



Racial Discrimination in the Zadie Smith's Whiteteeth

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received 15th April, 2023
Revised 29th April, 2023
Accepted 13, May, 2023
Available Online 26, May, 2023

ARTICLE ID

PHJSSH0102002

KEYWORDS

Racial Discrimination, Systemic
Inequality, Multiculturalism, Coping



ABSTRACT

The paper examines the theme of racial discrimination in Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*. The novel portrays the diverse lives of characters in London, particularly focusing on the cultural clashes and identity struggles of immigrants and their descendants from Jamaica, Bangladesh, and other backgrounds. Through a close analysis of key characters and narrative incidents, the study explores how racial discrimination manifests in various forms such as societal prejudice, systemic inequalities, and individual biases. It examines how the characters navigate and respond to these challenges, shedding light on broader issues of multiculturalism, identity formation, and the impact of historical legacies on contemporary social dynamics. By examining Smith's nuanced portrayal of racial discrimination, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of race relations and cultural diversity in modern urban societies.



Prismatic Horizons

Journal of Social Science and Humanities

www.phjssh.lexarcheus.com

Vol-01, Issue-02 (Apr-Jun, 2023)



INTRODUCTION

Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* delves into the intricate dynamics of race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism in late 20th-century Britain through the intertwined lives of three ethnically diverse families. Set against the backdrop of a post-colonial London, the novel explores how the legacy of British imperialism has shaped the identities and experiences of immigrants and their descendants from nations such as Bangladesh and Jamaica now residing in England. At its core, *White Teeth* confronts the pervasive impact of systemic racism, illustrating how it permeates the daily lives and aspirations of characters like Samad Iqbal, an immigrant struggling with both overt discrimination and subtle micro aggressions despite his achievements.

Samad Iqbal, a central figure in *White Teeth*, embodies the struggles of the first-generation immigrant experience. His narrative arc unfolds against a backdrop of historical injustice and cultural displacement, highlighting the barriers faced by immigrants striving for acceptance and success in a predominantly white society. Samad's journey is marked by his internal conflicts over identity and belonging, as well as external challenges stemming from racial prejudice in British institutions and communities. Contrasting Samad's experience are the younger generation represented by characters like Irie Jones, whose mixed heritage reflects a more integrated, multicultural identity. However, even Irie and her peers are not immune to the complexities of race relations in modern Britain. They navigate cultural expectations, familial legacies, and societal stereotypes that shape their sense of self and their interactions with others from diverse backgrounds. *White Teeth* portrays cultural exchange as both a source of enrichment and a site of conflict. It depicts how cultural diversity can foster understanding and solidarity among communities while also exposing underlying tensions and prejudices. The novel's narrative structure, which weaves together multiple perspectives and timelines, underscores the complexity of racial dynamics and the ongoing quest for racial harmony in a multicultural society. *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith offers a profound exploration of racial discrimination and multiculturalism in contemporary Britain. Through its richly developed characters and intricate narrative, the novel challenges simplistic narratives of racial harmony and instead presents a nuanced portrayal of the enduring challenges faced by immigrants and their descendants. Smith's work encourages readers to critically examine the intersections of race, identity, and societal norms, highlighting the importance of empathy, dialogue, and collective action in confronting systemic racism and fostering a more inclusive society. Ultimately, *White Teeth* stands as a testament to the complexities of cultural integration and the ongoing quest for social justice in a diverse and evolving world.



Prismatic Horizons **Journal of Social Science and Humanities**

www.phjssh.lexarcheus.com

Vol-01, Issue-02 (Apr-Jun, 2023)



Objectives

The study aims to comprehensively analyze how Zadie Smith portrays racial discrimination in *White Teeth* through the experiences of characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds. It investigates the novel's depiction of systemic inequalities, including access to opportunities, societal prejudices, and structural barriers based on race. It examines individual biases and their impact on interpersonal relationships among characters, exploring their responses to discrimination and their strategies for coping and identity formation amidst cultural diversity and clashes. By highlighting themes of multiculturalism and assessing the novel's contribution to contemporary social dynamics, particularly concerning race relations and cultural diversity in urban settings, the study seeks to deepen understanding of these complex issues as depicted by Smith.

