

Zadie Smith's White Teeth: Dubious Existence of Cultural Authenticity

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Abstract

This paper argues the cultural authenticity is a questionable conception. Zadie Smith's debut novel, *White Teeth* features characters like Samad Miah Iqbal and Hortense Bowden who are determined to retain cultural purity. Through this projection, presumably, Smith intends to satirize their efforts and substantiates her claim that cultural purity cannot be maintained, especially, when the immigrants come to the host country. Despite the guarding of one's culture, the breaching of the cultural integrity has visibly taken place in the novel.

Keywords: Mixing process, Essentialism, Cultural anxieties, Cultural purity, Rigidity

Claiming that *The White Teeth* constitutes the strong statement of cultural inauthenticity would not be an exaggeration. As fascism is loathed, the celebration of authenticity fares no better. The articulation of authenticity can be useful to the restricted and limited purpose and extent and thoroughly dubious, as it were. Followers of any culture preserve the authenticity because if that status is questioned, "the culture is on the way to major transformation or collapse" (Greenwood 27). In general, the adherents of any culture no longer prefer the "transformation or collapse" of their own culture. For this reason, the mask of authenticity seems to have been continuously staged.

Determinants of cultural authenticity as Joanne Barker are "linguistic and biological" differences (4). And cultural authenticity is considered to promote "integrity of a culture" (Mingshui Cai 38). However, even the cultures that seem to possess the powerful integrity and autonomy are the results of mixture in due course of time. There can be no culture that has not evolved or gone through the mixing process. Although existence of authenticity is a questionable issue, its practice prevails. The people in the real and textual worlds as in Smith's case intend to demonstrate the authenticity.

The acceptability of authenticity cannot be used for camouflaging the dominance of the Western culture. Salman Sayyid underscores the fact that cultural authenticity as "essentialism" is acceptable so long as

“critique of universalism” is maintained and “western hegemony” is rejected (257). For him, opposing essentialism as reductionism for promoting the western cultural centrality and universalism is sheer nonsense (257). In the line of Sayyid or even with more precision, Geoffrey Brahm Levey cautions the risks of the notional aspect of the term, “cultural authenticity risks ignoring cultural beliefs and, especially, the identitarian dimensions of belonging” (16). Also, the authenticity is made more acceptable as Maiken Umbach and Mathew Humphrey discuss, “through a set of cultural metaphors and derives much of its persuasive power from their emotive and aesthetic appeal” (127). The norm of authenticity, thus, in the metaphorical forms and the ignorance of other’s cultural beliefs, further for enacting dominance, gets disguised for the controlling of the people.

How is authenticity articulated is a contentious issue? It calls for two dimensions of debates. First, does the insider of a cultural group express cultural notions more authentically? Secondly, or is it the outsider who does it more authentically? The arguments, in this regard, have been “reduced to absurd arguments” “oversimplified” or the other times the debate has taken the form of the “fodder for provocative journal articles that generate much heat and little light” (Bishop 29). Emic or etic perspective for authenticity becomes another dimension of contention in relation to authenticity.

In *White Teeth*, Irie, from the Caribbean background does not know her cultural references. Although she desires to be English in England, her body is not of the English type. Her mother Clara has the English body, but Irie has the genetic burden from Hortense Bowden. It means she is more like Hortense whose bodily shape is predominantly Caribbean. Ulrike Tancke confirms, “Irie’s Caribbean roots, which her shape points to, are equally irremovable beyond the scope of individual self-fashioning” (35). Irie attempts to change her hair as that of the European lady by visiting the P.K.’s Afro Hair Design and Management and tolerates the excruciating pain for having the English hair, she endeavors to lose her weight and change her Caribbean fat body to English slim body.

The immigrants and the children of the immigrants put all the efforts to be agreeable in the host lands. In the text, Irie does not like to be the stranger for England. This is not the particular case of Irie. This is largely a general case because the owner of the P.K.’s hair center had a research on the hair politics and hair obsession especially on the immigrants. Tracey L. Walters reveals, “In *White Teeth*, the narrator tells readers that the white owner of the hair salon gets the idea to open the store after reading a newspaper article about black women spending millions of pounds a year on their hair” (60). Obviously, one migrates in the other’s country and one wishes to be assimilated in that country. When

one is prepared to live a life in a certain land, some sort of compromise is necessary. For the same, the owner of the P.K.'s hair management center got the business plan. The reason that the black women are ready to spend a lot of money in managing their hair cannot be any different than the adjustability in the host country. To be precise, they do not want to be called black, or they want to be accepted in the new land. The fear that they might be rejected in the new land is the chief reason that even the black women who have low income come to manage their hair so that their sense of beauty would match to the European standard.

