

# Black British Women Writers : Challenging And Changing The Narrative Through Their Writings

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper is modest attempt to explore the ways and means by which Zadie Smith, a black British woman writer, is challenging and changing the narrative through her writings. A black woman writer is always expected to write about her exploitation in the society for being 'black' or about her sexuality. But there is lot more to her experience and multitude of dimensions which are part of black woman consciousness. In this paper I will be dealing with of the works of Zadie Smith i.e. *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*. In both the novels Smith deals with multicultural identities in dominant white culture. Smith with her style of writing and her way of representation of black subject gave acceptance to black people in British society and readers wants to know more about their life, experiences, traumas of black people. Smith has transitioned them from being 'invisible' to being 'visible'. She arose the sympathy of readers for black people.

**Key words:** Multicultural identities, Black consciousness, Pain, Trauma.

As Gina Wisker in *Black Women's Writing* quotes 'Audre Lorde puts it, writing is empowerment for others to speak out, step out and value their lives. It provides testimony of their experience as both individuals and members of a community. For us as readers examining the readers experience, it provides enlightenment, self-awareness, a recognition which is not always personally pleasant, and great enjoyment. Recognition and expression of difference is essentially creative: 'In our work and in our living, we must recognize that difference is a reason for celebration and growth, rather than a reason for destruction.' (4)

Gina Wisker writes, "The writing of more and more Black women becomes available to readers, students and teachers daily as publishers recognize the popularity of this wide range of works. The Open University has recently adopted Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* for its new literature course, which will ensure that the work of Morrison, at least, reaches an extremely wide audience here in Britain" (4).

Wisker further adds that 'The range of writing by Black women is diverse and comes to us from such a wide variety of cultures that it would be arrogant to suggest that a short critical work could cover the field, and we would be crazy to attempt to do so... One very important element in our reading, teaching and studying of Black women's writing is that of ensuring the recognition of cultural and historical context. It is only through ensuring that these black texts are read in context that the kind of essentialism which surrounds and validates the works of the 'great tradition' and its canon can be undermined and the difference and worth of works hitherto ignored or marginalized be properly acknowledge and read from a basis of something more than ignorance. Cora Kaplan argues:

Unless we are actually specialist on the area from which these foreign anglophone literatures come, and teaching them in that context, our more than usually fragmented and partial knowledge of the history, politics and

culture in which they were produced and originally read, frequently leads us into teaching and thinking about these texts through an unintentionally imperialist lens, conflating their progressive politics with our own agendas, interpreting their versions of humanism through the historical evolution of our own. (6)

Wisker elaborates on this by writing that 'For those of us, Black and white, who do not come from the various cultural contexts out of which Afro-American, African, Caribbean and Black British spring, it is important that the diverse 'otherness' of these texts always be recognized and their contexts understood as far as possible, in order that we may grow nearer to an appreciation of their intention and achievement.' (6)

We need to know the cultural context of writing, and also of the background and development of the forms of expression used. The particular significance of the autobiography is one such form of writing. The autobiographical mode is of particular importance to people who have been silenced hitherto. Historically, slave narratives were counted as both proof of identity and testimony to lived individual experience. Maya Angelou's five-part (so far) fictional autobiography is a fine example of the mode, as is Buchi Emecheta's *Head Above Water* and, earlier, Zora Neale Hurston's essays, *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *I Love Myself when I am Laughing*.

In this paper I will be dealing with works of Zadie Smith, a Black British woman writer whose writings are challenging the expected narrative from black women and writing a new discourse. As Philip Tew writes about the *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith that it emerges as a more poignant and profound commentary on contemporary multicultural reality, asking not only very uncomfortable truths not just about British multicultural society, but also about the human condition at large. As very rightly Smith said that everyone is Venn diagram of different identities playing different roles. So, this mosaic of identities is very well represented in her debut novel *White Teeth*.

Where characters from different cultural identities are chosen. Smith wanted to give voice to all the black people through her 'multicultural' novel. She has presented the voice of not only of black or coloured women but equally that of black men also. As we all know that Black Feminism/ Womanism is not against any men or anti-men. She attempted to present the condition of over all black community in a contemporary British society.

Benedicte Ledent in her paper 'Other Voices' and the British Literary Canon, writes that Smith's novel portrays an idealised image of what liberal minds wanted contemporary London to look like. One could have imagined at the time that this novel, by giving confidence to writers and publishers alike, was heralding the beginning of an era -- augured by the 1998 Windrush celebrations and the 'Reinventing Britain' project -- whereby writing by British citizens of African or Asian descent could be more easily and officially recognised.

Zadie Smith has tried to put forward the psychological trauma of black people in British society. This is also very well represented in her second novel *The Autograph Man*, where Alex Li, British- Chinese Jewish boy, always trying to escape the truth of early death of his father. By putting the trauma and pain of black people in the centre-stage of her novel, she is making an audacious effort to highlight it in multicultural Britain. She wants to tell the world that still today British society is not that open or acceptable to black experiences, pain and trauma.

Ledent writes '...institutionalised racism is still very much present in Britain. As Joan Anim-Addo and Les Back point out, 'the legacy of Empire is still in evidence' in British universities, both in terms of the absence of black British texts from the curriculum and of black

academics, especially female ones. Nathan E. Richards highlights the persistence of racial discrimination in the academic world, causing a form of 'brain drain' whereby such authors as Fred D'Aguiar, Aminatta Forna, Caryl Phillips and Zadie Smith have left the UK to take up academic appointments in the US.' (2-3)

As Irenosen Okoje observes:

Britain doesn't champion the voices of its female writers of colour enough, preferring to fawn over international writers. Some will wheel out names of the usual suspects, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. Yes, I know about them, but they are just two writers from the past 15 years, and are by no means a barometer to measure the typical representation of women of colour in the industry. Both studied at Oxbridge, and both are of mixed race. What does this say to black and Asian writers: do you have to have an elite education and a white parent for the publishing industry to be interested? (3)

Zadie Smith with both of her novels i.e., *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man* has tried to bring the black people in the narrative. In her novels she is dealing with various aspects of adjustments, acceptance and rejection from the dominant culture and finding their place whom they can call 'home'.

With the reception of her novels, we can see that Smith has dealt very efficiently with the subject of black people. Readers are happy and excited to read her works about black people. Smith with her style of writing and her way of representation of black subject gave acceptance to black people in British society and readers want to know more about their life, experiences, traumas of black people. Smith has transitioned them from being 'invisible' to being 'visible'. She aroused the sympathy of readers for black people. With her debut novel she established herself as a successful writer of coloured origin in Britain, paving way and setting example for other black women to become writers.

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