Significance of the study

The significance of studying racial discrimination in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* lies in its profound exploration of complex societal issues within a multicultural context. By examining how Smith portrays discrimination through diverse characters, the study sheds light on enduring themes of identity, prejudice, and cultural clash in contemporary urban settings. The analysis not only enriches our understanding of race relations and systemic inequalities but also prompts critical reflections on empathy, social justice, and the impacts of historical legacies on present-day societal dynamics. Ultimately, studying racial discrimination in *White Teeth* contributes to broader discussions on inclusivity, diversity, and the complexities of navigating multicultural identities in modern society.

Methodology

The methodology employed for studying racial discrimination in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* involved a comprehensive analysis of the novel's narrative structure, character development, and thematic exploration. Close reading and textual analysis techniques were utilized to identify instances and patterns of racial discrimination portrayed through characters and their interactions. The study focused on extracting themes related to systemic biases, societal prejudices, and the intersectionality of race with other social identities. Comparative and contextual approaches were also used to situate the novel within broader discussions on multiculturalism, identity formation, and social justice. The methodological framework aimed to provide a rigorous examination of how Smith's narrative elucidates the complexities of racial discrimination in contemporary urban societies.



RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Racial Discrimination in White Teeth

Zadie Smith's novel "White Teeth" provides a nuanced exploration of racial discrimination and its impacts on characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds in multicultural London. The novel centers on the Iqbal, Chalfen, and Jones families, each with distinct cultural and racial identities. Smith adeptly depicts how systemic racism manifests in the lives of her non-white characters. Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi immigrant, faces constant micro aggressions and struggles to find employment commensurate with his education and experience, relegated to working as a waiter in a curry house. His treatment by his fellow British Army officers during World War II and the discrimination he faces in London decades later underscore the pervasive nature of racism. Similarly, the novel highlights the challenges confronted by the Jamaican-British Jones family. Clara, Irie's mother, is an immigrant who grapples with feelings of displacement and not fully belonging in British society. Irie herself, caught between her Jamaican and British heritage, navigates the complexities of forging a cohesive identity in the face of racial prejudice.

In contrast, the Chalfen family, who are of Jewish descent but considered "more English than the English," benefit from their perceived whiteness and status as established Britons. The stark contrast illustrates how race and ethnicity profoundly shape one's experiences and opportunities in a society still grappling with the legacy of colonialism and systemic discrimination. Despite the novel's bleak portrayal of the devastating effects of racism, it also offers glimmers of hope through the younger generation. Characters like Irie, Millat, Magid, and Josh forge cross-cultural friendships and relationships, suggesting the possibility of a more inclusive and harmonious multicultural future. Smith's nuanced approach avoids simplistic solutions, recognizing that dismantling deeply entrenched racial divisions will require sustained effort and a willingness to confront the uncomfortable truths of Britain's colonial past and present. In "White Teeth," Zadie Smith masterfully weaves a tapestry of diverse narratives, illuminating how race and ethnicity profoundly shape individual experiences and collective societal dynamics. Her unflinching depiction of racial discrimination serves as a powerful commentary on the ongoing challenges of building a truly equitable and inclusive society.

Systemic Inequality in the Novel

In Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*, systemic inequalities based on race are vividly portrayed through the multifaceted lives of its characters, who navigate a complex landscape shaped by historical legacies and contemporary societal norms. The novel unfolds in post-colonial London, where characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds, such as Archie Jones, Samad Iqbal, and their families, confront various forms of systemic discrimination that



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profoundly impact their opportunities, identities, and interactions within society. Central to the exploration of systemic inequality in *White Teeth* is the theme of access to opportunities. Characters like Archie Jones, a white working-class man, and Samad Iqbal, a Bengali immigrant, experience contrasting trajectories in their pursuit of socioeconomic advancement. Archie's life is marked by a sense of aimlessness and missed opportunities, reflecting the limitations imposed by his socioeconomic status. In contrast, Samad, despite his academic qualifications and aspirations, faces systemic barriers in his professional life, constrained by racial prejudices that hinder his career progression and perpetuate inequalities.