In the same line of adjustment, we see that Irie modelling herself. Irie "wishes to have straight, red hair, instead of her tight black Afro curls" (Alaa Alghamdi 115). Irie's Afro curls and her tight black hair would not make her acceptable in her school, not legally, but the perception of the people would matter. Irie would not like her Afro hair because she wants to be loved as the European ladies, she wants England to be her land. She does not like her hair to be like that of the African people who have lost the prestige of their body in the perception of the people.

Zadie Smith reads the mind of the African perception, "Such a loose curl" is the "half-caste hair" (277). And half - caste hair is not the standard hair. The mixed portrayal is not the pure or perfect portrayal. Irie feels this to be true because she does not know her exact cultural references. Her parents do not help her know this, her cultural anxieties become exacerbated when she does not know what culture she has to rely on. Thus, she attempts to avoid her Jamaican physique.

She wishes to lose weight for shading her "substantial Jamaican frame (Smith 265) . Even in the school, while her English teacher is teaching, Irie cannot concentrate on her study and the lecture; she occupies herself in the doodling. When the expert doodle spotter, the English teacher finds her digression, she asks about the concern. The matter with Irie is that she has been thinking of reducing her weight. Her body size - the big body size is the feature and clear indicator of the Jamaican body. When she comes across an advert, she is attracted to that and is occupied with that advert even in the class. Reading her mind can reveal that she is not satisfied with her present body size that is the embodiment of the Jamaican body.

Irie, the daughter of Archibald Jones and Clara Bowden, is quite restless for various reasons. She is, in a way, frustrated because she has not found love. She knows she wants to be loved by Millat, she also knows that Millat is often liked by the White ladies, Irie is very jealous of this. Her one of the reasons for the remodeling of her body size, shape and hair style is to attract Millat. Jessica Weintraub discusses the purpose of Irie, "Irie tries to discover a place on Millat's body where she can stake her claim" (182). Irie wants to claim the body of Millat, especially his

heart, his love because he is popular among the white ladies, Irie wants the end of the relations of Millat with other ladies. She wants to privatize him. She wants to make Millat her own and nobody else's.

The lack of scripts, the cultural role model for Irie is the pitiable case. She is born in England but is different from the people of England; this is a shocking fact to Irie. Her rescripting is required for living a life of her own. Barbara Schaff brings forth the discussion between Irie and her English teacher Mrs Olive Roody:

Irie appears as an alien and a misfit in this land of English roses: access denied. Even Shakespeare's dark lady, whom she hopes to adopt as a possible role model which would help her to integrate, turns out to be dark in different way: 'Is she black?' Irie asks her English teacher, and is disappointed by her answer." (284)

When her English teacher at Glenard Oak Comprehensive clarifies the case of the dark lady that Shakespeare was referring, that the dark lady was not the black lady the modern people understand, her role model is vanished. She had taken that dark lady to be her reference. She wanted to be like that dark lady. The English teacher clarifies to her that the dark lady was not the black lady as Irie had understood. She was not the black one. After this understanding, Irie has no script to rely on, she feels quite empty after this.

Irie was in love with Millat. Milat would be many times punished by the head teacher of their school for his unruly behaviours. Irie also was once caught when she was with Millat. After that Irie, Millat and Joshua Chalfen were to be privately coached by Chalfens at their home locations. Andrea Katherine Medovarski detects, "Irie's cultural anxieties are exacerbated by Joshua Chalfen and his parents, Joyce and Marcus, who have been assigned to tutor her and Millat

(151)." This exacerbation has the roots that Marcus Chalfen and Joyce Chalfen had a life style that was different from the immigrants. When Irie saw the study room of Marcus Chalfen, it was meant only for the study, the rooms of the immigrants would include even the spare objects in them. The purity and neatness in the lifestyle of Chalfen family forced Irie to ask herself about her root canals. She wanted to know why she was the way she was. She wanted to know the background of her being.

The glory of purity in the Chalfen family reminded Irie that she did not have the perfection in her :

When Irie stepped over the threshold of the Chalfen house, she felt an illicit thrill, like a Jew munching a saussage or a Hindu grabbing a Big Mac. She was crossing borders, sneaking into England; it felt like some terribly mutinous act, wearing somebody else's uniform or somebody else's skin. (Smith 328)

Her private tutoring in the Chlafen family gave her the sense of who she was, or to be precise, who she was not. That is why Irie determines to visit her grandmother Hortense Bowden to know about the roots.

