

**BETWEEN PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY:  
PERFORMING FEMALE IDENTITIES  
IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH* (2000)**

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*Abstract:* Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) represents a multicultural novel of a dual function in connection with Judith Butler's theory of performativity. In some scenes in the novel, the female characters act within the gender norms created by their society. In this sense, their performative role is repetitive and stands for acceptance. In other scenes, the same female characters challenge the established gender norms. Thus, their performative role becomes subversive and indicates rebellion. This paper claims that their shift from repetitive acts to subversive acts is purposeful for their journey of locating their heterogeneous identities in the English society.

*Keywords:* gender roles, identity crisis, in-betweenness, post-colonialism

## **1. Introduction. Discordant concepts in the post-colonial era**

The twenty first century is best described as a melting pot in which people all over the world could influence and be influenced by each other simultaneously. However, globalisation and the world becoming a small village result in two opposing poles. On the one hand, there is multiculturalism, which means the preservation of various cultures within the same society. On the other hand, there is interculturalism, which indicates the blending of one culture into another, which, in turn, could result in an identity crisis, fragmentation, and instability. In many post-colonial novels, the reader encounters countless terms related to the 'metaphor of roots', such as *roots*, *routes*, *rootedness*, *rootlessness*, during the characters' quest for concordance between their familial roots (history), their new culture and their life journey (Vančura 2015). In most cases, this journey ends in a confrontation between the colonised, most of the time an Oriental figure, and the coloniser, an Occidental figure. In an interview, Salman Rushdie comments on the importance of the concept of roots and routes and its significance for the majority of immigrants, stating that:

The roots of self are the place that you know, the community that you come from, the language that you speak and the cultural assumptions within which you grow up. Those are the four great roots of the self and very, very often what happens to migrants is that they lose all four—they're in a different place, speaking an alien language, amongst people who don't know them and the cultural assumptions are very different. You can see that's something traumatic. (Rushdie 2012)

It is clear that one of the problematic issues in the post-colonial era which stems from the immigration movement between the Orient and the Occident is the proper definition of the word *home*. This echoes Thompson (2005:133), who asserts that: “the notion of home as having a fixed and singular origin for anyone in a multicultural world is...shown to be illusory”. Therefore, during the individual’s quest for identity, s/he is trapped between two identities, or what post-colonial critics call a “double identity issue”. The individual comes to realise that s/he has to negotiate his/her identity within a mixture of cultures, which Hall describes in the following way:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Hall 1990: 222)

Post-colonial critics have resorted to various concepts to describe this phenomenon. For example, Edward Said (2002: 173), in his essay “Reflections on Exile”, uses the word *exile*. He affirms that exile “is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted”. In addition, Homi Bhabha (1994), in his book *The Location of Culture*, refers to this state of uncertainty where the individual is located, a state of “in-between” or “in the middle”, further using the notion of ‘the third space’. Consequently, the offspring of the migrant, according to Homi Bhabha, will find themselves inhabiting this neutral space. The uncertainty which usually comes with conflicting societal influences ends up paradoxically in experiencing both states: “a lack of belonging as well as an excess of belonging. This so called excess ... is a consequence of belonging to and living in too many places at once” (Thompson 2005: 123).

## **2. Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*: A model for a multicultural novel**

The present article aims at investigating the way individuals, women in particular, navigate and shape their identity within a multicultural community. Zadie Smith’s novel *White Teeth* serves as the raw material for the research for the following reasons: first of all, examining some biographical aspects about the novelist, it is clear that there is a resemblance between her personal life and the complex identity of her female characters in the novel, since Smith was born in 1975 in north-west London to a Jamaican mother (Yvonne Bailey) and an English father (Harvey Smith). By analogy, *White Teeth* contains characters that, even though born in London, are still attached to their non-British roots. This echoes Dominic Head’s argument that *White Teeth* reflects Smith’s belief that “we are all hybrid post-colonials, biologically as well as culturally and the pursuit of pure ethnic origins is a pointless objective”. (Head 2003: 114) Smith is speaking as an insider who embarked on the journey of shaping a healthy self and not as an outsider. Such background information about the author enables the research to treat the novel partly as a biographical text. This provides the research with fruitful insights about her feminist vision of how a woman’s identity could be established and constructed in a hybrid world. Secondly, the article attempts to analyse the reaction of female characters, in particular, Smith’s efforts in giving voice to women and liberating them from the shadow of their male counterparts. Thus, the

following sections of the article will be devoted to the analysis of the feminist perspective revealed in *White Teeth*.

