

A Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Novel *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith

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Abstract

The multicultural novels of Zadie Smith, though fiction, invite linguists' attention because of the efforts she makes to achieve dialectal and social accuracy. While Smith's *On Beauty* (2005) is celebrated for its use of American Black English Vernacular; *White Teeth: A Novel* (2001) is acclaimed for its use of Cockney, Jamaican Creole, and youth language in London. In this linguistic review of *White Teeth*, specific features of the characters' dialects are compared with standard versions of English. The impact of these speech patterns on the larger narrative is discussed. This study focuses especially on verbal inflections in the variety of dialects appropriated in the novel. It reviews the relevant research in the field of linguistic inflections and partial derivations with a view to comparing and contrasting their significance. This paper also debates the efficacy of existing sociolinguistic tools vis-à-vis a linguistically challenging work like *White Teeth*. The study aims at facilitating a better understanding of the linguistic features in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and their literary use.

Keywords: Dialect, speech inflections, *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith

Zadie Smith and *White Teeth*

The global world of mass migration we live in today encompasses unprecedented diversity. In addition, advances in technology, particularly in communication, influence society in ways that have only recently come under investigation. Novelists like Zadie Smith, attuned to social and cultural phenomena, have created works that explore new forms of realism (Howland 2009, 1). James Wood (2000) has identified in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth: A Novel* (2001) (hereafter, *White Teeth*) a new category, which he named as "hysterical realism" or "recherché postmodernism," typified by the juxtaposition of elaborately absurd prose, plots, or characters with careful, detailed investigations of specific, real social phenomena. As early as 1981, the literary critic Meir Sternberg spoke of the challenges of a single standard monolingual code, particularly when describing the socio-cultural milieu created by a novelist:

Framing and juxtaposition of differently-encoded speech are ... particularly common within the fictive worlds created in literature, with their variegated referential contexts, frequent shifts from milieu to milieu, abundance of dialogue scenes, and keen interest in the language of reality and the reality of language. Literary art thus finds itself confronted by a formidable mimetic challenge: how to represent the reality of polylingual discourse through a communicative medium. (221-239)

If modern Britain is a fantastically multicultural nation, the city of London remains its best example. Critics and reviewers as well as readers agree that no novel in recent times bears such faithful verisimilitude to London's cross-cultural society as *White Teeth*. Zadie Smith's novels are rightly seen as the emerging hallmark of multiculturalism in British literature.

It would be helpful to look at Zadie Smith's personal background to view her novels from her own perspective. She grew up in North London. Her father was an English man and her mother was Jamaican. She attended local state schools and then completed a degree in English Literature at King's College, Cambridge. In 2000, with *White Teeth*, Smith made an amazing literary debut. This first book by an unknown novelist was awarded a six-figure advance, and Smith became, overnight, a literary celebrity. Her early commercial success paved the way for Smith, who was then only 21 and still enrolled as an undergraduate at Cambridge. The sensation caused by the large advance also guaranteed public attention for the novel's release in 2001.

White Teeth largely received favourable reviews and sold a million copies. *White Teeth* has been awarded the Whitbread First Novel Award, the Guardian First Book Award, and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, and has been translated into over 20 languages. Considered remarkable in its breadth and fluidity, *White Teeth* is a complex reflection of a kaleidoscopic landscape of new, multicultural London. It centres on three sets of culturally and ethnically diverse parents and their children, although the novel is replete with peripheral references to other eras and earlier generations. It describes the lives of the Iqbals, the Joneses, and the Chalfens. The Iqbals (Samad and Alsana) are both Bengali Muslims. The Joneses are of mixed-race and ethnicity (Clara is Black Jamaican, Archie is White English). The Chalfens belong to the British Jewish community. The story extends to track the lives of the children in these families (Irie Jones, Millat and Magid Iqbal, and Joshua Chalfen).

