

# Psychological Disposition in the Select Novels of Zadie Smith

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**Abstract**—Psychology and Philosophy are intertwined. Psychology deals with belief and feelings, which cannot be separated. Considering psychology, many writers adapted the idea of Sigmund Freud who explained about conscious and unconscious mind. The combination of Id, ego and super ego were accepted and this was blended in literature to describe various characters in their writings. Female and male writers tried to bring out various aspects of mind, emotions and feelings in their works. They tried to analyze the characters in depth and bring out the psychological aspects, which affects them. Various female writers in British Literature such as George Eliot, Agatha Christie, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte were all brought out in their works the inner struggle and turmoil of their characters especially female characters. Zadie Smith, a contemporary writer, born to a Jamaican mother and an English father, has joined the list. She is a novelist and an essayist. Her debut novel 'White Teeth' won James Tait Black Memorial Prize and Betty Trask Award. She writes about the social controversies and her treatment of race and culture is well known. Zadie satirically shows the psychological struggle, suppression and oppression of the characters and multicultural aspects. She even depicts the inner turmoil of each character in her work. In all her novels, the reader can find many themes especially, cultural discrepancies, which has been rooted in their blood with an attitude, which is blended in their society.

**Index Terms**—psychology, discrimination, gender, struggle, multicultural

## I. INTRODUCTION

Psychology is considered as a branch of Philosophy; they are intertwined. The word psychology is derived from Greek words psyche meaning "breathe principle of life, life, soul," and logos meaning "speech, word, reason". Literally, psychology can be defined as the study of the mind. In other words, psychology can also be defined as the science of mind and behaviour. When keenly observed one can find that psychology is really a vast discipline that describes in detail the thoughts of human beings. It also tries to explore individuals act, belief and feeling. Every action of an individual is controlled by his psyche knowingly or unknowingly.

Many psychologists have contributed their theory to psychology. The most renowned and established psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, an Austrian, did the major contributions to psychology for the welfare of the human beings. He was the one who was associated with psychoanalysis. He was one who combined with his psychodynamic theories and the power of the unconscious mind. This combination attracted many young writers and this aspect of psychology became a predominant theme for various writers. The psychologists began to gain popularity and their ideas not only reflected in that field but also started to influence English literature.

The psychological concepts made a great impact and reflected on the technique and style of many authors. The writers started portraying the characters psychologically and they applied various theories related to it in their works. Psychoanalysis became a widely accepted term, developed by Sigmund Freud. It was adapted as the system of interpretation and therapeutic treatment of many psychological disorders.

In English Literature, Freudian psychology has more influenced in novels rather than drama and poetry. Lapsley, Daniel K., and Paul C. Stey clearly states that,

Psychoanalysis is one of those rare intellectual achievements that had the effect of radically transforming human self-understanding. Indeed, Freudian notions have so thoroughly permeated human culture that the jargon (if not the substance) of psychoanalysis is accessible to even the most untutored observers of human behavior. (1)

It is the known truth that, novel has a great scope of representing human thoughts and behaviour. Since 'mind' became the central theme of Freud, this was given importance in the characters of the novels. Previously Freud gave mind a name as 'psychical apparatus' by giving an explanation to minds' development. He describes mind in three stages – dynamic, economic, and topographical. They explain the different aspects of the mind. He explained that the external force of the world, which leads to tension and stress, drives the basic instinct, which controls the human mind. These forces are caused by the dynamic point of view, where mind has a contact with the body. They have an

interconnection with the feelings of pain and pleasure. The economic point depends on the hindrance caused by any stimulus causing negative or positive impact on pleasure. The combination of 'Ego' and 'id' was described by Freud to explain about economic and topographical points. The economic point deals with the adjustment between the external and the internal factors of mind, which makes a soft existence of the psychical interactions. Apart from this, the mind's agency is divided into the 'id', the 'ego', and the 'super ego'. Various writers in English literature adapted this concept, be it American, British, Diasporic, Canadian and so on. Starting from Jane Austen, who was the famous British writer, many female writers captured a vital place in British Literature including George Eliot, Agatha Christie, Charlotte Bronte, and Emily Bronte etc. Following their path many female writers involved themselves to pen down their ideas blending psychological aspects in their writings. One among such female writer is Zadie Smith.

