



HUMOUR AS A MODE OF CONFRONTING RACIALISM IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

Samikshya Das

Research Scholar

Department of English

Sambalpur University, Sambalpur, India.

Dr Sabita Tripathy

Professor

Department of English

Sambalpur University, Sambalpur, India.

Abstract: Zadie Smith, the renowned novelist of her debut novel *White Teeth*, has won many accolades owing to the postmodern approach to multicultural London and its multihued inhabitants. Smith herself being of mixed race, being born to a Jamaican mother and an English father, brings the angst she herself has dealt with in an entirely new and unique way. What's commendable about the novelist is how she introduces humour as a postcolonial tool to subjugate and lessen the absurdity and racially charged atmosphere of London, where coloured races and mixed breeds coming up had led to less whitewashing and less impact of WASP Englishness. This paper identifies humour as a vehement tool of resistance and confrontation to the prying nature of racism/racialism that engulfed the modern and multicultural London cosmopolis.

Keywords: diaspora, humour, postcolonialism, resistance, multiculturalism.

Postcolonialism is a serious topic with no allowance for even a crevice of comedic relief, as it was Imperialism and its aftereffects that largely determined the happenings and power relations in this hegemonic world. In her debut novel *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith explores this postcolonial phenomenon in the megalopolis of London, where the characters draw their references from. It is a maximalist novel in the sense that it aims to tackle major themes such as racism, familial ties, individualism, multiculturalism, the cumulative influence of history and female independence. It incorporates a large time span, with stories and narratives spanning from 1857 to 1999. It is told from the point of view of a flexible omniscient narrator, taking into account the points of view of multiple generations. The novel has the manner of hysterical realism wherein flashbacks and disparate cuts are used to weave the unfolding into one narrative. It is definitely not a book of despair and despondence. The narration is done with hilarity and great absurdity. Yet, what does truly seep through is the unfolding of the identitarian politics of individual characters.

Stuart Hall's New Ethnicities (1988) or the second-generation migrants amidst the issue of multicultural London seems to be the crux binding the novel together. Vijay Mishra (2007) has mentioned about this phenomenon about Indians migrating to the West with their zeal to occupy "the space of the hyphen – Indian-Americans, Hindu-Americans, Muslim-Britons – signals the desire to enter into some kind of generic taxonomy and yet at the same time retain, through the hyphen, the problematic situating of the self as simultaneously belonging here and there" (185).

Charlie and Samad, the two war-time friends could be said to be the patriarchs of the two families dominating the space in this novel. The setting of the narrative takes place in London until the end of the twentieth century. The lives of the Jones, Iqbal and Chalfen families are intertwined in that the children rebel and choose different paths than their parents. The family dynamics prove all too complicated and challenging in a way that modern relationships operate, that is, in a constant flux-like state. It is in these unstable conditions intertwined with globalised multicultural cosmopolis like London that the gruelling yet hysterical story of non-white yet Englishness thrives.

White Teeth begins with Archie Jones, a white and despondent war veteran, attempting suicide by letting smoke down a hoover into his car. Luckily, he survives as he is saved by a halal butcher, Hussein-Ishmael. One can definitely see the undertone of irony here, as it the white man being saved by the brown oppressed, rather than it being the white man's burden being the saviour of the colonized. The shift in perspective from a middle-aged white man to a coloured person is noticeable. This suggests the multi-ethnic composition of the London neighbourhood. Archie is the everyman character- the token white man, who begins the narrative as was the nature of imperialism, a starting point of the homogenizing process. This process includes all the colonial and postcolonial makings of hybridization, mimicry and liminality. The unsure indecisiveness of Archie Jones is evident as he always resorts to coin flipping to make decisions for him. This motif is significant as the white man's place in this new world after colonialism is not fixed as that being dominant anymore. New races begin to gain positions as stakeholders of power, albeit not much as whiteness still ranks above other races. Englishness in its purity began to lose its essence of whiteness and other skin colours came into the scene offering different cultural experiences. Archie's personal connectedness with his past shook prolonged and took over his will to live, only to make way for diverse and colourful experiences much like that of white Englishness grappling over power of the east/west poles eventually to chart the way for the Other and mixedness to occupy its place.

