

Unravelling the Effects of Trauma: A Study of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Ahmed Yousuf Ayatulla¹, Md. Ataul Karim¹

¹ Dept. of English, Bangladesh Army University of Engineering & Technology (BAUET), Qadirabad, Natore-6431, Bangladesh.

Abstract: Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* (2000) primarily depicts the lives and struggles of three families that span over two generations. They are ethnically, culturally and socially different from each other though they share the same spatio-temporal setting of multicultural London. While doing so, it critically explores the predicaments of the characters' attempt to make sense of their identities, cultures, histories, lineages and perceptions of the world around them. So, this paper aims to address the characters' struggles and argues that such problems stem from their psychological scars, trauma, and unresolved conflicts that are deeply rooted in their personal experiences. Furthermore, this paper examines how personal trauma coupled with the trauma of war, cultural shocks, displacement and collective histories are manifested in broader social context and result in fragmentation/reconfiguration of the self. In order to do so, this paper extensively draws attention to the literary theory of trauma studies. Also, the convergence of other theories in the later phase of the development of trauma theory is also taken into account while conducting this research. Moreover, this research is conducted to add new insights to the interpretation and understanding of the text as no such attempt is made so far.

Keywords: Identity, Multiculturalism, Trauma, *White Teeth*

Introduction: Zadie Smith, being half Jamaican and half English, aptly portrays the struggles of the immigrants and people with a colonial history in a multicultural society because she herself has experienced a number of such social and personal problems. Being a descendent of mixed origins, she has always struggled with 'double consciousness'. Furthermore, her mixed identity and her parent's divorce have also made her victim to racism in her day to day life. Her anxieties of belonging in such a position are expressed in her essay titled "Speaking in Tongues" where she states that her "own childhood had been the story of this and that combined, of the synthesis of disparate things" [1]. Her anxieties of negotiating with the complexities of her cultural identities and experiences of racism are also evident in the fact that she changes her name to Zadie Smith from Sadie Smith at the age of fourteen. She masterfully uses all these experiences of her while writing her first novel *White Teeth*. Although *White Teeth* is not strictly an autobiographical novel, some of Smith's personal experiences and insights regarding her psychological trauma, social and cultural displacement are incorporated in the fictional representation of the lives of the Iqbal and Jones family. However, the personal life of Zadie Smith and its connection with the novel are irrelevant in the context of this paper as Terry Eagleton in his book, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, speculates that psychoanalysing the author creates similar problems to that of discovering the 'authorial intention' in literature [2]. Nonetheless, whatever Zadie Smith's intention is, she transcends her personal and subjective experiences of and responses to trauma and creates a masterpiece that can be classified as a trauma novel.

Smith's writing style specially her use of non-linear narrative structure, repetition of certain memories and events along with frequent flashbacks that are employed in the novel encapsulate the several layers of trauma and their effects on the lives of the characters. Furthermore, by incorporating some historical events such as the Sepoy Mutiny of India in 1857, the Second World War and the Congo war, she extends the scope of the novel to a broader context and masterfully demonstrates how trauma shapes the perception of reality and is transmitted across generations instead of being limited to individual psyche. For a comprehensive exploration of these issues of the text, the article is divided into several parts for clarity. In the first part, it gives an outline of the theoretical framework of trauma theory in literature. The first part also serves a literature review that is prepared by long and thoughtful exegesis of different scholarly writings, which serve as the secondary materials of the research, of prominent scholars in the field. In the latter parts, the novel *White Teeth*, as the primary source, has been thoroughly analysed under the prism of trauma theory to discover different levels of trauma and their effects in the lives of the characters. The nature of this research is qualitative and analytical method has been used to achieve the primary goals of the research.

Theoretical Framework: The word 'trauma' is first used in association with physical injury although later it is "extended to include psychogenic ailments" [3]. In *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, the word 'trauma' is defined as "a mental condition caused by severe shock, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time" and as "unpleasant experiences that make you feel upset and/or anxious" [4]. Under these circumstances, two different aspects of the word trauma can be identified. First, it is essentially a mental condition that is caused either by a physical injury or an experience. Second, it has effects that last for a very long time. Therefore, the implications of the word 'trauma' both extend to and manifest in the psychological as well as physiological realm. These interpretations of trauma have been deeply explored in literary Theory, particularly through the works of Cathy Caruth.