Zadie Smith is a prominent British essayist and an author well known for her fiction and nonfiction. She was born on October 25th 1975, in Willesden, London. Her academic pursuits became a strong foundation for her successful career in writing later. She was born to a Jamaican mother and English father and had the name Sadie Adu Smith. She grew up with a wide exposure of cultures and backgrounds. While attending the local state schools she showed a deep interest for literature. Her mother acted as a catalyst who encouraged her to explore variety of literary genres and introduced her to various authors. This exposure influenced Smith's writing in a great manner and kindled her ambition to become a writer, while studying in Cambridge who adopted the name "Zadie" since Sadie was frequently mispronounced with the singer Sade.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers and writers have deeply researched about Zadie Smith's work in various angles. This research paper brings out the psychological disposition of characters in her various novels. Araslanova, A. (2019) in her article titled "Negotiation and Hybridization: Constructing Immigrant Identities in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *Swing Time*" analyses about the immigrant identities in *White Teeth* and *Swing Time* of Zadie Smith. She argues that the immigrants in her books try to reconstruct their identities according to their environment they live. If they want to have an economically prosperous life, they have to adapt the culture. The main problem they face is the religious and racial difference and even tend to forget their roots.

Whereas, Đerić-Dragičević (2021) in the article "Post-Postmodern British Novel: Fundamentalism in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*", discusses the influential ideas of the racial stereotypes, religion, and identity. The researcher also discusses about the fundamentalism, which prevails in this novel and argues that every individual has something fundamentalist in his or her personality. He brings the truth that the fundamentalist traits have great influence in individual's personality, which depends upon social environment. Houser T. A. (2017) describes about the empathy and sympathy, which affects the humans, in his article "Zadie Smith's *NW*: Unsettling the Promise of Empathy". He explains it to be a process, which a person tackles emotionally, and sharing the other people's internal feelings. These feelings of empathy and sympathy cause a drastic change in the characters life.

In most of her novels, Zadie Smith handles multiculturalism. She opines that multiculturalism is developed not by an individual but by government and the social media and thinks that, it has been forcefully injected inside the people and they accept it unwillingly. The concepts must be practiced and not to be designed by some individual. Meeuwisse W.W. J. (2011) says that Zadie Smith handles her themes in the same manner. She avoids using the subject, multiculturalism, rather deals with the reality, and she is particular that her characters are not from the same race and even have different religion. The main themes, race and culture, Smith artistically deals it, which brings psychological changes in an individual in a witty manner.

Beatriz Pérez Zapata (2014) in her article discusses about women who are against motherhood and their confrontation with their race and origin. In this article the author explores the discourses of race, gender, class and sexuality in a contemporary context.

Apart from this list, there are many other opinions about Smith using psychological aspects in her novels. She tries to explain the mentality of her characters in different ways.

## III. PSYCHOLOGICAL DISPOSITION

Zadie Smith's first novel "*White Teeth*" (2000) received a great acclaim and made her name as an influential young writer. This novel addressed the themes of multiculturalism, identity, racial themes, and generational conflicts. The novel explores the lives of three families who live in London. It also reveals about the observation of contemporary British society. As per Philip Tew (2009),

Smith details their interlocking narratives and sketches various characters they encounter, largely in Willesden, north-west London reflecting on contemporary multi-racial mores often satirically exhibiting the knowing, generally interrogative equality. (13)

The characters in this novel have diverse psychological dispositions, which are shaped by their experiences, personal struggles and backgrounds.

Archie Jones, the protagonist, is a British Army veteran. He struggles with a feeling of failure and regrets in his life. He always has a sense of aimlessness and a lack of purpose. This sense makes him to contemplate suicide at the very

beginning of the novel. He is a quiet man, who enjoys do-it-yourself projects, which is simple and wanted to keep everything in order. Archie's disposition evolves as he seeks meaning and connection in his relationships, particularly with his daughter, Irie. Samad Iqbal, Archie's close friend is a Muslim, born in Bengal. He too was serving in British Army during World War II. He is torn between his traditional Bengali upbringing and the new culture of London. He is always proud of his ancestors. In psychic distress and alienation, he says:

What am I going to do, after this war is over ... What I am going to do? Go back to Bengal? Or to Delhi? Who would have such an Englishman there? To England? Who would have such an Indian? They promise us independence in exchange for the men we were. But it is a devilish deal. What should I do? Stay here? Go elsewhere? (White Teeth, 112)

He struggles with the inner conflict about his identity, loyalty, and confusions. His inner conflicts and his adjustment affect his family life. After returning from the war, he works in his cousin's restaurant, which makes him feel that he does the work of his wife at home. This feeling makes him depressed and he could not show his authority to his wife and family.

