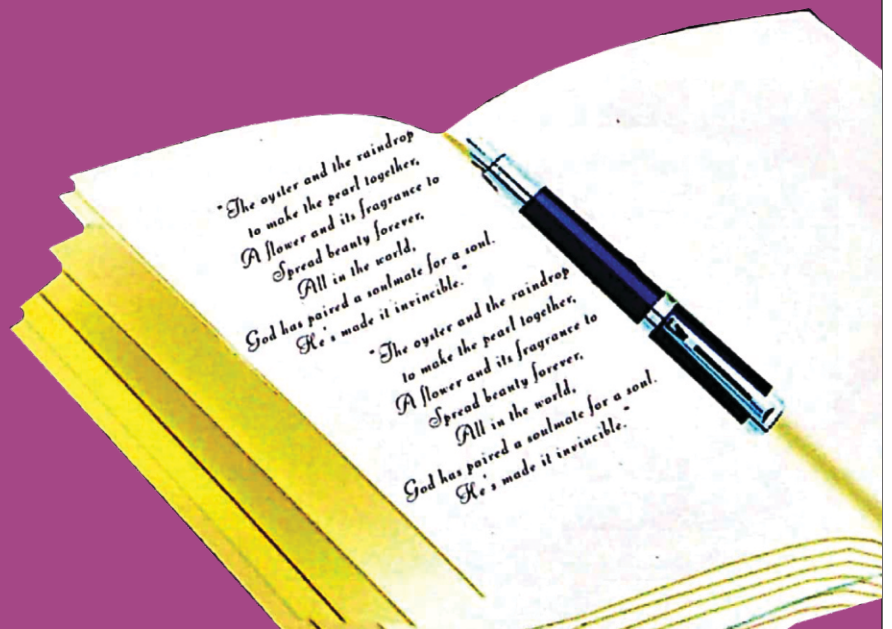


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# VIBGYOR

Bi-annual Multi Disciplinary Research Journal  
Special Issue : April 2018



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Bi-annual Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
**SPECIAL ISSUE - APRIL 2018**

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## अनुक्रमणिका

१. THE STATUS OF ENGLISH AS A LINK LANGUAGE IN INDIA TODAY: A REVIEW	Dr. Jobi George ..... 7
2. Identity and Multiculturalism in Zadie Smith's, 'White Teeth'	Dr. Vinita S Virgandham ..... 12
3. Identity, Displacement, and Resilience: Amitav Ghosh's Portrayal of the Colonial Experience	Dr. Raheel Quraishi ..... 18
4. A study on Patent awareness among faculties of Engineering Colleges	Rajasree O.P., Mangala A. Hirwade, ..... 22 Sunilkumar U.T.
5. An Overview of Indian Government Policies in the Agricultural Sector and Farmers' Suicides	Dr. Mangesh Kadu ..... 29
6. Physical Fitness: The need of the Era	Asst. Prof. Aditya Sarwe ..... 35
७. द्रारिद्र्य निमुर्लन आणि सरकारच्या कल्याणकारी योजना : एक दृष्टीक्षेप	प्रा. डॉ. सुनिल शिंदे ..... ३७
८. महाराष्ट्रातील तमाशा : एक लोकनाट्य	प्रा. डॉ. मधुकर वि. नंदनवार ..... ४१
९. मानवाधिकार और बुद्ध तत्वज्ञान	प्रा. डॉ. मोतीराज चव्हाण ..... ४६
१०. नागपुर शहरातील औद्योगिक विकासासाठी कामगारांचे अध्ययन : एक अभ्यास	प्रा. डॉ. राजेश बहुरुपी ..... ५०
११. आधुनिक काळात मूल्यशिक्षण व्यवसायाची खरी गरज	प्रा. डॉ. अनिता महावादीवार ..... ५३
१२. धम्मपालनाची मानवी दृष्टिकोनातून वर्तमान उपयोगिता	सहा. प्रा. सोमेश्वर विनोदराव वासेकर, सहा. प्रा. भिमादेवी महादेव डांगे ..... ५७