A novel is a work of fiction, written mostly in prose that complies with standard norms of language and style. All good novels imitate something of human interest, thereby satisfying readers as being true to life. A book that aspires, as *White Teeth* does, to be accurate to a multicultural society can be authentic only if the conversational discourse mentioned is true to its multicultural milieu. Therefore, a book of this kind must define and redefine what is generally regarded as standard language use. In depicting a multicultural society, the novel portrays, artistically and authentically, not only the setting but also the social and linguistic behaviour of its characters. As the use of elements of social and linguistic behaviour is common in fiction, this phenomenon naturally invites the attention of sociolinguists. *White Teeth* has rightly been studied by sociolinguists for the fidelity of its socio-cultural mapping. The present study, which describes and analyses morphological inflections in the novel, contributes to this field.

Inflectional morphology refers to the study of affixation and vowel change. In other words, it is the change of meaning of some words or groups of words through the addition of an affix. Patrick (2004, 11) provides examples of verbal inflections, showing how a verb is inflected by adding an -s or -ed. A linguistic inflection denotes a particular word formation process that modifies the morphological word form to appropriate a grammatical context. It does not change the syntactic category of the base and does not affect the meaning of the particular word. In grammar, inflection refers to the alteration of a word so as to portray grammatically various concepts like mood, voice, tense, person, aspect, gender, case or number.

Smith possesses an ear acutely tuned to linguistic inflections and their sociocultural nuances, and as a result *White Teeth* uses distinctive features of verbal inflections that make the book different from other novels. In conducting a sociolinguistic analysis of *White Teeth*, the major concern is not only the description of non-standard varieties of language, but also to

determine whether these varieties are truly represented in the backdrop of London's linguistic landscape. In other words, demotic communication that happens in any fiction might be taken as a reliable source for sociolinguistic analysis. An author can use distinct approaches in sociolinguistics that are highly significant to the study of non-standardized languages. This approach is more valid in today's globalized world of regional, ethnic, age-related, and social variation. In *White Teeth*, distinct varieties of English vernacular that draw attention include youth language, Cockney, and Jamaican Creole, which are analysed and reviewed in the following part of this study.

Linguistic Approaches to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Linguistic analysis of a literary work needs to look at the time in which the work is set; the forms of language used should correspond to this setting. There are, likewise, considerations of literary linguistic analysis that relate to structuralism and semiotic theory (Terence 2004, 68). Such considerations generally include the appropriateness of the speech attributed to the particular characters.

As stated earlier, language in fiction, being a work of reconstruction, does not necessarily always interest a linguist. However, if a novelist ascribes different local dialects to different characters, it is incumbent on the linguist to identify patterns in the delivery of morphological, phonological, and syntactical usages. As far as linguistic research in literature is concerned, there are studies that have analysed novels based on both linguistic inflection and derivation. However, to analyse *White Teeth* for linguistic inflection alone, one needs to review the relevant theoretical research in depth to bridge the gap between previous studies and this one..

Zadie Smith captures a portrait of present-day London in print. She achieves this by utilizing the King's English and Bengali, which unites Cockney and Creole. This leads to a melting pot of linguistic mixture. As Squires put it,

Voicing of different characters and their ethnic groups is one of the most apparent features of *White Teeth*. From Archie's bumbling homilies to the 159 "appalling pronunciation" of the customers Samad takes orders from in the restaurant, from Alsana's wacky images to the hybrid street slang of the "Raggastani," and from Irie's rising, soap opera-influenced Antipodean intonation to her accusation that Millat's Caribbean-toned speech is "not your voice" [...], Smith displays a finely tuned ear for linguistic inflections and their sociocultural nuances. (64-65)

Smith succeeds in signifying in English that which is alien to English. She makes use of rhetorical techniques which are usually utilised in ethnic writing. Hattenstone (Dec. 11, 2000) describes *White Teeth* in the *Guardian* as "a book about modern London, a city in which 40% of children are born to at least one black parent, a city in which the terms black and white becomes less and less relevant as we gradually meld into different shades of brown."

Linguistic characteristics discussed in this novel are th-fronting, consonant addition and omission, nasalization, glottal stops, slang, tags, consonant-swapping, h-dropping, g-dropping, and tense analysis. In th-fronting, characteristic of Cockney and in Estuary English, the /f/ sound is substituted for the /θ/ sound – "fank" instead of "thank" or as the /v/ sound in "bruvva" instead of "brother." An example can be found, in the novel, in the conversation between Ryan and Mrs. Bowden: "Fine mornin', Mrs. B. fine mornin'. Somefing to fank the Lord for" (321). Th-fronting is a marker of London accents. The tendency has also long existed in the Bristol accent. It can be

thought of as a feature of Southern English. Travelling far from its place of origin, it is also present in the urban populations of Northern England and Scotland. The advancement of this feature is a phenomenon that is still being explored (Vajda 2004).