The novel also illuminates societal prejudices that shape characters' experiences based on racial and cultural backgrounds. For instance, Clara Bowden, Archie's Jamaican wife, confronts stereotypes and micro aggressions that diminish her identity and agency, highlighting the pervasive nature of racial biases within interpersonal interactions. Similarly, characters like Millat Iqbal and Magid Iqbal navigate cultural identity crises exacerbated by societal perceptions and expectations, underscoring the complexities of multiculturalism and assimilation in a predominantly white society. Structural barriers further underscore the systemic inequalities depicted in *White Teeth*. These barriers manifest in institutionalized forms of discrimination that limit characters' access to education, employment, and social mobility. Samad's experiences within the British educational system, where his aspirations for upward mobility are thwarted by systemic biases and academic marginalization, exemplify the entrenched nature of structural inequalities based on race. The novel critiques the intersecting dimensions of race, class, and gender within the context of systemic inequality. Characters like Alsana Iqbal and Clara Bowden navigate intersecting forms of discrimination that compound their marginalization, highlighting the intersections of identity and oppression within a stratified social hierarchy. *White Teeth* serves as a poignant exploration of systemic inequality based on race, offering a nuanced portrayal of how historical legacies and contemporary societal norms perpetuate disparities in access to opportunities, perpetuate societal prejudices, and impose structural barriers. Through its richly developed characters and intricate narrative, Zadie Smith's novel challenges readers to confront the complexities of systemic inequality and reflect on the enduring impact of race on individual lives and societal dynamics in multicultural urban environments.

Individual Biases and Relationships

In Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*, the portrayal of individual biases and their impact on interpersonal relationships among characters from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds provides a profound exploration of identity, conflict, and empathy within a multicultural society. The novel presents a tapestry of characters whose interactions are shaped by their personal biases, societal conditioning, and cultural perspectives, resulting in nuanced dynamics that reflect



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broader themes of racial tension and understanding. Central to the examination of individual biases is the character development of Archie Jones, Samad Iqbal, and their families, whose relationships illustrate the complexities of cultural assimilation and identity negotiation. Archie, a white British man, and Samad, a Bengali immigrant, harbor inherent biases influenced by their respective backgrounds and life experiences. These biases often manifest subtly in their interactions with each other and with characters like Clara Bowden, Archie's Jamaican wife, whose racial identity challenges societal norms and perceptions.

The novel portrays how individual biases impact interpersonal relationships through conflicts, misunderstandings, and moments of empathy. For instance, Archie's paternalistic attitudes towards Clara and her daughters, exacerbated by his limited understanding of their cultural heritage, lead to tensions within their family dynamics. Similarly, Samad's traditional views clash with the aspirations of his sons, Magid and Millat, highlighting generational and cultural divides exacerbated by individual biases rooted in societal expectations and personal histories. *White Teeth* explores how individual biases contribute to the formation of social cliques and identity groups within the broader community. Characters like Irie Jones and her friends navigate peer dynamics influenced by racial and cultural biases, shaping their sense of belonging and self-perception amidst societal pressures. The novel's portrayal of these dynamics underscores the complexities of identity formation and the enduring impact of personal biases on interpersonal relationships and community cohesion. Smith's narrative challenges readers to confront their own biases and assumptions, urging empathy and understanding across cultural divides. Through nuanced characterizations and intricate plot developments, *White Teeth* invites readers to reflect on the complexities of identity, belonging, and societal expectations within a multicultural context. Ultimately, the novel's exploration of individual biases and interpersonal dynamics contributes to a deeper understanding of how perceptions and prejudices shape human interactions and societal norms in diverse urban environments.