# Identity and Multiculturalism in Zadie Smith's, 'White Teeth'

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## Abstract :

Zadie Smith's seminal novel, 'White Teeth,' stands as a literary exploration of the intricacies of identity within the multicultural landscape of late 20th-century London. This research paper aims to explore the multifaceted theme of identity, formation, negotiation, and representation as influenced by the coexistence of diverse cultures and immigrant experiences. Through an analytical lens, it navigates the paths characters traverse in their pursuit of understanding selfhood amidst the blending of cultures, religions, languages, and traditions. By examining the characters' nuanced experiences, this study unveils the dynamic nature of identity, highlighting its adaptability, hybridity, and complexity in the face of a multicultural society. The findings in this research contribute to a deeper comprehension of the interplay between identity and multiculturalism in contemporary literature, shedding light on the broader implications for societies grappling with diversity and the fluidity of individual identities.

Keywords: Identity, Multiculturalism, Zadie Smith, White Teeth, Cultural Hybridity, Religion, Gender, Literary Analysis

## Introduction :

Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth,' a literary tour de force, emerges as a vibrant narrative encapsulating the kaleidoscopic tapestry of contemporary society. Published in 2000, it swiftly garnered critical acclaim, marking Zadie Smith's debut as a writer of remarkable insight and prowess. Set in the dynamic milieu of late 20th-century London, the novel unfurls an intricate tale that intricately interweaves the lives of characters from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In doing so, 'White Teeth' assumes a unique position in the realm of contemporary literature, serving as a literary mirror reflecting the complexities of a multicultural society.

The thematic core of 'White Teeth' revolves around the nuanced exploration of identity and multiculturalism. Smith adeptly illuminates the multifaceted nature of identity, illustrating how it is profoundly influenced by the interplay of various cultural elements, including ethnicity, religion, language, and the immigrant experience. The novel doesn't merely chronicle individual identities but delves into the collective identity of a society in the throes of transformation due to immigration and globalization. At its essence, 'White Teeth' scrutinizes the symbiotic relationship between identity and multiculturalism, inviting readers to contemplate the implications of this intricate bond in an increasingly interconnected world.

This research endeavours to dissect the portrayal and significance of identity and multiculturalism in 'White Teeth.' By dissecting the characters' evolving identities and their encounters with a multicultural society, this paper aims to provide an insightful exploration of the themes that lie at the heart of the novel. Through a comprehensive analysis of cultural intersections and the subsequent hybridization of identities, this study aims to decipher how Smith's work resonates with the contemporary narrative of globalization, migration, and diverse societal amalgamation.

In this vein, the research embarks on a comprehensive examination of the characters and their experiences, delving into the novel's historical and social context to unravel the

intricate layers of identity formation. By scrutinizing the interactions between characters of diverse backgrounds and highlighting the challenges and opportunities presented by multiculturalism, this research aspires to contribute to a deeper understanding of 'White Teeth' as a literary exploration of identity and multiculturalism.

#### **Literature Review :**

The novel 'White Teeth' by Zadie Smith has been the subject of extensive literary analysis, particularly in the realms of identity and multiculturalism. Scholars and researchers have explored the various dimensions of the novel, offering critical insights into the characters, themes, and societal implications presented in the narrative.

**1. "Zadie Smith's White Teeth : Multiculturalism for the New Millennium"** by Ruth L. Vanita (2002)

Vanita's work explores 'White Teeth' as a seminal text in the context of multiculturalism in the new millennium. The research examines the novel's portrayal of cultural amalgamation, focusing on how Smith showcases the challenges and benefits of multiculturalism through her characters and their complex identities.

**2. "The Postcolonial Identity of White Teeth" by Deborah Willis (2007)**

Willis delves into the postcolonial aspects of 'White Teeth,' discussing how the characters in the novel negotiate their identities in the postcolonial setting of London. The paper explores how historical and colonial legacies influence the characters' self-perceptions and interactions in a multicultural society.