An elision or deletion is the omission of one or more sounds in a word or phrase. In colloquial language, such features of consonant addition and omission have distinct importance. They can highlight the finer nuanced differences between the varieties of a single form of non-standard English (Mattiello 2005, 4). Other dialectal language uses include the following:

- i. Nasalization: The pronunciation of long vowels with airflow through the nose, shown by long vowels alone (e, ii, oo, aa). The nasalized vowel is often the last sound in the word. The part of speech most susceptible to nasalization is the noun, the reason being that nasalization originates in a diminutive component (Vajda 2004).
- ii. Glottal stop: An occlusive sound, that is, a consonantal sound type that is produced by obstructing airflow in the glottis. In Cockney, its usage as an allophone of /t/ in different positions after a stressed syllable and occasional occurrence for /k/ and /p/ is commonly observed (Vajda 2004).
- iii. H-dropping: The omission of the phoneme /h/ from the pronunciation of words like hotel, happy, and honor; a type of elision. H-dropping occurs in most English dialects in England and Wales, West Country English, West Midlands English, the dialects of northern England, and Cardiff English. It is perhaps most notable in Cockney and is also referred to as “the dropped aitch.” H-dropping is used by Abdul Mickey in the novel, as in the following example: “Sail in 'ere, mate. Best four ninety-five I ever spent. Talking of moolah, you 'aving a flutter today?” (155).
- iv. Tense analysis: In less developed dialects, different tenses are generally not distinguished in the verb form. If a distinction is made at all, it lies somewhere in the syntax of the sentence. This is true of both Cockney and Jamaican Creole. A slang is constituted of non-standard phrases and words in a language. The standard variety of a language is subverted by the use of such a lexicon and is interpreted as different attitudes implied by the speaker. Sometimes such selections convey stature and attachment to a specific peer group. In other places, slang conveys arrogance, as when used to confront a peer group that is not one’s own. London slang is a clear example of a language that varies from its standard form. It is a mixture of words and phrases from around the globe. (Vajda 2004). Here is an example of a conversation between Alsana and Clara:

“If it’s a girl, I tink I like Irie. It patois. Means every ting OK, cool, peaceful, you know?”
 Alsana is horrified before the sentence is finished: “O K? This is a name for a child? You might as well call her ‘Wouldsirlikeanypoppadomswiththat?’ or ‘Niceweatherweare having.’” (Smith 2000, 64)

British Creole (BrC) is the name given to the dialect which is spoken by British people whose parents, grandparents or great-grandparents had migrated from the Caribbean to Britain. BrC is an ethnic variety. It is not a regional or a local variety, – according to Patrick, “the product of dialect contact between West Indian migrants, the largest group of whom during the period of critical formation (1950–1970) were Jamaican, and vernacular varieties of urban English (EngE)” (2004, 609). At the phonological level, we can note a comparative structural similarity between Caribbean English-lexicon Creoles (CECs) and EngE.

The diverse cultural and ethnic constitution of London's population is reflected in the

characters' linguistic range in *White Teeth*. Vernacular has travelled from London to the rest of the country, and vice versa. Cockney rhyming slang, as used by Mad Mary in *White Teeth*, is the best-known form of London Slang. Jamaican Creole exists on a creole continuum – that is, you cannot distinguish between the variety of language which most resembles the lexifying language, known as the acrolect, and the intermediate varieties, collectively known as the mesolect, or the furthest-diverging rural varieties, collectively known as the basilect (Vajda 2004). One can note basic variances between Jamaican Creole and English with respect to their tense or aspect system. Morphological markers for tense differentiation (e.g., -ed for past tense in English) do not exist in Jamaican Creole. There are two preverb particles, *en* and *a*. These are invariant particles that cannot stand alone. They are not verbs, and do not function like the English auxiliary to be. They function differently as compared to English. Clara's mother, Hortense Bowden, always speaks like this: “--- it late for dem to be making eyes at Jehovah. It take effort to be close to Jehovah. It take devotion and dedication” (26). Even Clara, though a second-generation migrant, has a patois sense of tense markings: “--- it like a staircase. --- Me nah wan' fe see you bruk-up your legs” (30). Jamaican Creole derives its lexeme primarily from English, although it borrows from languages as diverse as Hindi, Portuguese, Arawak, African languages, and Scottish and Irish dialects. In *White Teeth*, Hortense Bowdens, Clara Jones, and Ambrosia Bowdens are the primary characters who use the Jamaican Creole dialect. Their speech is characterized by the presence of rhotic /r/, replacement of fricatives with plosives, and h-dropping.