Coping with Discrimination

In Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*, characters respond to instances of racial discrimination with a range of coping strategies, resilience, and quests for identity amidst cultural clashes, offering a poignant exploration of personal agency and cultural adaptation within a diverse urban setting. The novel portrays characters from various ethnic backgrounds navigating the complexities of racial prejudice and societal expectations in post-colonial London. One prominent response to racial discrimination depicted in the novel is resilience. Characters like Samad Iqbal and Clara Bowden demonstrate resilience in the face of systemic inequalities and personal prejudices. Samad, despite facing career setbacks and societal marginalization due to his Bengali heritage, maintains a steadfast commitment to his cultural identity and traditional



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values, striving to preserve his heritage amidst cultural assimilation pressures. Clara, on the other hand, confronts racial stereotypes and micro aggressions with resilience, asserting her identity and challenging societal norms that seek to diminish her agency. Coping strategies among characters in *White Teeth* vary, reflecting individual approaches to navigating racial discrimination. For instance, Archie Jones often adopts a passive approach, attempting to avoid conflict and navigate cultural complexities with pragmatic detachment. In contrast, characters like Millat Iqbal and Irie Jones respond with activism and self-discovery, seeking to assert their identities and challenge systemic injustices through personal agency and social action. The novel also explores characters' quests for identity amidst cultural clashes, highlighting the internal conflicts and external pressures that shape their sense of self. Characters like Magid Iqbal navigate dual identities and conflicting cultural expectations, grappling with the complexities of assimilation and belonging in a multicultural society. Similarly, Irie Jones embarks on a journey of self-discovery, reconciling her Jamaican and British heritage while navigating societal expectations and personal aspirations. Smith's exploration of responses and coping strategies in *White Teeth* underscores the resilience and agency of characters amidst cultural and racial challenges. Through nuanced characterizations and intricate plot developments, the novel invites readers to reflect on the complexities of identity formation, cultural adaptation, and societal resilience in the face of discrimination. Ultimately, *White Teeth* offers a compelling portrayal of how individuals navigate and respond to racial discrimination, highlighting the enduring quest for identity and belonging in a diverse urban environment.

Multiculturalism and Identity

In Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*, themes of multiculturalism and identity formation are intricately woven into the narrative, offering a profound exploration of cultural diversity and the complexities of identity within a vibrant urban milieu. Set in post-colonial London, the novel portrays a tapestry of characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Jamaican, Bengali, and British, whose lives intersect and intertwine amidst cultural clashes and societal expectations. Central to the exploration of multiculturalism in *White Teeth* is the depiction of cultural hybridity and the blending of traditions among characters like Irie Jones, Samad Iqbal, and Archie Jones. These characters navigate the complexities of dual identities and conflicting cultural influences, reflecting the multicultural fabric of contemporary urban society. The novel challenges essentialist notions of identity by portraying characters that negotiate their cultural heritage while embracing the diversity of their surroundings.

Identity formation emerges as a central theme in *White Teeth*, as characters grapple with questions of belonging and self-discovery amidst cultural diversity. For instance, Irie Jones embarks on a journey to reconcile her Jamaican heritage with her British upbringing, navigating



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societal expectations and personal aspirations in her quest for self-identity. Similarly, characters like Magid and Millat Iqbal navigate the complexities of dual citizenship and cultural assimilation, highlighting the transformative effects of multicultural encounters on individual identities. The novel also explores how multiculturalism fosters both unity and division within the community, reflecting the challenges and opportunities of cultural exchange in an urban setting. Characters form alliances and friendships across ethnic lines, yet also confront prejudices and misunderstandings rooted in cultural differences. Smith's narrative emphasizes the dynamic nature of multicultural identities, portraying characters that evolve and adapt amidst the fluidity of cultural boundaries and societal norms. Through its nuanced portrayal of multiculturalism and identity formation, *White Teeth* invites readers to reflect on the complexities of cultural diversity and the evolving nature of identity in contemporary urban environments. The novel celebrates the richness of cultural exchange while challenging stereotypes and fostering empathy towards characters navigating the intersections of race, ethnicity, and nationality. Ultimately, *White Teeth* underscores the transformative power of multicultural encounters in shaping individual identities and collective narratives within a diverse and interconnected world.

