



## **The Portrayal Of Identity Crisis In The Novels White Teeth And On Beauty By Zadie Smith**

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### **Abstract**

Identity crisis has become one of the hottest topics in modern contemporary society. As the world has become a global village, people tend to live in different places, and this tendency gives rise to various ethnic diversity and cultural identity issues. Loneliness, alienation, lack of social security, and racial discrimination are certain difficulties they confront in their new situation. The first-generation immigrants have their past in their homeland and their presence in their host land, but the second-generation people do not have their history. Multiculturalism has become a prominent factor in such issues, and this article is to focus on the identity crisis the immigrants face in the host country.

**Keywords:** Identity crisis, cultural identity, racial discrimination, multiculturalism

### **Introduction**

The Collins Dictionary defines an identity crisis as a state in which a person experiences uncertainty about who they are and their proper role in life. Practically, multicultural people deal with this crisis, and their state of doubt about the future or what is the right thing to do is the talk of the town. There comes alienation, loneliness, and acculturation when migration takes place. People have to live with different cultural, religious, lingual, and regional groups, and this mingling has positive and negative effects. As John Clement Ball suggests,

multiculturalism and multicultural structure in England have become a ‘postcolonial’ contact zone that has brought about the interrogation of some issues such as nationality, identity crises, religious clashes, hybridity, and so forth, as mentioned in subject matters in multicultural literature (Ball, 15).

As per this, when the cultural and social backgrounds of the immigrants have been contrary to that of the host society where they settled, the crisis of identity arises, and the immigrants and their progeny encounter the uncertainty. The author explores how these people and their upcoming generations are chronicled in the postcolonial metropolis in the multiculturalism White Teeth and On Beauty novels. With the help of these novels, scrutiny is made to view immigration into extending or operating across national boundaries and beyond ethnic lines, which focuses on identity crisis, cultural

diversity, hybridity, cultural protests, racial discrimination, the individual's difficulty to adapt, assimilate and withstand stereotypical protocols and attitudes of the host society.

As a third-generation mixed-breed, postcolonial writer Zadie Smith successfully depicts immigrants' cultural, religious and racial relationships and experiences. In the words of Laura Moss, 'Smith has created characters of mixed races, cultures, and languages; in short, she has created a portrait of hybridity in a North London borough.' When Tamila Adilova talks about Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth*, she says,

The family roots of Smith provide her with cultural and social questions, which are dramatically depicted in the novel. It is a book of cultural experiences of different generations where immigrants' status is revealed through exploration of integration process, identity and its space. History and life in London provide the reader with appropriate description of multicultural identity of migrant people (Adilova, 2008).

*White Teeth* is a realistic narrative of multicultural London which involves three different families living in Northwest London, the Iqbals, a Bangladeshi immigrant family with a British-born twin boys Magid and Millat; the Joneses, with a British father (Archibald), a Jamaican mother (Clara) and their mixed-race British-born daughter (Irie); and the Chalfens, a Jewish - Catholic family with four children (Emrah Isik, 304).

The novel most probably speaks about the friendship of Samad Iqbal and Archibald Jones and their families. Samad and his wife Alsana are immigrants, whereas their twins are hybrids. In the same way, Irie Jones is a third-generation hybrid who does not have a root. She wants to become a dentist as she has buck tooth and metal retainers. She runs behind Millat, but he never responds to her. Though she was born and brought up in Britain, she has the features of a Jamaican where never she has visited. She wants to straighten her spring-like hair to appear like a British girl. She goes to the hairdressers and asks them to straighten her hair.

'Straight hair. Straight long black sleek clickable toss-able shakeable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair. With a fringe' (Smith, *White Teeth*, 273)

She has to bear the intolerable irritation the chemical ammonia gives. She suffers horribly and has to be fixed with false hair. The purpose of these sufferings becomes futile when Millat does not even look at her. She annoyingly throws away the fixed hair. At this juncture, she undergoes an identity crisis. Born to be a half-English girl, her peers and her parents do not accept her and are not ready to teach her the past. Her father, Archibald, has shrapnel in his leg, and her mother, Clara, has no upper teeth, for which she uses false teeth. She wants to hear about her history, but neither of her parents is ready to relate the pains and pangs suffered. After finding the false teeth in her parents' room, she wants an explanation, which leads to a quarrel, and she decides to meet her grandmother. Her grandmother, Hortense Bowden, an ardent follower of Jehovah's witness, tells her the history which 'comes out like wisdom teeth when the time is right (Smith, *White Teeth*, 306). Hortense does not accept her daughter Clara living with a white man Archibald. She does not want to mix black and white, forgetting her mixing with an English man.

Irie always keeps her hand on her stomach from her school days. This activity shows her lack of confidence and her expectation of an unknown danger. She places her right hand on her stomach carefully when she wants to warn Millat against the raid which is to be done against the smokers and drug addicts. She is irritated by Millat, and he neglects her caretaking. She likes to be in the good books of Millat, but he is running behind blondes. So she decides to be like a British girl and as already stated she visits the hairdressers and again she is annoyed by him. This gives her disappointment, and the question of identity arises. As an act of revenge, she decides to erase the identity of the future generation. She sleeps with Millat making him the first son for a change, and on the same day, within twenty-five minutes, she sleeps with Magid and becomes pregnant. As the Iqbals are identical twins, no chromosome test can reveal who is the father of her unborn child.