Youth language of London is a complete language having its own lexicon and grammar. Different terms like “youth sociolect,” “youth slang,” “street language” and “youth language” are generally applied to explain the language of young adults. For most of the part it consists of lexical elements and expressions. There is also a grammatical aspect of youth language, although it is much more difficult to describe. For a writer like Zadie Smith, accurately documenting youth language is a challenge because of the speed with which words are adopted and abandoned. Youth language is subject to rapid change as it is susceptible to influence and it generally borrows elements from other languages. This swift change happens as it has been observed that young people are more receptive and flexible than other age groups. Apart from neologism and what is being borrowed youth language also makes creative use of the existing terms. These terms may be used in their original grammatical form but with new connotations. Youth language exists at the transformative edge of standard language. Sternberg (1981) has observed the trends of assimilation of youth language in Standard English. Analysis of youth language has been made in consultation with the Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language (COLT). In *White Teeth*, young characters like Ryan Topps and the twins Millat and Magid are exponents of this dialect: “Please,” said Ryan, proffering the spare scooter helmet. “Simportant. Need to talk to you. Aint much time left” (35).

Cockney, which has an elaborate system of lexeme and grammatical rules, is a popular dialect of the English language, known for its rhythm. Cockney is a non-rhotic dialect. It also features t-glottalization. This conversation between two characters in *White Teeth*, Jackie and Irie displays t-glottalization:

“Is dat a fact! You wash your hair recent?”

“Yesterday,” said me, offended. Jackie slapped her up-side her head.

“Don' wash it! If you wan' it straight, don' wash it! You ever have ammonia on your head? It's like the devil's having a party on your scalp. You crazy? Don' wash it for two weeks an' den come back.” (228)

Here, the dropping of /t/ is apparent. Other features include diphthong alteration, th-fronting, use of double negation and yod-coalescence (Vajda 2004). Studies have indicated that television and radio have played roles in the spread of Cockney English, beginning in the early 1960s. South East English accents have contributed to this. The use of Cockney has increased over the years, and many of its features may become part of Standard English.

The term Ebonics, which means “black speech,” was created in 1973 by a group of black scholars who were against the negative connotations of terms like “Nonstandard Negro English” that was coined in the 1960s. However, the term Ebonics never caught on among linguists, who prefer to call it “Black English” or African American English (AAE) or, African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Black English pronunciation omitted the final consonant in words like ‘past’ (pas’) and ‘hand’ (han’), the pronunciation of the “th” in ‘bath’ as /t/ (bat) or /f/ (baf), and the pronunciation of the vowel in words like ‘my’ and ‘ride’ as a long ah (mah, rahd). However, some of these features are there in vernacular white English, too, especially in the American South. Some Ebonics pronunciations are very distinct: for example, dropping b, d, or g at the beginning of auxiliary verbs like ‘don’t’ and ‘gonna’, yielding Ah ‘on know for “I don’t know” and ama do it for “I’m going to do it.” The devoicing of /d/ is apparent in words like “and” in the novel, being written as ‘an’. We also have an example of the devoicing of /g/ in Hortense’s dialogue with Ryan: “Fine mornin’, Mrs. B., fine mornin’. Somefing to fank the Lord for” (321).

Themes in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*

A study of *White Teeth* suggests that fiction can be a reliable source not only for the representation of different dialects but also for depicting attitudes about these dialects. Different readers have different attitudes towards each style of language. A reader who has been brought up in an area with different ethnic cultures may have attitudes towards Jamaican Creole that are distinct from those of a reader from a “white” area. As Sternberg explains, “nonstandard is meaningful beyond what a writer chooses to say in it” (1992, 109).