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Corresponding author details: A. Y. Ayatulla

E-mail address: aya.bauet@gmail.com

Tel: +8801716222220

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Trauma, in the context of literary theory, has mostly been popularised by Cathy Caruth in the 1990s. In her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth contextualises trauma in the process of interpreting a text that marks the beginning of first wave of trauma studies known as ‘traditional model of trauma theory’. Cathy Caruth, along with other critics of the first wave such as Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman, borrow extensively from the works of Sigmund Freud, Josef Breuer and Jacques Lacan.

The ground on which the emergence of trauma studies is highly indebted is mainly laid out by Sigmund Freud. According to Micheal Balaev, some components of Freud’s theories such as traumatic experiences “divide the psyche”, “influence memory differently than other experiences”, and cannot be recalled without a “narrative reproduction of the past” serve as the founding principles of trauma studies [5]. The field also borrows from Freud’s idea that such experiences significantly alter the memory and perception of identity. Upon these ground, the first scholars of the field established that “trauma is an unassimilated event that shatters identity and remains outside normal memory and narrative representation” [5]. They also considered traumatic experiences, which Strachey’s translation of Freud and Breuer mentions, as pathogenic and disruptive in natures which result in pathologic symptoms that are caused by the memory [6].

Furthermore, Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freud with the lenses poststructuralism that postulates that “we can never mean precisely what we say and never say precisely what we mean” [2], considering the inherent chaos in and self-referentially of language, provides a solid foundation for the theory. Based on these grounds, the main concerns of the traditional trauma model are to trace the fragmentation of consciousness of the characters and their inability to express traumatic experiences through language due to its limitations in a literary text.

Moreover, they attempt to find out how such experiences create, what Van Der Kolk et al. call a “speechless terror” [7], as a kind of universal response because these experiences cannot be linguistically coded due to the fact that they are repressed in the unconscious and are inaccessible. Thus, they believe that meaning and attempt of representing these experiences are postponed and “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual’s past” but can only be identified in “the way it is precisely not known” but return “to haunt the survivor later on” [8].

In short, the traditional trauma studies argued that traumatic experiences cause dissociation or split of the ego, alter memory and perception of identities in a way that cannot be represented linguistically and ultimately disrupts an individual’s perception of the self, outside world and emotional organization. In addition to that, Caruth argues that traumatic experiences are not only limited to individual psyche but also extends to subsequent generations. She also contends that trauma inherently has intergenerational/transhistorical quality. She says, “History, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we were implicated in each other’s traumas” [8]. Thus, she widens the scopes of understanding the representation of trauma in literary text. This statement of her contributes to the later development of the theory that significantly deviates from her model.

Although Caruth perceives the intergenerational quality of trauma, her central focus is the ineffability of trauma. Later on, by taking hints from Caruth’s model, a more inclusive model of trauma theory known as ‘pluralistic model of trauma’ is developed that incorporates theoretical frameworks of race, postcolonialism, feminism and ecocriticism. In this model, it is emphasised that Caruth’s conceptualisation of trauma in the context of literature is only one of many other possibilities. The later model also argues that, “traumatic experience uncovers new relationships between experience, language, and knowledge that detail the social significance of trauma” instead of being limited to psycho-pathological fragmentation [5]. In other words, the scholars of pluralistic model of trauma studies believe in the variability of the causes, effects and potentiality/possibilities of representation. Thus, trauma is not only limited to its inherent ineffability because of its psycho-pathological functions rather it is, as argued by psychiatrist Kirmayer, “governed by social contexts and cultural models for memories, narratives, and life stories” [9].

Traumatic experiences, as Balaev argues in favour of pluralistic model, “may include an ambiguous referentiality as well as determinate meaning” [9]. To be more specific, this model does not consider memory as a fixed cryogenic chamber rather perceives it as something that is continuously reconstructed in the process of recollection. This reconstruction of the memory is highly influenced by “cultural and historical contexts that impact narrative recall and create knowledge of the past” [5]. In other words, several factors such as racial, cultural and economic position of a people or group in any space determine how trauma should be perceived and represented.