**3. "Identity and In betweenness in White Teeth" by Karam Singh Sethi (2010)**

Sethi's research delves into the theme of identity in 'White Teeth' through the lens of in-betweenness. The analysis focuses on characters caught between various cultural and social dimensions, presenting the struggle and adaptation that occur in this state of in-betweenness.

**4. "A Clash of Cultures: Exploring Cultural Hybridity in Zadie Smith's White Teeth" by Sarah Ayman Shawky (2014)**

Shawky's work examines the concept of cultural hybridity in 'White Teeth.' The research analyses how the characters represent hybrid identities resulting from the blending of different cultures, shedding light on the complexities and nuances of multiculturalism within the narrative.

**5. "Muslim Identity in White Teeth" by Shahnaz Khan (2017)**

Khan's research focuses on the portrayal of Muslim identity within 'White Teeth.' The paper explores how characters like Samad Iqbal grapple with their religious and cultural identity in a multicultural setting, shedding light on the challenges and intricacies of being Muslim in London.

#### **Research Methodology :**

This study uses a secondary data analysis approach, utilizing data from various sources such as books, journals, novels, research institutions, and academic studies.

#### **Identity and Multiculturalism**

The novel 'White Teeth' by Zadie Smith is set in late 20th-century London, a period characterized by significant demographic shifts and a burgeoning multicultural landscape. The late 20th century saw London transform into a dynamic melting pot of cultures due to increased immigration from former British colonies and other parts of the world. The influx saw the city evolve into a multicultural metropolis marked by a diverse and complex demographic makeup.

The aftermath of World War II saw a wave of immigration to Britain, particularly from the Commonwealth nations. The British government, facing a labour shortage and the need for post-war reconstruction, actively encouraged immigration from countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Caribbean Islands, and Africa. This influx of immigrants resulted in the development of vibrant ethnic communities, contributing to the multicultural landscape of London.



The Windrush generation, named after the ship HMT Empire Windrush that arrived in the UK in 1948 carrying Caribbean immigrants, symbolizes a significant demographic movement. The immigrants from the Caribbean, known as the Windrush generation, played a pivotal role in shaping London's multiculturalism. Their cultural influences, traditions, and struggles became an integral part of the city's social fabric.

The multicultural landscape of London during the late 20th century is highly relevant to the themes explored in 'White Teeth.' The period was also marked by racial tensions, discrimination, and challenges related to integration. The novel intricately probes into the lives of characters from diverse backgrounds, including Jamaican, Bangladeshi, Indian, and English. The amalgamation of these diverse cultures reflects the multicultural reality of London during that time.

The clash of cultures and attempts at integration were prevalent themes, and 'White Teeth' carefully captures the struggles and conflicts that characters face due to these tensions.

The multicultural landscape and interactions among different ethnic communities in London influenced the concept of cultural hybridity. Individuals in this setting often developed hybrid identities, blending elements of their original culture with aspects of the dominant culture. This hybridity is central to the exploration of identity in 'White Teeth.'

Understanding this historical and social context is crucial for analysing how the multiculturalism of late 20th-century London is portrayed in 'White Teeth' and how it shapes the characters' identities and experiences in the novel.

### **Characters and Identity**

The novel reconnoitres the complex and evolving identities of characters such as Archie Jones, Samad Iqbal, Irie Jones, Magid and Millat, Clara Bowden, Josh and Marcus Chalfen, and Clara Bowden. Archie Jones, an Englishman, struggles with a lack of purpose and direction in

his life, while Samad Iqbal, a Bengali Muslim immigrant from Bangladesh, faces inner conflicts due to his traditional upbringing and the clash of cultures in London. Irie Jones, Archie's daughter, grapples with her multicultural background, balancing her Jamaican roots with the Western culture she encounters. Magid and Millat, twin brothers from the same cultural background, adopt Westernized identities, while Clara Bowden represents cultural hybridity and freedom, showcasing a balanced and adaptive identity. Josh and Marcus Chalfen, born to a Jewish mother and a Bengali father, navigate their mixed heritage, sometimes embracing it but often treating it as an exotic novelty. The novel highlights the evolution and transformation of identity as these characters navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the multicultural society of London.