The theme of *White Teeth* is summarized in the preface with the statement “*What is past is prologue*” (viii). This novel presents the past and present struggle of three ethnically distinct families. That the past is unavoidable is suggested by Samad, who ardently adheres to the past, while young people, like his son Magid, reject it. The main story of the novel takes place between 1975 and 2000, but it reaches as far back as the 1900s. Smith alternates between points of view, incidents, and eras, weaving different stories into a novel. *White Teeth* opens on New Year’s Day, 1975, when Archie Jones has decided he has had *enough* and so plans to end his life in his own car. However, fate has other plans for him, and he is interrupted in his suicide attempt. He ends up roaming around and trying to catch the end of a New Year’s party and then he meets the lovely Clara Bowden, a much younger Jamaican woman. The two instantly starts liking each other. Clara decides to marry Archie, not only for love but also to escape her mother, a fanatical Jehovah’s Witness. Around the same time, Samad Iqbal, Archie’s unlikely best friend who served together in World War II, marries Alsana Begum, also a much younger woman. Thus the novel tries to portray the struggles between time and age and the differences that these factors can have on our daily lives.

How Joyce and Marcus Chalfen welcome Irie and Millat into their family, is another good example of loose connections in the novel. Joyce is a horticulturalist, an expert in gardening. She takes Millat in and nurtures him as if he is one of her plants. Marcus praises Irie’s organizational skills and offers her a job in his office. But the Chalfens’ efforts with Irie and Millat seriously affect

their own son, Joshua. Later, Joshua rebels against Marcus and joins “Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation” (FATE). At the same time, Alsana and Clara are unhappy with their children’s surrogate family. They feel sad that they could not perform their parental role in bringing up their children. Against the wishes of Samad, Marcus brings Magid back to England and encourages him to study law. Samad and Alsana are pressured by the involvement of the Chalfens in the lives of their twins. Of course, the Iqbals are happy to have their son with them again. But the presumptuous involvement of Joyce and Marcus makes them angry. Alsana and Joyce fight over Millat. Clara tries to set down certain ground regulations with Irie. Both conflicts result in more rebellious behaviour in the children. In the meantime, Irie is pregnant and she herself is unsure as to which of the twins is the father of the baby, as she had sex with both. This is, probably, her way of eventually figuring out how to be herself, being okay with her identity as a mixed-race.

Inferences from the Novel

The rhetorical techniques used by Smith, generally, consist of direct translation and contextualization. The description of the second marriage of Archie and Clara goes this way:

For his second marriage he had chosen a mohair suit with a white polo-neck and both were proving problematic. The heat prompted rivulets of sweat to spring out all over his body, seeping through the polo-neck to the mohair and giving off an unmistakable odour of damp dog. Clara, of course, was all cats. She wore a long brown woollen Jeff Banks dress and a perfect set of false teeth; the dress was backless, the teeth were white, and the overall effect was feline; a panther in evening dress; where the wool stopped and Clara’s skin started was not clear to the naked eye. And like a cat she responded to the dusty sunbeam that was coursing through a high window on to the waiting couples. She warmed her bare back in it, she almost seemed to unfurl. (42)

Even though the author insists *White Teeth* is not about race, race is present throughout the novel as a heated topic. To diffuse the situation, the author aptly uses humour and irony. Pirker comments:

[...] that humour can be used as a means to defuse cultural conflicts by offering a strictly limited context for such conflict. Many cultural conflicts stem from differences in cultural values and norms, or are related to superiority/inferiority problems, real or assumed. (2007, 33-37)

Smith is realistic in presenting human nature; she therefore cannot overlook race and ethnicity. The characters in *White Teeth* are trapped between different cultures. Clara is a good example of this. She tries to honour the heritage of her parents and also explores the pop culture of the West which surrounds her. The first time Clara diverges from her heritage, she has her teeth damaged; she deviates a second time, by marrying Archie, and she is almost disowned by her mother, Hortense. Similarly, Millat is rejected because he goes against his father’s plan to live according to Bengali traditions.

Among the various characters that are included in the novel, Samad has the most difficulty in letting go of his roots.