Irie Jones, daughter of Archie, is depicted as a combination of complex characters. She struggles to prove her identity and self-esteem. She tends to have a psychological journey to discover herself. She tries to reconcile her Jamaican and English heritage and tries to prove herself in a multicultural society, whereas, Millat Iqbal, son of Samad, struggles with identity crisis and is rebellious in nature. His psychological disposition is characterized by the search for purpose and belonging, which leads him to different paths.

Clara Bowden is Archie's second wife, a spiritual character, who has her own beliefs. She is always friendly and cheerful. Even though she does not love Archie, she knows that he is a good man. With his help she gets admission in a college. Even though she appears to be good and happy, the writer describes about her psychological disposition, which involves the strained relationship with her mother and also with her daughter. She always has a quest for understanding the world and her place in it. Through these characters Zadie Smith, tries to make the readers understand the psychological dispositions, including identity crisis, cultural clashes, etc.

The other novel by Zadie Smith is 'On Beauty,' which was published in the year 2005. The characters in this book undergo psychological disposition, which refers to the mental and emotional status, behavior, and personality traits of the characters.

Howard Belsey, the central character of the book, is an art history professor at Wellington College, which is a fictional place. He toggles between the sense of inadequacy and insecurity in both his personal and professional life. Even though he is known as an intellectual, he is politically liberal. The writer brings out the psychological disposition of Howard, which includes academic ambition and intellectualism. When talking to him, his wife says:

...we're not really a part of his community, are we? I mean, no one's gonna help us feel that way. So if you want this job to be something special, you got to make it something special. No one's gonna do it for you, that's the truth. (On Beauty, 89)

She notices the mental confusion in between inadequacy and insecurity of her husband and shouts at him. She wanted to specifically insist him that he should not believe anyone and no one will help him in this regard. The author brings out contrast in his character through which the readers can assess the psychological disposition of the character. Legally married to Kiki Belsey, he has an affair with Claire Malcolm, and also extends an affair with the daughter of his academic opponent, Monty Kipps. When Kiki finds out his extra marital relationship, heartbroken she shouts at him,

You think it's normal. Everywhere we go, I'm alone in this... this sea of white. I barely know any black folk any more, Howie. My whole life is white. I don't see any black folk unless they be cleaning under my feet in the fucking café in your fucking college. Or pushing a fucking hospital bed through a corridor. I staked my whole life on you. And I have no idea any more why I did that. (On Beauty 21)

She feels very lonely due to his affair and couldn't bear it and her mental peace is disturbed due to his negligence. The writer brings out the agony of black woman who runs her life in a white community, where she is already stressed with multiculturalism and racism. She even exhibits the dissatisfaction about the stressful life in the hospital where she works. He gets frustrated when her husband never understands her.

His African-American wife, Kiki Belsey, works in a hospital. Before giving birth to kids, she appears to be thin, young, and beautiful. But, after her three kids, she gains excessive weight. This causes depression in her mind. This becomes the reason why her frustrated husband has an extramarital affair. Even after knowing this, she stays with him. Her forgiving character is exhibited her. Her psychological disposition involves about her complex emotions and establishing her place within the family. Their three children have three different characters. Zadie brings out the psychological aspects, which affect them.

Jerome Belsey, the eldest, is a sensitive and intelligent man. He falls for Victoria and she breaks his heart. He is very close towards his mother rather than his father. Later he feels sad and dejected when he finds out about the brief affair of his father and Victoria. The second child, Zora Belsey, is interested in doing art history like her father. She is close to her father rather than her mother. The youngest, Levi Belsey, is neither intellectual nor clever. He is very much interested in hip-hop culture and black street culture. He likes to dress up as a rap artist and roams frequently. Unlike his siblings, he is neither cultured nor disciplined. He joins the group of Haitian street hustlers, and even tend to steal

Monty's office. Through these characters, Zadie Smith brings out the psychological dispositions, which is essential to unravelling the complexities of their relationships, affecting their personal growth.

Zadie Smith's novel *NW*, revolves round the relationship between Leah and Keisha/Natalie. This novel was published in 2012. Leah Hanwell is the central character in the novel. Outwardly, she is satisfied and appears to be excited. She is a socially conscious personality, who has a steady job and distributes the funds to charities. But inwardly, she appears to be a total failure. Her life is in turmoil. She is upset of Michel's attitude towards life and family. She experiences existential crises and feels low motivated. Even though she has a strong belief on others, she is fundamentally unsure about herself. Marcus, D. (2013) in the article "Post-Hysterics: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity" tries to bring out the condition of Leah and Natalie.