Upon visiting her grandmother, Irie sees Ryan Topps, and has interaction with him about her studies. Alongside, she comes to know the roots of her grandmother, the case of Captain Durham and also the photos she saw in the granny's home told her a lot about her roots. Emilia Lipovsek suggests:

Irie... sets off to search for her own identity, since she feels invisible in London....After a big row with her parents, she moves in with her grandmother, whom she does not know too well...Irie discovers a rich legacy in old photos, certificates, maps and family stories... .(53)

Knowing the family stories makes her clear that she was the Jamaican mother's daughter who had the English father.

At grandmother's house, her encounter with her mother's ex-boyfriend helps to know that her mother had been divorced and her grandmother had association with him on religious grounds. When her grandmother introduced her to Ryan Topps, Ryan asked, "What exactly is it that you are studyin? Chemistry, biology and religious studies, Irie blew on a hot piece of plantin." Ryan perked up "Religious studies? And do they acquaint you with the only true church?" "It's more the big three. Jews, Christians, Muslims" (Smith 391). Ryan Topps' exclusive interest in the Church and her grandmother's only inclination to Church stunned her. For the same reason, Irie had to inform both of them that she was in grandmother's house not for the promotion of her faith, rather she was there for some studies. This triangulation, Hortense, Ryan Topps, and Irie takes a special note when Hortense tells Ryan Topps that Irie could have been Ryan Topp's daughter if Clara had not left him, such a nice fellow for Hortense. For Hortense, Clara is a child who has ruined the family status.

Irie's cultural reference excavation takes her to the choice of her profession. Barbara Schaff puts:

Irie Jones, the young female protagonist of *White Teeth*, daughter of a –toothless- Jamaican mother and an English father, will overcome the limitations of her underprivileged social background and become a dentist in the end. Her job will be to remove bad, damaged teeth and to seal root canals-metonymically, for Irie, being a dentist means being able to cope with her heritage and cultural memory. (284)

Being with Marcus Chalfen should have turned her to the field of science, she should have been the scientist. She did not, she has been determined to be a dentist, a daughter of the bucktoothed mother, the

toothless mother. She wants to seal the root canals of the teeth. To say the matter more directly, she wants to detect the roots of her cultural tooth. She wants to fix her heritage. She wants to know who she is. The question- is she English or Jamaican? The answer is yet to be found and the question defies easy answers.

The concern that Irie has not found the authenticity of her cultural roots is paralleled by the plight of Samad Miah Iqbal, who wants to be the pure embodiment of the cultural purity. James Procter fixes that Samad as the parent-governor is “a part of the school’s commitment to... diversity” (115). He has already committed to the secular inclination of the school. Time and again, he shows some sorts of the affiliation to his Muslim foundation, but his associations and his activities show otherwise.

Samad has put around twelve motions to the parent-governor body. He has tolerated the dismissal to all other motions. But he seems to be a little bit more determined to avoid the Harvest Festival from the school calendar. James Procter puts, “Samad puts forward 13 motions to the school governors, the last of which is a call for the Harvest Festival to be removed from the school calendar” (114). This last motion gets discussed in the novel. Even though the head lady of the school clarifies that Harvest Festival has community value rather than the religious values, he feels disinclined to the suggestions. Ultimately, he has to subside his voice because his is the mere preference.

Zadie Smith puts that Mrs Owens, the headmistress of Samad’s son’s school convinces Samad that it is the “charity aspect of the Harvest Festival that makes it worth retaining” and she asks him not to think in terms of “religion” but not in terms of “community” and “charity” (Smith 130). Mrs Owens has been able to dismiss his dislike to the Christian festivals. Samad says that the calendar has many Christian festivals and less Muslim festivals, the lady answers trickily and says that the Harvest festival is included in the calendar not on the religious grounds but for the benevolence value.

Samad, one of the significant characters of satirization by Smith derives more focused attention. Especially, his inclination to the cultural purity but the activities and involvement otherwise. Nick Bentley clarifies, “For Samad, the crisis manifests itself firstly in guilt over masturbation, and eventually in an affair with the white, English art teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones” (55). These two big instances are against a person from the Muslim background.

In times of fasting, masturbation is not practiced, but Samad appropriates it with his left hand. This shows that he is not in favour of the authentic Muslim behavior but in the act of pragmatic concerns. Zadie Smith explains, “Of course, Samad, being Samad, had employed the best of his western pragmatism, gone home and vigorously tackled the job with his functional left hand, repeating *To the pure all things are pure*” (Smith

139). To meet his personal need and to be honest to his public faith, Samad attempted to be pragmatic. His pragmatism is again the display of his contradictory part of personality.