To Samad . . . tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles. . . You would get nowhere telling him that weeds too have tubers, or that the first sign of loose teeth is something rotten, something degenerate, deep within the gums. Roots were what saved, the ropes one throws out to rescue

drowning men, to Save Their Souls. (161)

Samad calls Millat a “*good-for-nothing*” (113) and speaks in praise of Magid. Millat, by chance, or as if to take revenge on his father, becomes a militant fundamentalist. Magid too, sways between cultures and proceeds in another direction. He is inspired by Marcus, a geneticist and secularist. Ultimately, Samad is caught between his two sons. They do not fulfil the Bengali identity that their father envisions. Irie, too, half-English and half-Jamaican, is captured between cultures and races. Archie and Clara do not force Irie to follow a particular cultural heritage. But later on, as a teenager, Irie longs to learn about her ethnicity. She flatly rejects faith in the past and clings to Chalfenism. As a young adult, she reviews the files at Hortense’s home and believes Jamaica to be her homeland. Irie’s daughter represents the peak of multiculturalism in the novel □ she is English, Jamaican, and Bengali.

Other non-character elements of *White Teeth* also represent the multicultural theme of the novel. For instance, the pub where Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones regularly meet has an Irish name – “O’Connell” – but is owned by a Muslim immigrant from the Middle East, Abdul Mickey. This multiculturalism also applies to the food served. “Just like people, the food they consume bears a much more mixed history than may first seem apparent” (Nair 2010, 13). The many foods mentioned in the novel do not come from one source alone; instead, they originate from different countries.

There is a conversation between Dr. Perret and Archie that addresses the uncertainty of one’s roots and the dispute regarding Pande’s character. In an attempt to save Archie’s life, Dr. Perret advises Archie, “I breathe and I bleed as you do. And you do not know, for certain, what type of a man I am. You have only hearsay” (444). Dr. Perret recognizes the difficulty involved in understanding the intricacies and identity of an individual. Although Samad’s great-grandfather, Pande, has been dead for more than a century, Samad is still interested in receiving positive assurances about his escapades and identity. Because of this myopia, he trusts only his version of reality. Archie escorts Dr. Perret into the obscurity of darkness. After five minutes, “Samad hear[s] a shot ring out” (102) and thinks that the task is completed, unaware of the truth that Archie returns “bleeding and limping badly” (102). While Archie understands that “[e]very moment happens twice: inside and outside and they are two different histories” (299). Samad observes his own fixed version of history. Thus, not only does he refuse to believe in an alternative version of Pande’s history, he refuses to recognize the truth about both Archie and Dr. Perret as well. As a result, he grounds a fifty-year companionship on the hypothesis that Archie has murdered Dr. Perret. Beyond his one-dimensional vision, Samad’s beliefs and logic are contradictory. He hypothesizes “that the generations . . . they speak to each other. . . It’s not a line, life is not a line . . . it’s a circle . . .” (100). The circular pattern reduces the significance of any single point and renders all points equal.

In the novel, teeth represent people. Dental anthropology is a very interesting field of study that uses dental remains to determine a person’s race and heritage. Irrespective of one’s colour, the teeth are always white, uniting people as human beings. The teeth are everlasting and preserved in the skull for a long time after death. As a result, teeth leave a long legacy and are existent throughout time. The actions of a particular set of teeth indicate how people experience their lives. For instance, canines are said to be “the ripping teeth” (257) that are involved in the action of initial bite. Relating this concept to the novel, Alsana resents the Chalfens’ control over Millat and Irie’s lives, splitting the children from their parents and ruining qualities she considers important. Molars are said to be the grinding teeth that help us in the digestion of our food. Symbolically, under the chapter titled “Molars,” Millat and Magid discover the affair between

Samad and Poppy as they crunch into apples with the help of their white teeth. In this case, Smith makes use of molars to imitate how the twins “digest” the actions of their father. Likewise, Smith compares every tooth with every character that is mentioned in her novel. For example, of the violence which followed Indira Gandhi’s death on the streets of India, Smith writes, “teeth, teeth everywhere, scattered throughout the land, mingling with the dust” (168). It is said that Indians lose themselves to intolerance and violence; they break out one another’s teeth, forgetting that humans are united by teeth, which are common to all.