When Leah and Natalie, sitting in the walled-in backyard where the novel begins, come closest to realizing just how foolhardy this faith in their freedom is. Trying to persuade herself and Leah that their sense of upward mobility has not led them astray, Natalie talks herself into a rather different epiphany, realizing not only how false her self-help mantras ring but how alone they have left her. "We were smarter," she explains. "We wanted to get out. People like Bogle—they didn't want it enough. I'm sorry if you find that answer ugly, Lee, but it's the truth." But as she "carried on with her bright list" of reasons why, she realizes just how "automatic" and "self-referential" they had become, and "her only real thought was of Frank". (72)

She regrets for her status in the society and at home. The other central character is Keisha (Natalie Blake). She is Leah's best friend. At the age of four she saves Leah from drowning. Since then, they are friends. But later when she enters a church going family, they insist to break her friendship with Leah. When she becomes a barrister, progressing in her legal profession becomes very difficult for her. Many people do not like her. Even her own children do not understand her. She feels lonely and left alone and begins to hook up with strangers. Finally, she ends up wandering with Nathan in the streets with no aim. The author brings out her struggle with her past and present identities in an effective way.

Zadie Smith's next novel 'Swing Time' was published in the year 2016. It narrates the life of two biracial childhood friends who share a passion for dance and music. The narrator (unidentified) is considered as the protagonist of the novel, is born to a Jamaican mother and an English father. Zadie purposely avoids giving a name to the character, since the anonymity signifies her mutable nature. The narrator is interested in dance and music where her mother had her own choices to be imposed on her daughter. Later she understands that, only love of dance is not enough, she must have talent as a dancer. Later she accepts the truth that she is a failure as a dancer. Her psychological aspects change as she matures. This maturity makes her to understand the other characters whom she is with. She understands her mother as a person rather than understanding the motherhood.

Tracey, narrator's friend from childhood is born for a white mother and Jamaican father. Even though she is a gifted dancer, she could not shine better. Due to the disturbances in her family, she develops a troubled personality. She becomes wild and arrogant. Even though she is tough, she keeps quiet when her boyfriend sexually abuses her. Zadie brings out the psychological disposition about the character Tracey, when she is aware about the race and class differences she faced since her childhood.

Another character, described by Zadie is Aimee, who is a rich person. Instead of bringing happiness, her richness brings negativity. When the narrator joins as an assistant to Aimee, she finds out that Aimee was sexually abused when she was a child and a teenager. She uses her wealth to battle against global poverty. Even though she has her own kids, she adopts a local baby. Zadie indicates that Aimee switches nations and sometimes cultures according to her convenience. She tries to prove and exhibit her power of capitalism and her white privilege.

Fragmentation is a tool, which is used by Zadie Smith to describe her characters in her novels. Through this tool, she tries to break her narrative into pieces, which tends to reflect the muddled world. Through implementing this tool, she even brings the fragmented psyches of her characters. The psychological dispositions of these characters display the themes of the novels. It also explains about the race, cultural appropriation, friendship and specially the societal identities. The struggles undergone by various characters face the challenges of reconciling different aspects of one's identity. The characters' psychological journeys provide insight into the complexities of navigating one's place in the world.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Zadie Smith as a well-known writer underwent a great journey from Willesden to a renowned author. She is a living testament in exploring the complexities of contemporary life. She ploughs deep inside the characters mind and brings out the complications and confusions in their mind. People tend to disrespect with one another's culture in the multicultural societies. She brings out the truth about the sufferings of the other race or caste people who have been suppressed by the dominant and upper caste. She brings out the pathetic situation of the people in the pluralistic society. She even argues that psychological disturbances lead to ethnic impression in their familial life. The characters tend to compulsively choose alternative to fulfill their desire. The characters instead of seeking remedy to their confused mind they tend to concentrate in other things to pacify their needs. Sometimes the characters plunge into deep humiliation and this leads to confused state of mind. It is better to understand that there are many ways to overcome the mental issues. Zadie Smith after analyzing about their psych and giving a suitable solution for their problems is her strength. Her

characters tend to search, their identity, be native or the immigrants. In that search, they lose their identity and reality. In her novels, the reader can find cultural discrepancies, which has been rooted with an attitude, which has been presented, even at the lower section of society.

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