Analysing these characters and their identities provides a rich understanding of how cultural backgrounds and experiences shape identity in the multicultural context portrayed in 'White Teeth.' Their diverse paths of self-discovery reflect the intricate interplay between culture, society, and personal choices in forming and evolving one's identity.

### **Immigrant Experience and Identity Formation**

'White Teeth' portrays the immigrant experience through the struggles and identity crises faced by immigrants. Characters like Samad Iqbal and Alsana Iqbal, immigrants from Bangladesh, face displacement and struggle to preserve their cultural heritage while integrating into a foreign society. The clash of cultural norms and values, language barriers, and discrimination contribute to their feelings of isolation and alienation.

The second generation of Irie Jones, represents cultural hybridity, blending elements of their parents' culture with the dominant culture. This adaptation showcases the resilience and flexibility of immigrants in constructing an identity that incorporates both their cultural heritage and the culture of their adopted home.

Immigrant characters often experience ambivalence in their identity, grappling with questions of authenticity and societal expectations. This ambivalence leads to an exploration of identity, often resulting in a blend of cultural influences.

The novel underscores the human need for belonging and acceptance, with characters like Irie seeking acceptance and validation in a multicultural society. The novel also highlights generational differences in the immigrant experience, with the first generation struggling to preserve their cultural heritage while the second generation navigates a more fluid and adaptable identity.

Through the lens of immigrant characters in 'White Teeth,' the novel unravels the intricate process of identity formation, offering a poignant portrayal of the challenges, conflicts, and adaptations experienced by immigrants in a multicultural society. The characters' journeys serve as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of individuals in the face of a complex and ever-evolving cultural landscape.

#### **Cultural Hybridity and Multiculturalism :**

'White Teeth' is a novel that explores London as a melting pot of diverse cultures, where characters from various backgrounds coexist and interact. The novel blurs cultural boundaries, showcasing the fluid nature of culture and identity. Characters like Irie Jones embody hybrid identities, exemplifying the amalgamation of different cultural influences. Linguistic hybridity is a significant aspect of cultural hybridity, as characters often mix languages, dialects, and idioms, reflecting the diverse linguistic influences in London's multicultural environment. Culinary and cultural fusion are also highlighted, with characters' preferences for various cuisines and sharing meals symbolizing the blending of tastes, traditions, and culinary experiences. The novel explores cross-cultural relationships, promoting understanding of cultural differences and unity amidst diversity. The concept of cultural hybridity evolves across generations, with younger

characters exhibiting a more effortless blending of cultures compared to their parents. Zadie Smith uses literary techniques to emphasize cultural hybridity, utilizing narrative styles that blend various cultural elements and perspectives. The novel suggests that cultural hybridity fosters social cohesion and understanding among diverse communities, promoting harmony and peaceful coexistence.

Cultural hybridity in 'White Teeth' emerges as a core theme, illustrating the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity in a multicultural context. The novel explores how embracing and celebrating cultural hybridity can lead to a richer, more inclusive society, challenging conventional notions of cultural purity and highlighting the beauty of diverse influences.

#### **Religion, Race, and Ethnicity :**

In 'White Teeth,' religion plays a significant role in shaping characters' identities. Characters like Samad Iqbal, a devout Muslim, grapple with conflicts between their religious beliefs and the changing cultural landscape. The novel explores generational shifts in religious identity, as characters like Samad struggle to transmit their traditional beliefs to their children, who adopt a more liberal version of their parents' faith.

Racial identity is a complex aspect of identity, as characters face racial prejudices and stereotypes that significantly impact their self-perception and interactions. The novel highlights the challenges of racial identity and the resilience needed to overcome stereotypes and discrimination.

Ethnicity is portrayed as a tapestry of identities, with characters like Irie, Magid, and Millat embodying the intricacies of multiple ethnic identities due to their mixed heritage. The intersection of race, ethnicity, and religion is evident as characters of South Asian descent grapple with the intersection of their racial background, cultural heritage, and Islamic faith.