In *White Teeth*, Smith provides an image of a completely multicultural composition of Britain:

Her characters include Brits of Bengali, Jamaican, Polish, German, Saudi Arabian, Barbadian, and plain old English descent; Muslims, Hindus, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Secular Jews; closeted gay men and out lesbians; adolescents, mid-lifers, and octogenarians who may be fat or skinny, drop dead gorgeous or genetically cheated. (Ahmad 2001).

Different people who come from various backgrounds replicate the cultural and racial mosaic of British civilization.

In this novel, there is a special or “celebratory” attitude towards the multicultural relations that leads some critics, such as Dominic Head, to call the novel the epitome of multiculturalism: “Smith has found a way of harnessing the novel’s capacity to embrace heterogeneity and has used it to give convincing shape to her presentation of an evolving, and genuinely multicultural Britain” (2003, 107). Other critics, like Sell, view the multiculturalism modelled in *White Teeth* with approval: “If multiculturalism means hybrid identity and the apotheosis of difference, right from the start the novel presented apparently impeccable credentials” (2006, 28).

For Rampton (1995), who supports redefining ethnicity, ethnicity is not affixed but negotiable; it is not necessarily a stable part of identity, existing from birth and remaining unchanged throughout life. Smith recognizes the importance of origin but also admits that identification is not only based on origin. Something constructed and not socially learnt or inherited, can often change. But it can be deconstructed again easily. So Rampton proposes a new option of adapting to someone else’s ethnicity and then constructing one’s own new ethnicity. We can see, here also that language plays an important role. Sometimes, Smith contextualizes a minority language by, offering either a translation or an explanation. In Chapter 9, for example, throughout the argument between Millat and the ticket man, “The Crew, on cue,” refers to the man as a “Somokāmi!” (192). Initially, this term goes untranslated, but eventually, Smith’s narrator disrupts the scene and tells us that “there was nothing Millat’s Crew prided themselves on more than the number of euphemisms they could offer for homosexuality” (192). When Samad returns back home, he finds his wife Alsana, who is physically upset on hearing the news of the murder of “Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India.” Samad stops the BBC news and begins to blame Alsana, saying that she is “the perfect example of the ignorance of the masses” (165). To this, Alsana replies, “Bhainchute!” and a digressive conversation follows immediately: “bhainchute (translation: someone who, to put it simply, fucks their sisters)” (165).

When the three children, Irie Jones and Millat and Magid Iqbals, cross the street in London to give food on a Harvest Day to a poor racist pensioner, the conversation goes like this:

“For your information,” snapped Irie, moving the nut out of Millat’s reach, “old people like coconuts. They can use the milk for their tea.” (136)

Irie pressed on in the face of Millat retching. “And I got some crusty French bread and some cheese-singlets and some apples—” (137)

“We got apples, you chief,” cut in Millat, “chief,” for some inexplicable reason hidden in the etymology of North London slang, meaning fool, arse, wanker, a loser of the most colossal proportions.” (137)

Marcus waits for Magid to land in a plane which comes to England from Bangladesh. When Marcus waits, the speaker reflects about the “talkative but exhausted brown mob who rushed toward [Marcus] like a river [...]. Nomoskār...sālām ā lekum...ksmonāchō?” (349). As she attempts to portray the cacophony which punctuates the mass and cut-off conversations, the details of the particular scene are left unexplained by Smith. We are only told that “this is what they [the passengers] said to each other and their friends on the other side of the barrier” (349).

These examples indicate the nonstandard patterns of English used in the novel, showing how the characters identify with or dissociate from certain ethnic groups. All these instances involve realization of the ideological weight of language, and of the problem of escaping the tug of socio-cultural differences. With these types of communication related to action and social performance, people win over prejudice and succeed in establishing effective communication, thus achieving the process of transculturation. Thus, while Alsana makes discriminatory judgments against some ethnic groups, where actual personal feelings are concerned, she finds sufficient reasons to get along with individuals of other ethnicities. Compared to Alsana, Clara is less biased; hence, she marries Archie, who belongs to a different race.

