

INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT AND HYBRID IDENTITY FORMATION IN ZADIE SMITH’S WORKS

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Abstract. This article looks at the clash between generations and the formation of mixed identities in Zadie Smith’s writing, mainly focusing on *White Teeth* (2000) and *Swing Time* (2016). Smith, a British author with Jamaican and English roots, is in a great position to explore the cultural tensions in postcolonial Britain. Her novels show the emotional, ideological, and cultural gaps that appear between immigrant parents and their children who are born or raised in Britain. Through vivid character portrayals and nonlinear storytelling, Smith illustrates that cultural hybridity is not just about mixing identities but also about conflict and contradiction. The article uses ideas from Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy to explore how identity is always changing in the ‘third space’ created by migration, memory, and multiculturalism. Ultimately, Smith’s characters reflect the difficult, often unresolved journey of forming mixed identities amid the weight of history, family, and belonging.

Key words. Hybrid identity, intergenerational conflict, cultural hybridity, third space, multiculturalism.

Introduction. Zadie Smith’s fiction presents one of the most detailed views of multiculturalism and postcolonial identity in 21st-century British literature. She was born in North London to a Jamaican mother and an English father. Smith has described feeling “between worlds.” This tension influences much of her writing. Her novels feature characters who navigate various cultural, ethnic, and national identities, often at the same time, while trying to create a clear sense of self. A major source of tension in this journey is the family, especially the conflict between immigrant parents, who carry the weight of memory and cultural tradition, and their children, who grow up in a Western liberal setting with different values and expectations.

In *White Teeth*, *Swing Time*, and other works like *The Embassy of Cambodia* and *NW*, Smith shows intergenerational relationships as battlegrounds where loyalty, beliefs, and personal freedom are challenged. These conflicts do not just add drama to the story; they are essential to how her characters experience and express their identities. This thesis examines how Smith highlights intergenerational conflict to show hybrid identity formation as a tough, often broken, and ongoing process, influenced by race, class, gender, and historical awareness.

Hybridity and the Generational Divide in White Teeth. Smith’s debut novel, *White Teeth*, is often seen as a key postcolonial work, thanks to both its content and its

structure. It weaves together the stories of three families in London: the Joneses, the Iqbals, and the Chalfens, over several generations. At its heart is Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi immigrant yearning to hold on to his past, and his twin sons, Magid and Millat, who grow up in 1990s Britain. The novel's structure reflects the dislocation and fragmentation faced by its characters, jumping between time, place, and perspective.

Samad represents the immigrant's desire to maintain tradition and memory. His belief in the purity of religion and ancestry shines through in his fixation on his supposed ancestor, Mangal Pande, a sepoy in the 1857 Indian Rebellion. He laments, “You begin to suspect your ancestors are somewhere laughing at you” (Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 145). This shows his worry about living up to a glorified, perhaps mythical past. In contrast, his sons are indifferent to this legacy. Millat becomes a symbol of rebellious youth culture, smoking weed, sporting Adidas, and ultimately joining KEVIN, a radical Islamic group that, ironically, reflects Western gang culture in its style. Magid, however, is sent to Bangladesh to become more religious but ironically comes back as a secular rationalist fixated on science and order.

This ironic twist highlights Smith's main idea: identity cannot be forced through tradition or intent. The children do not transform into what their parents want; instead, they create fractured identities shaped by complex social interactions. The “third space” that Homi Bhabha talks about becomes a place of both potential and struggle, where new cultural identities are developed through negotiation and contradiction.

Smith cleverly uses irony and humor to shed light on the futility of strict cultural expectations. Samad's desperation drives him to make choices that damage his family, showing how parental ideals can clash with their children's realities. These conflicts are not just cultural; they are emotional too, stemming from miscommunication, fear, and shame. Intergenerational conflict becomes the furnace in which hybrid identity is painfully, and sometimes violently, crafted.

Motherhood, Power, and Silence in Swing Time. *Swing Time* shifts Smith's focus from cultural mixing to identity shaped by race, gender, and globalization. The novel features an unnamed biracial narrator and her childhood friend Tracey, who grow up in a working-class neighborhood in London. Both are dancers and both are influenced by their mothers, but their paths take very different turns. The narrator's mother is a strict, self-taught Black feminist who becomes a Labour MP. She is deeply ideological, often emotionally distant, and critical of her daughter's lack of political awareness. In contrast, Tracey's mother is white, emotionally unstable, and stuck in poverty. These maternal figures do not just serve as background—they symbolize different models of womanhood, cultural belonging, and resistance. The narrator's struggle for self-definition is shaped by this dual legacy, yet she feels emotionally and politically lost.

The narrator’s silence, or her refusal and inability to name herself, serves as a key literary device. It implies a lack of fixed identity and reflects the difficulty in reconciling her mixed heritage. Unlike her mother, who has a clear sense of purpose and identity, the narrator remains undefined, fragmented, and adaptable. Her eventual downfall, both in her career and personal life, results from her struggle to create an authentic identity amid the conflicting demands of family, work, and society.

Smith uses subtle symbolism and structural connections to show that identity is performative and relational. Dance, for example, recurs as a metaphor for self-expression, control, and cultural interpretation. Tracey uses her body to assert her presence and power, while the narrator, despite having privilege and traveling the world, becomes invisible. Their different paths reflect not only personal choices but also systemic inequalities tied to race, class, and family.

Through *Swing Time*, Smith critiques the idealization of mixing cultures, indicating that it can lead to alienation instead of unity. The narrator's internal struggle and broken identity stem from a generational gap in values, goals, and historical memory.

Postcolonial Memory and Cultural Transmission. Another aspect of intergenerational conflict in Smith’s fiction is the role of postcolonial memory. Immigrant parents often try to give their children a sense of history, religion, and cultural pride. However, these efforts frequently clash with the children’s experiences in a society that often overlooks or dismisses such narratives.

In *White Teeth*, Samad’s attempts to maintain “authenticity” by sending Magid to Bangladesh show his deep concern about losing culture. Yet, his efforts are contradictory: “He wanted his son to grow up a proper Muslim, but he didn’t believe in Muslim schools in England. He wanted authenticity but not the cost of violence or extremism.” (Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 137). This contradiction highlights the difficulty of maintaining a fixed identity in a globalized, multicultural world.

Smith uses multiple viewpoints to demonstrate how each generation interprets cultural memory in different ways. The older generation views memory as sacred and instructive, while the younger generation often finds it irrelevant or burdensome. The outcome is a fragmented, contested space where hybrid identity does not arise from harmony but from misalignment and negotiation.

Conclusion. In her novels, Zadie Smith asks readers to rethink hybrid identity as an ongoing, emotional process shaped by generation, culture, and memory. Her characters, especially the second-generation youth, are not examples of cultural success. They are complex and often conflicted individuals who navigate the gaps left by history and family.

Intergenerational conflict in Smith’s work goes beyond being a literary tool; it mirrors real sociocultural tensions in multicultural Britain. Through her detailed

portrayal of family relationships, historical memory, and cultural mixing, Smith shows that identity is not something an individual inherits or chooses. It is something one must continually create, often in painful defiance of both the past and the present.

Her literary techniques, such as narrative fragmentation, irony, and character mirroring, highlight the instability and variety of modern identity. Ultimately, Smith does not provide easy answers to the challenges of hybrid identity. Instead, she emphasizes its complexity, contradiction, and profound humanity.

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