Racial and religious hybridity is exemplified by characters like Clara, who navigate and blend various aspects of their diverse backgrounds,



challenging traditional labels and fostering a broader understanding of multiculturalism. The novel encourages a deeper examination of racial and religious stereotypes and their impact on identity formation.

In 'White Teeth,' religion, race, and ethnicity intersect to form intricate layers of identity. By delving into these aspects, the novel paints a vivid picture of the complexities and challenges faced by individuals as they navigate their identities within a multicultural society.

#### **Language and Identity :**

In 'White Teeth,' language is a significant aspect of identity, reflecting the characters' cultural backgrounds and upbringing. The characters navigate multiple languages, highlighting the diversity of their identities. Linguistic hybridity is a key aspect of their linguistic identity, as they blend words and phrases from different languages, creating a unique identity. Language is vital for characters' integration into society, as they face challenges in learning and mastering new languages. Bilingual characters, like Irie Jones, navigate their identity through their linguistic abilities, showcasing their flexibility in a multicultural setting. Accents, often associated with cultural and social backgrounds, can reinforce or challenge stereotypes, affecting how characters perceive themselves. The language used by generations represents a generation gap, with older characters retaining their native languages and younger ones predominantly communicating in English. For characters like Samad Iqbal, preserving their native language is crucial for preserving their cultural identity, as the fear of losing their language is tied to their heritage and sense of self.

In 'White Teeth,' language serves as a powerful tool that not only shapes characters' identities but also mirrors the multiculturalism and linguistic diversity of the society they inhabit. The characters' linguistic journey encapsulates their struggle, adaptation, and negotiation of identity within a multifaceted and multilingual

environment.

#### **Gendered Identity in a Multicultural Society :**

'White Teeth' is a novel that explores traditional gender roles and societal expectations across different cultures. Characters like Clara Bowden and Alsana Iqbal grapple with societal expectations tied to their gender, impacting their sense of self and identity. The novel also highlights cultural variations in gender identity, as characters navigate distinct gender norms in London's multicultural society. The experiences of characters are shaped by the intersection of gender and race, with women from different ethnic backgrounds facing unique challenges due to racial discrimination and gender-based biases. The novel also portrays generational changes in gender roles, with younger characters challenging stereotypical gender roles more openly. The novel also explores hybrid gender identities, where characters blend traditional gender roles with progressive perspectives. The novel also delves into gendered power dynamics within relationships, highlighting how power and influence are often unevenly distributed based on gender. Lastly, the novel subtly hints at LGBTQ+ identities, highlighting the complexities of gender and sexual identity within a multicultural society.

In 'White Teeth,' gendered identity is portrayed as a multifaceted aspect deeply entwined with culture, race, and societal expectations. The novel portrays the intersectionality of gender with other aspects of identity, shedding light on the intricate dynamics that influence character interactions and their experiences within a multicultural context.

#### **Conclusion :**

Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth' is a novel that explores identity and multiculturalism in late 20th-century London. The story follows characters who navigate a diverse society, highlighting the dynamic nature of identity. The novel emphasizes cultural hybridity, the blending of multiple cultural elements within individuals, and the evolving nature of identity across

generations. It also underscores the intersectionality of identity, revealing how various aspects such as race, religion, ethnicity, and gender intersect to shape characters' experiences and perceptions.

The novel remains relevant in contemporary society, as it encourages critical examination of societal norms, biases, and prejudices while advocating for understanding, acceptance, and unity amidst cultural differences. Future research should explore contemporary multiculturalism, linguistic hybridity, social media's influence on identity, and the representation of LGBTQ+ identities within multicultural settings. The novel offers a blueprint for navigating diversity and fostering a sense of community in today's multicultural societies.

'White Teeth' stands as a literary masterpiece that not only entertains but also provides a profound exploration of the human condition within a multicultural society. It challenges readers to critically examine their own beliefs, biases, and perceptions, ultimately encouraging a more inclusive and understanding world.

In this conclusion, the essential findings, relevance, and areas for future research are summarized, emphasizing the enduring importance of 'White Teeth' in the exploration of identity and multiculturalism.

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