

The Portrayal of the Role of Family in Shaping Belonging in Zadie Smith's Novels

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Abstract:

This paper examines the role of family in shaping belonging within Zadie Smith's novels, drawing upon examples from *On Beauty*, *White Teeth*, and *NW*. Through close readings and analysis, the study demonstrates how Smith portrays the family unit as a primary source of belonging, impacting identity formation, cultural negotiation, and the preservation of shared history. The analysis explores various aspects of familial relationships: the primal bond fostered within the family unit, the intricate connection between physical traits and shared identity, the mother's role in preserving family history, the transformative power of chosen family, the challenges faced by immigrant parents in navigating cultural assimilation, and the significance of family traditions and rituals. Furthermore, the paper investigates the impact of language on familial relationships and the crucial role of family in providing support during challenging times. By examining these diverse experiences, the study underscores the profound influence that family, both biological and chosen, has on shaping individuals' sense of self and connection to the world.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*, *White Teeth*, *NW*, Family, Belonging, Multiculturalism, Racial Identity, Ethnic Identity, Cultural Negotiation.

Introduction:

Zadie Smith's novels offer a profound exploration of the intricate relationship between family and the formation of belonging, showcasing its multifaceted nature and profound impact on individual identities. From the primal bonds forged within the confines of a childhood tent, symbolizing the family's role as the first and most fundamental source of belonging, to the complex negotiations of cultural heritage in immigrant families grappling with the tension between tradition and change, Smith's characters navigate a diverse range of experiences that illuminate the family's central role in shaping one's sense of self and connection to the world. Through intimate portrayals of familial interactions, Smith delves into the power dynamics, shared histories, and unspoken understandings that bind individuals together, highlighting the profound impact that even the most minute details, such as shared physical traits or inherited speech patterns, can have on shaping a sense of collective identity and belonging within the family unit. The author also explores the complexities of family relationships in the context of broader social structures, examining how factors such as class, race, and cultural background intersect with familial ties to influence individual experiences and opportunities. Through the lens of family, Smith's novels offer a nuanced and insightful commentary on the human condition, reminding us of the enduring power of familial bonds to both nurture and challenge, to both anchor and liberate, and to ultimately shape our understanding of who we are and where we belong in the world.

The Role of Family in Shaping Belonging:

The paper explores the family's role in shaping belonging in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*. The

scene with Zora in a makeshift tent highlights the family's significance as the primary source of belonging. Smith emphasizes the family's lasting impact on identity and belonging: "Before the world existed... there had been only one person, Zora, and only one place: a tent in the living room..." (301). This scene emphasizes the primal bond between individuals and their families. The tent symbolizes the family unit, fostering a sense of belonging. Before facing the outside world, Zora's world is defined by her family within the tent. This underscores the family's role as the first source of belonging, providing a safe space for self-development. The tent serves as a metaphor for the nurturing environment that families create, shaping a sense of belonging that endures. Another quote from the same novel "Looking at them both now, Jerome found himself in their finger joints and neat conch ears... He heard himself in their partial lisps..." (301) beautifully captures the intricate ways in which familial ties intertwine with individual identity. As Jerome observes his siblings, he recognizes a multitude of shared physical traits – from the shape of their finger joints and ears to the subtle nuances of their speech patterns – as reflections of himself. These minute details, often overlooked in the grand scheme of things, become powerful markers of belonging. They signify a shared genetic heritage that extends beyond mere physical resemblance. In recognizing these shared characteristics, Jerome acknowledges a deeper connection to his siblings, a shared history and a collective identity that binds them together, fostering a profound sense of belonging within their family unit. In *On Beauty*, the mother's act of sorting belongings reflects her role in preserving family history: "She separated physical things from paper things, childhood things from college things... the scattered possessions of the three people she had created" (Smith 535). By categorizing items, she acts as a curator of memories. The possessions represent the lives she nurtured, creating a link to their past. Her efforts, though often unnoticed, form the family's sense of continuity. Each object triggers memories, reinforcing their bonds. The quote highlights the mother's role in preserving collective memory, ensuring their shared history remains vital.

In Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Clara Bowden's encounter with Archie Jones is a transformative experience that challenges her beliefs and sense of belonging. When Clara loses her faith, she feels lost and adrift, as expressed in the quote, "Clara saw Archie through the grey-green eyes of loss; her world had just disappeared, the faith she lived by had receded like a low tide, and Archie, quite by accident, had become the bloke in the joke: the last man on earth" (Smith 36). But Archie unexpectedly becomes a source of stability during this turbulent time. Their unconventional relationship, though seemingly absurd, provides Clara with a sense of belonging that she never found within her religious community. Through Archie, Clara is exposed to a secular worldview that challenges her preconceived notions and opens up new possibilities for her life. This encounter prompts her to question her beliefs and redefine her identity. Archie's presence also introduces the idea of family as a chosen connection, rather than a predetermined one. This newfound connection empowers Clara to break free from the constraints of her past and embrace a new identity based on her own choices and experiences. Clara's transformation highlights the profound impact that relationships, both biological and chosen, can have on shaping one's identity and sense of belonging in the world.

In *White Teeth*, Samad Iqbal's struggles embody the complexities faced by immigrant parents. He fears familial judgment and feels shame about his son's perceived assimilation, mirroring the tension between preserving cultural heritage and adapting. The quote, "He dreaded the inevitable visits... when they caught an eye-load of this Iqbal the younger... He shuffled... with his eyes to the ground... If aunts and uncles phoned, he deflected questions or simply lied," (341), highlights Samad's internal conflict. His dread and deception reveal his anxieties about cultural assimilation. This reflects the immigrant experience of negotiating between tradition and change. Samad's struggle captures the

emotional toll of cultural dissonance and the complexities of belonging for immigrant parents.

In NW, the concept of family plays a significant role in shaping the sense of belonging for the characters. Following quote highlights how family relationships, dynamics, and histories all contribute to the characters' identities and their connections to the community: "He was called Peter... Marcia Blake... dealt with the cashiers... the child received first Peter, and then... the pig family... considered ornaments... on a shelf in the lounge" (Smith, NW 195). The quote shows how family traditions matter. The piggy bank symbolizes a ritual, teaching saving and creating a sense of accomplishment. Displaying the pig family strengthens family unity. Such traditions foster belonging through shared experiences and values. The novel explores language's power to shape perceptions, especially within families. Individuals are molded by words used to describe them. The quote: "People were not people but merely an effect of language. You could conjure them up and kill them in a sentence" (215), shows how words can have devastating consequences, altering someone's image or worth. Within families, hurtful language can erode belonging. In this context, careful language is crucial for healthy communication. The quote reminds us of language's profound impact on relationships. Within families, words can wound or heal, and ultimately determine how valued individuals feel. In NW, Leah's isolation at her father's funeral highlights the importance of family during tough times. The quote: "No siblings. No cousins. Only Michel to help," emphasizes the need for family's emotional and practical support. Strangers' attempts to connect further show the unique role of family in understanding one's experiences. The other quote: "You, me, all of us. Why that girl and not us. Why that poor bastard on Albert Road. It doesn't make sense to me" (289), reflects on the seemingly random nature of fate and opportunity, especially as influenced by family and social circumstances. It questions the fairness of a system where opportunities are unequal, highlighting how family, class, and environment shape individuals' lives.

Conclusion:

In this way, Zadie Smith's novels offer a rich tapestry of the multifaceted role that family plays in shaping an individual's sense of belonging. Through her diverse characters and intricate narratives, Smith explores how families can be both a source of comfort and conflict, of identity and alienation, of tradition and transformation. The families in her novels are not idealized units but rather complex and dynamic entities that mirror the complexities of the real world. They grapple with issues of race, class, culture, religion, and generational differences, all of which contribute to the formation of individual identities and shape their sense of belonging within both their familial unit and the wider society. Smith's exploration of family dynamics highlights the profound impact that familial relationships have on our understanding of ourselves, our place in the world, and the choices we make in life. Ultimately, her novels suggest that belonging is not a static state, but a continuous process of negotiation and re-evaluation, shaped by the complex interplay of individual desires, familial expectations, and societal norms.

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