### 3. The theoretical framework

The article draws on Judith Butler's theory of performativity to analyse the routes female characters undertake to establish their gendered identity in a multicultural society. However, before applying this theoretical framework to the novel in question, it is important to explain the way performativity functions in literary studies. Originally, performativity is associated with linguistic studies, in particular, with declarative statements. This means that performativity starts by dealing with language itself. However, with the advancement of research on this concept, other disciplines, including psychology and literary studies, have borrowed this term and have employed it according to their own agenda. For example, in literature, Butler's theory of performativity tackles the behavioural aspects of the characters in a given text. Thus, the present research draws on the theory devised by Judith Butler to demonstrate its manifestations in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. However, when discussing performativity, it is important to understand the way the performative behaviour is enacted. In this regard, Butler states that:

The performance of a gender is also compelled by norms that I do not choose. I work within the norms that constitute me. I do something with them. Those norms are the condition of my agency, and they also limit my agency... gender performativity is not just drawing on the norms that constitute, limit, and condition me; it's also delivering a performance within a context of reception, and I cannot fully anticipate what will happen. (Butler 2004b: 345)

Judith Butler's theory resembles Simone de Beauvoir's (1961: 249) assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman". This claim emphasises the identity of the body as a "historical construct" rather than a "natural species". Butler (2004b) claims that to be a subject is to be born into a world in which norms are already acting on you from the very beginning. This includes one's gender, name, race, etc. In this sense, gender becomes performative, since one's identity is shaped and determined by the societal scripts and constraints that the individual is forced to adhere to. Thus, gender is not something a person chooses to perform, but rather something performed on a person. In other words, gender is performative since the individual is playing the role of the actor whose duty is to perform the assigned role, according to the cultural scripts at hand. These scripts represent the norms which are agreed upon by the society. In this case, the society stands for the stage where the normative behavioural act takes place. However, when the individual refuses to act out or put on the expected gender roles as they are dictated by the cultural scripts or even challenges them, the performative behaviour shifts from being simply a repetitive act to being a subversive one. This subversive act functions as a means of refusal to adhere to what is called "repetitive acts". At this point, the individual moves from the state of being passive to the state of being active. Such a shift may be problematic in the journey of fashioning the individual's identity: on the one hand, the individual's identity is always negotiated and in a changeable state, there is no fixed, homogeneous identity, because "post-colonial identity is properly conceived as process rather than arrival" (Head 2003:

107); on the other hand, the shift of the gender performative role from being a repetitive act to being a subversive one could be accompanied by ironic outcomes, dangerous massive cultural misunderstandings and misinterpretations of meanings that can breach what Butler refers to as “social sanction and taboo”. (1988: 520)

Accordingly, the present article analyses the females’ behaviour in Zadie Smith’s multicultural novel *White Teeth*, in particular, Irie Ambrosia Jones’. The article traces the concept of performativity including the repetitive and subversive gender acts manifested in Irie’s bodily behaviour during her attempts to build her identity within a hybrid society. To do so, it is important to understand the familial atmosphere which Irie was born into in order to draw on the challenges she encounters and the way she reacts to such obstacles during her own attempts of shaping her personality. The article highlights both the repetitive acts and the subversive acts Irie shifts between and evaluates her decision to fashion her heterogeneous self in a multicultural world as a contemporary woman and as an immigrant.

#### 4. Irie’s journey in a multicultural world

Irie Ambrosia Jones is one of the main characters in *White Teeth*. Some researchers, including Medlock (2018: 5), refer to Irie “as an author surrogate for Smith. Both are the offsprings of a Jamaican mother and an English father”. Irie was born in London to an English father, Archie Jones and a Jamaican immigrant mother, Clara Bowden. Irie looks like a Jamaican girl even though she has never been to Jamaica. Apparently, her visual representations indicate that she does not belong to England. Irie is what Homi Bhabha refers to as the offspring of an immigrant, or the second-generation immigrants. However, being biracial creates a dilemma for Irie, since she is trapped between two cultures, each with its own standards. The paradox is that Irie’s first name means “everything OK, cool, peaceful” (idem: 64), while in fact, because of her mixed race, Irie has a lot of trouble with her gender roles in the multicultural space of London.