Social Dynamics in *White Teeth*

Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* makes a significant contribution to understanding contemporary social dynamics, particularly in its exploration of race relations and cultural diversity within urban societies. Set in London, the novel portrays a diverse cast of characters from Jamaican, Bengali, and British backgrounds, whose lives intersect amidst a backdrop of cultural clashes, societal expectations, and historical legacies. One key aspect of the novel's contribution lies in its nuanced portrayal of race relations. Smith deftly navigates the complexities of racial identity and discrimination through characters like Samad Iqbal, Archie Jones, and their families. By depicting their experiences with systemic inequalities, micro aggressions, and cultural assimilation pressures, *White Teeth* sheds light on the enduring impact of race on social interactions and individual identities in multicultural urban environments. The novel challenges readers to confront their own biases and assumptions, fostering empathy and understanding across cultural divides. *White Teeth* underscores the transformative potential of cultural diversity within urban societies. Through characters like Irie Jones and the Iqbal twins, the novel explores how multicultural encounters shape identity formation and community dynamics. Smith's narrative emphasizes the fluidity of cultural boundaries and the ways in which individuals navigate and negotiate their cultural heritage amidst societal pressures and personal aspirations. The novel also critiques essentialist notions of identity and celebrates hybridity and cultural hybridity. By portraying characters who defy stereotypes and embrace their multifaceted identities, *White Teeth* challenges conventional narratives of race and ethnicity, offering a more



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inclusive and expansive understanding of contemporary social dynamics. Smith's exploration of family dynamics, generational conflicts, and intercultural relationships in *White Teeth* reflects broader societal shifts and tensions within urban settings. The novel highlights the complexities of community cohesion and the challenges of forging meaningful connections across cultural and generational divides. *White Teeth* stands as a thought-provoking exploration of contemporary social dynamics, enriching our understanding of race relations, cultural diversity, and identity formation within urban societies. Smith's narrative mastery and insightful portrayal of characters navigating complex social landscapes invite readers to critically engage with issues of belonging, prejudice, and cultural exchange, ultimately contributing to broader discussions on inclusivity, empathy, and social justice in a multicultural world.

Implications of the study

Studying racial discrimination in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* yields implications that span societal awareness, identity reflection, educational insights, policy relevance, literary critique, and global dialogue. It enhances understanding of nuanced prejudice and inequality, prompting empathy and critical reflection on identity formation amidst diversity. Findings inform educational approaches, advocate for inclusive policies, enrich literary scholarship, and foster global discussions on systemic biases and social justice. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader efforts towards equity, cultural understanding, and societal inclusivity in contemporary contexts worldwide.

Final reflections of the study

1. Smith portrays various forms of racial discrimination through characters like Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones, illustrating systemic biases and societal prejudices.
2. It explores how discrimination influences identity formation among characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds, highlighting struggles with cultural assimilation and heritage.
3. Characters in the novel employ diverse coping strategies in response to discrimination, including resilience, cultural adaptation, and resistance against stereotypes.
4. The findings reveal how race intersects with other social identities (such as gender and class) to shape experiences of discrimination and opportunities.
5. Insights suggest educational strategies for promoting empathy and understanding, as well as policy recommendations for addressing systemic inequalities and fostering inclusive environments.
6. The novel's exploration of discrimination provides a lens for critiquing broader cultural dynamics and societal norms, enriching literary scholarship on race relations and multiculturalism.



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7. Findings resonate globally, fostering cross-cultural dialogue on shared experiences of discrimination and the quest for social justice in diverse societies.

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