Samad Iqbal knows that he has missed the morals. He knows what he is expected to do in ideal way and what he is able to perform. When he feels regretful about masturbation and impurity, Alim consoles him, “show me the pure man, Samad! Show me the pure act! Oh, Samad Miah...my advice to you is stay away from your right hand” (139). Alim suggests him to be more pragmatic because, as him, none is pure in the world, the religious concerns are not pragmatic and the authenticity has been dead in the real world. Thus, he is asked to continue the masturbation with his functional left hand. The coincidence is that Samad does not have the right hand, he had lost his right hand in the war. His appropriation of masturbation shows that the authenticity he often speaks of is useless and not actionable.

Samad, although attempts to be loyal to his culture, in reality, he is not. Charlotte Boyce and Joan Fitzpatrick discuss that Samad was unable to conquer his sexual behaviour and he “struggles to reconcile his westernized lifestyle with his Muslim faith (281).” There are many instances that display his inability to stick to his beliefs. His own beliefs that he wants his family members to follow have been abandoned by himself.

Alsana has realized that everyday a third world war is fought by Samad in his mind. He often talks about the root culture that his family members should not digress from. Alsana is less convinced, let alone her sons. Occasionally, Alsana persuades Samad to quit his approaches of correcting and enforcing them to act on the faith grounds. She even dares saying that Samad has been the victim of his bad faith. Alsana insists Samad, “Let the boy go. He is second generation -he was born here-naturally he will do things differently. You can’t plan everything (Smith 289). Alsana’s suggestions are not acceptable to Samad. He has deeper faith that he can correct his sons.

Grandmother of Clara had been promised that her baby-Hortense Bowden would not be done with any damage. “Captain Durham told her not to worry about the baby, he would do no damage to it. (Smith 357). This beginning of Bowdens itself is the foundation of the mixture, the challenge to the authenticity. When the beginning of the family history is problematic, the continuation has obvious effects unless a significant factor enters.

Captain Durham also had focused on the capacity of the boy he had inherited, he did not want to torture Ambrosia about the race and cultural difficulty rather he promised that the child from her would be the best Negro around. “Captain Durham told her that their secret child would

be the cleverest Negro boy in Jamaica" (Smith 357). His protective behaviour is surprising to Ambrosia.

Hortense Bowden is shown by Smith to be very strict concerning the cultural mixture. Nonetheless, her leeway to her granddaughter mentioning that her mixture is exceptional and acceptable is quite a shocking issue. Hortense does not even budge an inch to accept her daughter's marriage with a white man. She disowns her, she labels it as the sheer nonsense. But accepting Irie and claiming that she is a mixture but forgivable is the unusual pattern, it shows that authenticity is a tool of appropriation:

Hortense is a Jehovah Witness who strongly believes in the purity of race. However, she makes an exception for her granddaughter Irie who happens to look a lot like her own mother. Therefore, Hortense is a knot of contradictions. (Curry 284)

Among many instances, forgiving the mixed status of Irie hints at the contradictory authenticity that Hortense Bowden is determined to establish. Hortense Bowden is the devout Jehovah's Witness and one of the life values for the Jehovah's Witness is that they are expected to be non-judgmental. Hortense is judgmental. The core value of Jehovah's Witness can be summed up as observed by Hortense:

For twenty years she and other Jehovah's Witness have been waiting for the apocalypse, which is regularly prophesied. Forgetting the Christian values that teach her to be non-judgmental, she is quite hypocritical. Despite her own mixed marriage, when Clara marries Archie, Hortense stops speaking to her because he is White. (Walters)

Her cold relations with her daughter only because she married to a white is a clear instance that she is judgmental. A lady who invariably preaches the notion of apocalypse as the basis of her religion is untrue to her religion.

Hortense Bowden and Ryan Topps stand for inflexibility and rigidity. This rigidity is for their faith, the conviction and permanent belief."newness is exactly what Hortense and Ryan reject in favor of the perpetual sameness of a divine and stable system." (MacLeod 164) Their life recipes are on the basis of the Jehovah's Witness. They take the values from Jehovah's Witness and appropriate it for their favor. Neither they are honest to the religion they have followed, nor are they open to the people in their surroundings.

Even though the cultures seem to be autonomous and unaffected, the closer inspection into them shows the otherwise consequences. As an instance, Hortense's efforts to authenticity, Samad's inclination to purity and Irie's quest for her definite cultural references have resulted into the surefire crisis not because Smith has sampled them so, but this is the

representation of reality in the society at large. This paper concludes with a discussion that cultural authenticity can not be taken for granted. The novel *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith houses some characters intending to have cultural uniqueness for the distinct identity. This effort has been shown to be a failure.

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