



International Conference on Scientific Research in Natural and Social Sciences

Hosted online from New York, USA

Website: econfseries.com

2nd July, 2025

HYBRIDITY AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN ZADIE SMITH'S CHARACTERS

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Abstract

This document explores the themes of hybridity and identity crisis in the works of Zadie Smith, a British author focusing on *White Teeth*, *NW*, and *The Autograph Man*. It leverages postcolonial theory, more specifically Homi K. Bhabha's "third space" to analyze Smith's characters and the multicultural contexts which shape their unevenly stitched patchwork identities. This paper emphasizes that hybridity in Smith's works is not an ideal condition; rather, it is portrayed as emotionally charged and psychologically straining experience steeped in complex turmoil. Crises of identity illustrated through Irie Jones, Millat Iqbal, and Natalie Blake highlight the struggle of constructing a settled self amidst globalization and post-colonialism. Through her depiction of cultural hybridity Smith positions it as an area characterized by possibilities rather than seamlessly at ease which allows her to challenge essentialist perspectives while underpinning the apprehensions that accompany existence among cultures rising from differing eras, class structures or society frameworks. In conclusion, this work argues that through Smith's fiction readers are encouraged to cultivate multifarious identities adaptable to our ever-fluid surroundings countering rigid criteria failing boundary markers.

Keywords. Hybridity, identity crisis, third-space, post-colonialism, cultural hybridity.

Introduction

In a world of globalisation where geography is no longer a barrier, the cross contamination of different cultures makes the concept of identity more complicated and diverse. For the hybrids (those born into or exposed to amalgam cultural milieus), identity can no longer be seen as fixed, relegated to a single entity, but must be seen as including multiple and frequently transient entities. Few writers of our



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time demonstrate this complexity equally as well, and as profoundly, as British author Zadie Smith. In her novels – notably *White Teeth* (2000), *NW* (2012) and *Swing Time* (2016) – Smith explores the ways in which we move through culturally hybrid realities, in which belonging is always under negotiation and identity ever-shifting.

This article analyses how hybridity and its consequence - identity confusion, are represented by Smith through her characters from the perspective of postcolonial and cultural theories. Building on the work of such scholars

Zadie Smith's characters frequently inhabit a cultural "in-between" space, a hallmark of Bhabha's concept of hybridity. This hybridity is not only ethnic or racial but also linguistic, social, and ideological. In *White Teeth*, for example, Irie Jones—the daughter of a Jamaican mother and a white English father—struggles with her physical appearance and her cultural position. Her experiences are shaped by the contradictory expectations of both Jamaican and British societies, neither of which fully accept her. Irie is a symbolic figure of the postcolonial subject who is caught in the “third space,” where cultural meaning is negotiated but also where identity becomes unstable.

Similarly, Millat Iqbal, the son of Bangladeshi immigrants, becomes deeply conflicted as he tries to balance the values of his Muslim upbringing with his desire to fit into British youth culture. His rebellion against both worlds results in his eventual turn to fundamentalism—not out of religious conviction, but as an assertion of identity. This act of radicalization can be read as a response to the alienation and confusion he experiences as a hybrid subject. The very hybridity that should offer him flexibility and fluidity instead generates instability and crisis.

Smith's representation of these characters illustrates the psychological toll that hybridity can take. Rather than being liberating, cultural hybridity is depicted as a space of emotional turbulence, anxiety, and identity disintegration. The search for wholeness becomes central to many of her characters' journeys, but it often leads to further fragmentation rather than resolution.

Identity Crisis and the Role of Language. Language plays a crucial role in the construction of identity in Smith's fiction. Her characters often engage in code-switching, moving between dialects, accents, and registers depending on their social



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context. This linguistic flexibility reflects their hybrid cultural identities but also deepens their internal conflict. For example, in *NW*, Natalie Blake (née Keisha) consciously alters her speech, behavior, and even her name as she ascends the social ladder. She adopts a middle-class British persona, distancing herself from her Caribbean roots and working-class upbringing.

However, this act of reinvention leads to a profound identity crisis. Natalie is unable to reconcile the different selves she has inhabited—daughter of immigrants, high-achieving lawyer, wife and mother, sexual experimenter—and ultimately experiences a disconnection from her own life. Her multiple identities are incompatible, and her attempt to control them through performance only increases her alienation. Smith's portrayal of Natalie suggests that hybridity, while offering the illusion of choice, can result in a fragmentation of self that is difficult to integrate. The theme of language as identity also surfaces in *The Autograph Man*, where protagonist Alex-Li Tandem, a Jewish-Chinese-English man, frequently manipulates words and cultural references in ways that reflect his confusion and avoidance of real emotional engagement. His mixed heritage and obsession with celebrity culture highlight how identity can be mediated and even distorted through language and representation.

Generational Hybridity and the Myth of Return. Smith often contrasts first-generation immigrants with their children to explore the intergenerational dynamics of hybridity. The older generation, such as Samad Iqbal in *White Teeth*, tends to cling to notions of cultural purity and origin. Samad believes that sending his son Magid back to Bangladesh will preserve traditional values and prevent Western contamination. Yet, when Magid returns, he is more British and secular than ever. This ironic reversal underscores Smith's critique of the "myth of return"—the idea that one can go back to a pure cultural origin. In reality, culture is always evolving, and the second generation inevitably absorbs aspects of their host country.

The generational conflict also reveals different perceptions of identity. For the older generation, identity is something inherited and fixed; for the younger, it is something to be invented or performed. Irie Jones's eventual decision to raise her child without revealing the father's identity symbolizes a new form of hybridity—one that refuses



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binary definitions and embraces ambiguity. Smith seems to suggest that a stable identity might not be possible, but self-acceptance in multiplicity is.

Urban Multiculturalism and the Illusion of Belonging. Smith's settings—especially North-West London—function as microcosms of global hybridity. Her characters live in neighborhoods filled with immigrants, refugees, working-class families, and upwardly mobile professionals. These urban spaces promise diversity and acceptance, yet Smith reveals the tensions and exclusions that persist beneath the surface.

In *NW*, the illusion of multicultural harmony is broken by class stratification and racial prejudice. Leah, a white woman, and Natalie, a black woman, grow apart despite their shared history. Their differing paths expose how hybridity intersects with social and economic pressures, complicating the narrative of equal opportunity. Natalie's success does not shield her from racism or isolation, while Leah's liberal guilt and personal insecurities strain her relationships. Smith uses these characters to highlight that multicultural cities, despite their diversity, do not automatically solve the problems of identity. Instead, they become spaces where hybridity is constantly negotiated, sometimes violently.

Conclusion

Zadie Smith's exploration of hybridity and identity crisis reflects the complex realities of postcolonial and multicultural existence. Her characters, shaped by multiple cultural forces, often experience internal division and emotional instability. Hybridity in Smith's work is not romanticized but presented as a source of both richness and confusion—a dynamic process that continuously reshapes the self.

Through characters like Irie, Millat, Natalie, and Alex-Li, Smith illustrates the psychological cost of living between worlds. Their struggles challenge essentialist notions of identity and highlight the need for new models of selfhood—ones that accept multiplicity without demanding coherence. Smith's work ultimately suggests that identity is a process, not a fixed state, and that hybridity, while fraught with tension, is an inevitable part of modern life.



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