However, a question is raised in the responses to the international situation of first- and second-generation immigrants. The first-generation migrants take a decisive step to leave their homelands in search of a safer and wealthier place, to improve their families’ prospects. They believe that if this fundamental aim is achieved their lives will move smoothly. Instead, they find that their children suffer from cultural restiveness: hence, there are more discussions at places like home, school, and the kitchen of the Iqbals. The first generation has no time to ponder the problems that the course of adaptation to a different cultural situation may entail. They boast about the achievements easily attained by the younger generation, unmindful of the latter’s struggle for adaptation and compromise.

According to Smith, *White Teeth* is not autobiographical. Even though the novel is motivated by her history of having a mixed-race family and is set in her childhood surroundings of Willesden. One of the first scenes in the novel, a depiction of Archie and Clara’s first meeting, is, says Smith “a bastardized version of how my parents met” (Smith May 11, 2003).

In this novel, Smith refers to or quotes television as a major influence, mainly in the jovial or comedic timing of Samad and Archie’s relationship. To Smith, *White Teeth* is less about ethnicity, heritage and roots, and more about London as it is, an evolved, modern London. The novel deals openly with issues of ethnicity, culture, prejudice, and race. Smith says that these issues are not a cognizant goal. Rather, in the same interview, she agrees that she could not have written about modern London which is an extremely diverse city, without mentioning such problems:

I was just trying to approach London. I don't think of it as a theme, or even a significant thing about the city. This is what modern life is like. If I were to write a book about London in which there were only white people, I think that would be kind of bizarre. People do write books like that, which I find bizarre because it's patently not what London is, nor has it been for fifty years. (Smith May 11, 2000)

Acclaimed Critiques

In 2003, *White Teeth* was made into a television movie for Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) by Masterpiece Theatre. It was directed by Julian Jarrold from a screenplay which was written by Simon Bruke. The production was honoured as “rambunctious” and “superb.” The movie and characters were highly praised. Om Puri, the popular Indian actor, formed part of the cast. Smith was pleased and satisfied with the movie adaptation. In fact, she made a cameo appearance in the final part during the party scene in which Archie and Clara meet.

Smith has had her fair share of praise and admiration from critics and reviewers. According to O’Rourke (2000) she is, “an impressive versatile prose stylist, at ease with a variety of voices and breeds of urban slang, and in this and in her panoramic approach to multiculturalism she resembles Salman Rushdie, whose influence is obvious” (2000: 166).

There are, however, critics, like Fowler (2008), according to whom the praise received by the novel *White Teeth* is disproportionate and due to excessive publicity campaigns. Further, to Mullan (2002), the novel does not give an accurate account of multicultural reality, ethnic relations, or ethnic identities of the London city of Britain: “Smith has allowed herself a certain imaginative freedom” (2002: np).

However, the narrative comments prove to be useful when a character’s speech alone cannot convey the related metalinguistic gestures, for example emotions or intonation associated with the speech. Overall, the nonstandard forms provide other layers of identification, characterization and disassociation from particular ethnic groups. They work as meta-signs and attract attention because of their difference from that of the narrator’s language. Altogether, dubbing and translation introduce other culture through other languages into a text which is English.

Conclusion

In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith employs language variation and inventive writing to (re)invent diasporic reality. Both the language and the uses of language, reflecting today’s globalized society, call into question our traditional approach to sociolinguistics, demanding a more profound kind of sociolinguistic theorizing to arrive at an understanding of the general principles of organization. Of course, linguists’ primary interest lies in the portrayal of spontaneous speech, not in the dialogue or language used in a work of fiction. The nonstandard speech used in literature is employed and stylized to serve the reader, although the author should be conscious about authentic usage of language varieties and dialects. Therefore, as Daniela Wack has rightly pointed out,

If a writer wants to illustrate a particular state of reality and society in a novel, he must also consider linguistic realities as well, such as language of a particular time, place, gender, class and ethnic group. These language varieties can then be compared with standard speech in reality. (2005, 4)

Sociolinguistics can investigate linguistic variations in relation to important demographic categories such as age, class, ethnicity, and gender. Blommaert, in his article, notes that the influence of pop culture, such as rap and reggae, on adolescents and the globalization of language varieties necessitate sociolinguistic studies at “different levels and scales”: “--- we shall need more

ethnography alongside all kinds of other approaches as part of the sociolinguistics of globalization” (2003, 615).

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