If it was not somebody's child, could it be that it was nobody's child?... A map to an imaginary fatherland. But then, after weeping and pacing and rolling it over and over in her mind, she thought: whatever, you know? Whatever. It would always turn out like this, not precisely like this, but involved. This was the Iqbals we were talking about here. This was the Joneses. How could she ever have expected anything less? (Smith, *White Teeth* 516)

The above is Irie's thoughts after knowing that she is conceived 'and what she realised she may never know was the identity of the father'(Smith, *White Teeth*, 515).

Identity is a complex issue. According to Fearon, our understanding of 'what identity is' is based on how we define ourselves and how we answer the question 'who are you?'(Fearon, 12). This question may have various possibilities of answers depending on a person's circumstances and has an ever-changing shift related to place and time. An individual's identity is unclear, and one can not assure that a particular identity is theirs. People who live in acculturation may have multifarious identities when living in groups or in different places. This phenomenon is very tactfully handled by Smith in her other great novel, *On Beauty*. The novel's plot is connected with the rival intellectuals Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps. The Belsey family consists of white British Howard, his African-American wife Kiki and their children Jerome, Zora, and Levi. Kipps' family includes Monty Kipps, a Trinidadian, his wife Carlene, a Caribbean, and their children Michael and Victoria. The Belsey family has always considered itself liberal and atheist, whereas the Kippses are ultra-conservative Christians. Despite the hostility between their husbands, Carlene and Kiki develop a close nexus, and they are seasoned enough to keep away their disparities and past troubles. Carlene Kipps says to Kiki,

'Yes, you sit down, and we can talk properly. Whatever problems our husbands may have, it's no quarrel of ours'(Smith, *On Beauty*, 91).

Jerome, Zora and Levi are of mixed race, born to a white British father and black African-American mother. They are young black people who live in a predominantly white society, and it is hard for them to regulate and decide where they belong. As the head of the family, Howard does not understand their plights and does not even try to make efforts to make the family members feel safe and secure in the vicinity. In the same way, the children cannot be very close and affectionate towards him. This may be why they do not feel at home and need ways to escape. Howard never tries to talk to his wife more personally and sets himself away not only with Kiki but also with his children. Because he is white and his children are of mixed race, an indispensable fissure exists between the father and the children. He does not try to perceive what it is to be a young black individual in America. Susan Alice Fischer talks about this issue:

For instance, his son Levi receives hostile stares from white-passers as he approaches his own house, and Howard fails to understand his experience as a young Blackman in America'(Fisher, 285-97).

When Levi tries to share his experiences in the surroundings, Howard is not ready to listen to his problem.

'He disliked and feared conversations with his children that concerned race, as he suspected this one would '(Smith, *On Beauty*, 85).

Everyone in the neighbourhood is staring at Levi as black youth and says, 'I just don't want to live here anymore, man...all everybody does is stare'(Smith, *On Beauty*, 85). Levi, the youngest of the family, wants to mix up with the street lifestyle. He wishes he was not born in the white neighbourhood of Wellington but in Boston's back street in Roxbury, from which a street poet Carl hails and becomes his best friend. Under his influence, Levi tries to copy the street culture by changing his way of dressing and behaving as if he is from the street. He picks up the street language, which is different in its way, such as: 'important,' Aw, shut up, man. Mom, a mama be back by eleven'(Smith, *On Beauty*,202). On hearing such language from him, nobody can guess that he is from a prosperous, academic family. He

conceals his identity to his friends and strives to be a person from Roxbury. Levi knows that some people may think ill of him because of the way he looks like:

Maybe he could buy a T-shirt that just had on it YO. I'M NOT GOING TO RAPE YOU. He could use a T-shirt like that. Maybe three times each day while on his travels, that T-shirt would come in handy. There was always some old lady who needed reassurance on that point (Smith, *On Beauty*, 80).

When Levi evokes his colleagues not to work on Christmas morning, his boss from the record store says,

I know where you're from. Those kids don't know shit, but I know. The nice suburban kids. They think anyone in a pair of baggy jeans is a gangsta. But you can't fool me. I know where you pretend to be from (Smith, *On Beauty*, 191).

Vanessa Guignery notes Smith's joking description of herself while talking to an American audience in Philadelphia as 'an English writer of third-person comic fiction, a scribbler of epic narratives populated by a colourful crowd of many characters battling with a range of cultural issues, all speaking in the ponderous dialects of a world far removed from your own.'

Levi almost lives a pretended life, imitating to be something he is not. Besides working with the street hawkers, he involves himself in the political drive against the unfair treatment of Haitians. He even criticises his mother for giving a very meagre amount as salary to a Haitian maidservant. He tells her, 'By paying people four dollars an hour to clean? That's how much you pay Monique, man! Four dollars! If she were American, you wouldn't be paying her no four dollars an hour. Would you? Would you?' (Smith, *On Beauty*, 429)

Because of his lack of interest in being with his parents, and his non-committed activities involving the family matters, he makes himself aloof from the family members. Due to this, his sister Zora does not want him to be seen on the road with his street friends while going there with her class on a particular Tuesday. His mother pampers him, but he likes to be with his street friends. Despite being given the least importance, he has no worries and wishes to be with them. This is due to the search for his identity and being alienated from his own home.

## Conclusion

While comparing the characters of Irie Jones and Levi Belsey, they are searching for their identity. Unable to find exactly who they are and their roles in contemporary society, these characters undergo a mental struggle. As they are in a peculiar amphibian culture, this culture gives them voidness in their minds. As immigrants, their parents have a history and roots, but these hybrids do not have such strong emotional backgrounds and this lacking causes mental turbulence; hence they want to have an identity of their own. In search of history, Irie goes to her grandmother to be with his like-complexioned people. Levi mingles with street friends. This leads them to search for the same flocks to mix up, which gives them security and peace of mind.

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