Clara, a young nineteen years old Jamaican-born black woman with an accent, marries Archie just two weeks after meeting him. Clara is deemed beautiful alas black, a signifier of racist standards of beauty. They soon have a child of mixed race which only suggests the era of multi-ethnicity dawning in a poly-cultural and utopic London. Clara's transformation from an orthodox and religious Jehovah's Witness to a rebellious and confidently independent woman is worth to be noted. This is so because it signifies the colonized world's transition from that of rigidity to flexibility on their way to becoming independent nations. It could be read as the old world throwing away its shackles and incorporating Western ideals like liberty and individualism. Yet the conundrum or paradox happens when she herself expects to be saved by a white man, namely Archie. It is this contrapuntal reading of her story against the grain that we get the sense of racialism in the narrative.

Archie's colleagues observe that he is always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans so much so that he married an Other. They find him of an odd sort with him showing up to an office party with a black girl as a date. His boss denies himself being a racialist yet asks Archie to not bring Clara to any more to his office as others find the interracial couple strange and unsettling. He bribes Archie with restaurant vouchers settle the task, and surprisingly Archie accepts, making him an accomplice in the racist matter.

While the narration is done in the wartime past, we see the various ways Samad is looked down upon because of his brown skin although he fights from the British side. He is called names like "Sultan", which he refuses to be called as he is from Bengal. He puts on a brave face throughout as he traces his lineage to the great Mangal Pandey, the mutineer from India's first war of independence. It is here that he is stationed with Archie whom he later befriends and their friendship eliminates class and colour. A distressed Samad asks Archie after the end of the war: "What am I going to do after the war is already over – what am I going to do? Go back to Bengal? Or to Delhi? Who would have such an Englishman there? To England? Who would have such an Indian?" (Smith 112)

Samad wants to carry out an illicit relationship with Miss Poppy Burt-Jones, his children's school teacher. He strays away from the strict Islamic path and his children also become anglicised as they grow up. The narrator then smartly comments on immigrants repeating themselves- them making a dash from one land to another. Here in this case Samad and his twin boys Magid and Millat are seen deviating from their Muslim heritage and beliefs.

After Poppy and Samad's break up, Poppy goes to the restaurant Samad waits at and specifically calls on him and mocks him. As a man of colour, he is serving Poppy where his position is beneath her, as an immigrant in xenophobic Britain. Although Poppy claims to be racially sensitive, she weaponizes her whiteness to get back at Samad. She was by all means using Samad for sexual favours while fetishizing his brown colour. Pretending to be culturally drawn to him was also a ruse for him to play into the fetish.

After Irie turns 15, she begins to feel body dysmorphia as she constantly compares herself to the slim and white girls. This feeling is heightened after she sees an ad for losing weight in order to earn money. This contrastive image peculiarizes her teenage situation, and the readers feel laughter and pity for her at the same time. We see the conventions of attractiveness in white skin and slim body types in contrast to Irie's heavy-set body. Her build and shape are the sites of her constant frustration as she more and more wants to become one of the white girls in her classroom. When she asks her English teacher whether the dark woman in Shakespeare's sonnets is black, she is answered with a courteous no. After that, she is passed a note that called the sonnet an ode to Letitia and all the curly and kinky haired girls(slang). She is left flustered, yet the readers again cannot help feeling amused at the note of stereotype and mockery. Her hair is a concern to her too as she attempts to straighten it.

The presumably liberal headmaster of the school, Mr Glenard Oak, upon catching Irie and Millat smoking a joint together, orders them both to go spend time with the studious Joshua Chalfen along with his respectable Chalfen family. They are mostly deemed respectable owing to their class and whiteness as opposed to Millat and Irie's otherness.

Joyce Chalfen's book about cross-pollination that creates apparent gardens of diversity and interest is a seeming metaphor for interractivity and multiculturalism. Her husband, Marcus Chalfen's book about chimeric mice aims at rationality, logicality and efficiency of things, essentially "perfectibility". Therefore, the Chalfens can be called the perfect family, highly educated, middle-class, and seemingly astute in all observable ways. They can be contrasted with the other imperfect and coloured families. Upon meeting Millat, Joyce is struck by his beauty and confidence, which she presumed lacked in children of other races. She does not believe him to be a "real" Londoner considering him foreign. This showcases the ignorance of the privileged against the downtrodden mistaking real talents for exquisite fetishes. The civilizational aspect of imperialism of their ancestors can still be found in the Chalfens, who despite proclaiming themselves as rational and humane, strive to find faults in the characters of Irie and Millat and correct them.