To highlight Irie’s journey in multicultural London, which serves as the stage where the actions take place, in light of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, it is important to elaborate on the norms prevalent in the society where Irie grew up, in particular, the norms related to body constitution. Butler (2004a: 91) links those norms to gender, stating that “gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance or substance, of a natural sort of being”. For example, the feminine beauty in the Occident could be summed up in three main traits: thinness, whiteness, and delicacy. Dina Yerima (2017: 642), a post-colonial researcher, resumes the discussion of these standards, stating that women must have “nonkinky hair that might be either straight or wavy, slim physique, and fair complexion as opposed to bigger, fuller physiques and darker complexions”. Moreover, Fanon (1986: xiii) writes, from a colonial hegemonic perspective, that whiteness is a “symbol of purity, of Justice, Truth, Virginity,” whereas blackness “stands for ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality”. Lost between these beauty standards, Irie performs several experiments on her physical appearance, in particular, her hair and teeth. Her choice of these parts is purposeful, since many scholars emphasise the idea that those body constituents are connected to the idea of rootedness. For example, Nick Bentley (2008: 55) states that: “teeth are markers of history, genealogy and also they show individual’s journey through

their lives". Czech scholar Jakub Vančura (2015: 13) paraphrases the same idea asserting that: "We all are born with a set of teeth, but it is the way of life we choose, the accidental events that happen and the class we belong to, that affect how our teeth look like". In the same vein, Thompson (2005: 124) believes that: "the subjects of genetics and horticulture, as well as teeth and hair ... are, of course, associated with 'roots' in one way or another".

Irie starts the performative act in multicultural London with an advert which says "lose weight to earn money" (Smith 2000: 265). This ad serves as a shifting moment for her to recognise her body wrongness. In other words, Irie's physical appearance indicates that she does not belong to London since she "was big, and she was landed instead with ... Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangos and guavas; the girl had weight; big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth" (ibid.). Irie betrays the assumptions of the English standards of gender that link beauty to the characteristics of an English Rose, one that is "a slender, delicate thing not made for the hot suns, a surfboard rippled the wave" (idem: 267). Being the opposite of this rose, Irie appears as a freak when *White Teeth* describes her situation as "a stranger in a stranger land" (266). Moreover, Irie disappoints the expectations of her father, Archie, who is expecting a daughter with blue eyes. Her gender norms are imposed on her even before she was born: "the eyes Archie had been so excited about lasted two weeks only. She had been born with them, yes, but one day Clara looked again and there were brown eyes staring up at her" (268). All these incidents drive Irie to rethink her performative look in multicultural London. The English gender norms become like ghosts that haunt her in "Nightmares and daydreams, on the bus, in the bath, in class" (266).

At this point, Irie adopts a repetitive act. She accepts the English gender norms and she takes steps to modify her appearance according to the gender norms embraced by the British gaze. *White Teeth* describes the scene as "There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection" (ibid.). This repetitive act allows Irie to start trying to establish her identity by imitating the British standards as much as she can. In other words, the character decides to fight her genes that prevent her from becoming a modern English woman by changing both her style of dressing and her haircut. Firstly, Irie starts wearing corsetry which makes her look thinner, torturing her body in order to look like an English woman. But she does not feel comfortable with her clothes, making her mother wonder "What in the Lord's name are you wearing? How can you breathe?" (ibid.). Irie is recreating the gender norms imposed on her by the traditions of the English society. In other words, the society imposes certain characteristics on women as part of their feminine beauty and Irie, in turn, is imposing those characteristics on her own body, even though her body tries to reject them, making it difficult for her to breathe in her corsetry.