The remark of the narrator noting and drawing differences from the immigrant's perception from the outside and their own assumption from the inside is worthy to be noted. It is observed that the immigrants fear the nationalists' idea of the immigrant contagion and infection that will make their country impure. However, the immigrants themselves are fearful of their own dissolution or vanishing. Alsana, Millat's mother is afraid of the dilution of her son's "Bengaliness" if he marries a white woman, noticing his tendency for fascination with the white world. Clara too observes this with Irie who worships white movie stars and has white friends as her mates. Irie goes so far as she wishes to "merge" with the Chalfens. She is drawn to their firmness and stability whereas her identity is centred upon de-centredness, instability and randomness.

Amongst all this hullabaloo of contesting identities lies the generic humour of the situation. One such example is Marcus's FutureMouse project where his study is outfitted with Einstein, Watson and Crick portraits and those of his ancestors. Irie sees this and expresses her amusement at the great lineage of the Chalfen's ancestors-the fact that it is preserved still. In contrast to their clarity of family heritage, the Bowden's lineage is muddled with different races, classes, and overall vagueness. This shows us the dominance of caucasian purity over the ambiguity of the mixed races.

The perfect and homogeneous Chalfen family is constantly amused by the peculiarity of the marginality of others. They cannot comprehend a lesbian relationship, like that of Neena and Maxine, and offer an insensitive remark about using each other's breasts as pillows. The reader cannot help but feel enthralled by the dark humour of the dialogues and witty narration. When on an occasion a frustrated Millat shows up at the Chalfen's doorstep, Joyce wrongly assumes that he is feeling self-revulsion and hatred for his own kind. They tend to have a case of the orientalist attitude towards anything non-white.

Meanwhile, Irie is the only one who insists upon the excavation her own past and heritage as she visits Hortense and discovers the Jehovah faith, her great-grandmother Ambrosia and Captain Durham. She is refused travelling to Jamaica, her ancestral land, by Clara who wants her daughter to remain stable on the white soil. Yet she plays secretary to Marcus who refuses to see past her gender and is not too sure of her aspirations as he had written the

same in his letter to Magid who resided in Bangladesh. The novel henceforth also plays with feminist sensibilities showing the novel to be a maximalist one.

Genetic engineering plays a perverse role in altering the human nature in order to bring out the efficient capabilities of humankind. This operation was first introduced to mice which refers to animal cruelty. Overall, it is a gross and unethical project taken up by Marcus that could lead to disastrous impacts. This theme of the novel aims to mock at the civilizational goal of the Empire, which is mirrored her by the white and perfect Chalfen clan.

Smith's *White Teeth* relies greatly on farce as a tool of comedy. The confusion between the two twins Magid and Millat can be used as an effective example to highlight this aspect. The breaking of both their noses, that too in different continents simultaneously is a hard to ignore comedic situation, which again later gives rise to the mixing up of their identities. Another example of farce is use of physicality in marital discord between the Iqbal couple. Alsana who has a temper often beats up her husband Samad during fights, which turns the tables on the assumption that all Muslim women are submissive and polite. The Chalfen family can be termed as caricatures of English secularism and pretence. Sometimes the characters behave like stock characters routinely playing out their stereotypical nature as ordained by others to their race, class and gender.

Zadie Smith's cast of characters serves as portraits of the new and modern London consisting of the essentially English, Jamaicans, Bengalis and all in-between. The definition of clear-cut is left out of the narrative as the characters come into the in-between and liminal space, caught between two cultures and struggling to straddle them. Mixed ethnicity caught at inter-junctions is the point of the novel. Smith is unafraid to tackle large, unwieldy themes. It is her debut novel which pivoted her to the list of canonical names in English literature. Humour is interwoven with local British slang to add to the realist essence of the novel. It can be called a quirky and highly energetic novel where themes of serious implications are being dealt with frivolity.

References:

- Ahmad, Aijaz. "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality." *Race and Class*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1995, pp. 2-20.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Chambers, Iain. *Migrancy, culture, identity*. Routledge, 1994.
- Hall, Stuart. 1988. "New Ethnicities". *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Routledge, 1996.
- Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. Routledge, 2007.
- Moss, Laura. "The politics of everyday hybridity: Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth.'" *Wasafiri*, 2008.
- Rogers, Katina. "Affirming Complexity: 'White Teeth' and Cosmopolitanism." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, Penn State University Press, 2008
- Smith, Zadie. *White teeth*. Penguin, 2001.
- Thomas, Matt. "Reading 'White Teeth' to Improve Intercultural Communication." *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, vol. 6, no. 1, Maurice Lee, 2009