Secondly, Irie decides to change her hair style. She wants to look like an English woman, she insists on having a "Straight hair. Straight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakeable touchable finger through-able wind-blowable hair" (273). Again, Irie is torturing her body by imposing on it something that does not fit it. She asks the hairdresser, Andrea, whether the process of transforming her hair into straight hair is painful or not and the hairdresser replies, "Life hurts, ... beauty hurts" (278). The process is painful for two reasons: on the one hand, it is a transformation of her hair from one state into another, a procedure that is against her family's cultural expectations, and, on the other hand, it is a procedure performed on a kind of black hair that requires a lot of effort to be transformed, a

process that is not easy; this is why physical pain is part of the process. The whole transformation process proves that, for black women, feminine beauty in multicultural England is a double burden not only in physical terms, but in financial ones as well. Zadie Smith summarises this reality as: “black women spend five times as much as white women on beauty products and nine times as much on their hair” (idem: 278). The hair salon serves as the stage where the performance of white femaleness show takes place. The choice of the hair salon in *White Teeth* is functional, since it is full of mirrors in which women can see their reflection. However, things unfortunately go against Irie’s wish, as the product they put on her hair makes it look ugly, and her attempts end in ironic outcomes. Irie has to buy a wig to solve the problem; hence, the hairdresser seizes the chance to use lies to advertise her fake product stating: “Stupid girl. It is not fake. It is real. And when it’s on your head it’ll be your real hair. Go!” (279).

Irie is making changes in her looks mainly to attract the attention of her boyfriend, Millat, who is neglecting her because she does not rise to the beauty standards appreciated by the white males. However, the moment which triggers Irie to rethink her performative gender role within her multicultural community is captured by her own reaction to her new haircut. Irie is trying to avoid her reflection in the mirror when her hair is spoiled by the hairdresser. “Blubbing like a baby, Irie shuffled out of P.K.’s and down the high road, trying to avoid her reflection in the shop windows” (ibid.). At this moment, the woman becomes a cyborg with her fake hair. By changing her appearance, Irie betrays her Jamaican roots and appears like a freak. Moreover, after the caricatural outcome of her hair transformation, her friends insist that she should re-educate herself. For example, Maxine says: “Realize your value, stop the slavish devotion, and get a life, Irie. Get a girl, get a guy, but get a life” (285). These pieces of advice highlight the failure of English gender normative acts on Irie’s side and put an end to it.

After this moment, Irie adopts a subversive position which will lead her to a state of in-betweenness that enables her to select the things she likes to do both from the British society and from her Jamaican roots. She decides to go against the expected Jamaican norms of behaviour when, for example, she starts smoking, which is an English practice that is completely against the cultural expectations of her family. It is something she learns from her surrounding society and she decides to do it in order to blend in. In addition, Irie accepts her current hair as it is and decides to stop the battle with her genes. She is totally satisfied with her physical appearance, which is a mixture of her Jamaican roots and her failed attempts to become more English, and stops any attempt that involves alterations or assimilations following the “English Rose” model; thus, she looks “taller, wide, with breasts and no hair and slippers just visible underneath a long duffle coat” (381). Irie does not want to be a copy of the “English Rose” anymore and grows more satisfied with the neutral place she establishes for herself: a state of in-betweenness. Moreover, she decides to become a dentist, but she wants to take a year off before she joins the university, being eager to learn about her Jamaican roots. However, she has to argue with her mother about this delay “Irie was about to become the first Bowden or Jones ... to enter a university ... She wanted to study dentistry ... but she also wanted to take a ‘year off’ ... which led to three months of open warfare between her and Clara” (376). Thus, the order of Irie’s transformation between “Englishifying herself” and replanting herself in multicultural London starts with a repetitive act and then moves to a subversive one. This process sums up Butler’s (1988: 528) assertion that “Performing one’s

gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity". Moreover, the transformation of one's behaviour reflects the situation in a multicultural world where identity becomes something fragmented and unstable. This echoes Head (2003: 107), who states that "post-colonial identity is properly conceived as a process than arrival". Identity becomes something that is continuously negotiated with the surrounding context. Drawing on both her roots and her current multicultural community and adapting what she chooses from both cultures, Irie becomes a "great reinventor of herself. A great make-doer" (Smith 2000: 368). She learns a lesson from the disastrous effects of performing British gender roles, and then she uses these effects as a starting point to declare her performative identity as a mixed in-between subject. Such a process is not easy at all, as Butler explains:

Agency was indeed possible, although not in the simplistic sense of one being able to choose one's gender a la carte... Thus, we are not free to opt out of gender altogether or take a perspective on it from the outside; nevertheless, gender's cultural construction makes it vulnerable to subversion and disruption, for example, through parodic practices such as drag. (1990: 142-49)

*White Teeth* stands as a successful example of the feminine voice in contemporary London. Zadie Smith's text represents an attempt to subvert the male account of the current situation in London, since Smith decides to challenge the authorial norms that usually talk about "longing for the roots, frozen image of the mother land as an ideal place of living/ culture, identity, alienation, assimilation, discrimination, segregation, exploitation and stereotyping" (Jaya, Jyothirmal 2018: 84). Smith refuses to embrace the normative approach in literature and decides to incorporate all the gender themes to draw on the obstacles that female immigrants encounter during their search for identity in a multicultural country. It is important to mention that *White Teeth* does not portray the female protagonist in a heroic manner, nor does it indicate that she aspires to that position. For example, in an interview with O'Grady (2002: 107), Smith comments on Irie being the main character in the novel saying that: "the reason Irie gets to the centre of the book is not really about Irie, but about a certain idea of indeterminacy which is in a lot of writing of my generation of my peers, about the centre always being slightly displaced". Smith does not mean that Irie becomes a role model, since this would confine her to the cultural expectations of how a role model should behave; that would be a repetitive role again. Smith says that "role models are another crock and something which limits you. They don't set you free" (idem: 108). This makes *White Teeth* stand as a non-normative text.

Moreover, the text apparently discusses a political issue, namely the identity of the first and second-generation immigrants in London, the obstacles they encounter in their new home, as well as the black/white cultural expectations. In fact, *White Teeth* is not a book on politics solely, nor does Smith put on a politician's role to communicate her voice as a female of mixed background, half Jamaican, half English. In the interview with O'Grady (idem: 107), Smith asserts that "I didn't want the community in *White Teeth* to be representative of immigrants in England, that's not my job really, I'm not a politician". Smith does not include political institutions in her plot; instead, she enacts institutions, such as the school, as she believes that, at school: "there is a person of every different

colour standing next to you. It is the most multicultural place I can think of - more than the city - the school is so phenomenal” (idem: 106). In addition, Smith presents her ideas at the family level. This is why it can be said that *White Teeth* belongs to the category of social novels that “take the family as the nucleus of society and topicalise social, racial, religious, cultural, and gender politics at a grass roots level” (Nicklas 2013: 125). All these characteristics mark *White Teeth* as a story about performativity that brings together gender issues and racial and multicultural identities.

## 5. Conclusion

The article has elaborated on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity as manifested in the case of the female protagonist of *White Teeth*, Irie Jones. It concludes that the female character starts her quest for identity by sticking to repetitive acts, as she adheres to the expected gender norms of London and she performs them willingly. However, during her interaction with the surrounding community, such as her family or the school, she starts to be less convinced by the gender norms imposed on her, so she decides to revolt against the cultural expectations of her society. Thus, she switches to subversive acts, which sometimes end in ironic outcomes. Such a leap enables her to enter a state of in-betweenness involving her English and Jamaican roots. From Zadie Smith’s feminist perspective, this neutral state is not a bad thing and it could be used as a means to subvert any centralized subject or culture. However, such gender acts are not easily performed, since the female character in *White Teeth* is a hybrid post-colonial subject. In other words, she carries the burden of being both of mixed origin on the one hand, and living in a multicultural place that expects her to perform according to the standards of the whites, who make up the controlling group in her current environment, on the other hand. By choosing what suits her and ignoring the things that make her life harder, Irie Jones offers examples of attempts at negotiating and altering identity according to one’s surroundings. This process of negotiation best describes what identity looks like in a post-colonial, multicultural era: an identity that is always in the process of shifting from one state to another, an identity that is best described as being a slippery, finite, but endless quest for finding the self.

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