Naomi Mandel, in her *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America*, argues that the way ineffability of traumatic experiences is perceived by the traditional model is an academic production that allows to evade moral responsibilities in favour of the atrocities that cause it in the first place. In doing so it uses the “problems inherent in speech”. She reminds us of the “ethical obligations involved in such representations” [10]. Forter, in the same vein argues, “The ‘unrepresentable’ character of trauma is thus due not to its being ‘originary’ and hence, beyond history and representation. Rather, it has to do with the enforced rupture with precolonial pasts and the prohibitions against remembrance enforced by particular regimes of power” [11].

Trauma of War in *White Teeth*: From the theoretical framework, it is clear that trauma studies looks for representation of traumatic experiences, the effects of such experiences in the life of the individuals and communities in their perception of self and the world around them, and the transmittable qualities of trauma in broader social, cultural and political contexts. Collin Wright, in his essay “Lacan on Trauma and Causality: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Post-traumatic Stress/growth”, argues that “trauma tears a hole in the very fabric of meaning” [12]. In other words, trauma causes a lack of purpose, dissociation and psychological disorientation.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* deals with characters who show all the signs that can be classified as trauma response. Most of them bear marks of psychological scars for a number of reasons such as war, displacement, cultural shocks, racism, and personal experiences. The characters of the novel therefore exhibit how their trauma significantly disrupts their identity and sense of belonging. This section of the paper highlights the traumatic experiences of three war survivors as depicted in the novel and how these experiences shape the rest of their life.

Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, the two most prominent characters of the novel, are the Second World War veterans who undergo both psychological and physical trauma that have a long lasting impact effect on their respective lives. In terms of psychological trauma, they both witness the horror of the war when they witness the gruesome death of their teammates. The narrator uses a single paragraph to present the whole incident as follows:

Johnson strangled with cheese wire, Roy shot in the back. Roy's jaw had been forced open, his silver fillings removed; a pair of pliers now sat in his mouth like an iron tongue. It appeared that Thomas Dickinson-Smith had, as his attacker moved towards him, turned from his allotted fate and shot himself in the face. [13]

This simple yet profound narrative reproduction of the traumatic past is never repeated neither by the narrator nor by the characters who witness it in the novel although the narrator gives a lot of attention to elaborate other memories and past events in greater details. This further indicates that though the memory has a profound impact on the characters, it becomes a repressed memory that they intentionally want to forget. It implies both the ineffability of trauma and the effects of it in the minds of those who witness it.

Along with the witnessing of gruesome death of fellow comrades, both the characters suffer physical injury while they serve in the war as military personnel. Samad's one hand is crippled when a fellow soldier's, as he states gun went off and shot me through the wrist [13]. In case of Archie, he gets shot in his leg by Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret as it is later revealed in a flashback. In addition to all these, they also suffer mental breakdown due to the negligence of their allies in rescuing them and responding to their distress call.

As both receive physical trauma in the war, their perception of self is significantly altered because it is argued that "body and the space is a primary location of one's identity" [14]. So, traumatic physical experience means a disruption of identity for both of them. Therefore, it can be seen that the effects of their traumatic experience start immediately. Samad, while waiting for their troops to rescue them, develops morphine addiction in order to alleviate his suffering. Moreover, his split personality because of his traumatic experience manifests in his hypocritical claim to be a "Captain" by wearing his former Captain Dickinson-Smith's uniform although he is not a Captain. In addition to that he takes charge of Archie, whom he introduces as a Lieutenant, and a group of Russian soldiers who are on a mission to kill a Nazi scientist by proposing, "I would be pleased to take the charge" [13]. Under the influence of morphine and chaos of the war, later on the same day he cements his identity crisis by chanting "I'm a Muslim and a Man and a Son and a Believer" [13]. He does so because "he realises that he is not the pure outcome of a culture, his acts of mimicry have resulted in a man with a mixed identity, a hybrid" that is a direct result of his trauma [15].

In case of Archie, when he is assigned to kill Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret, he fails to kill him instead he gets shot by the later. It is suffice to say that Archie, after experiencing the violent death of fellow comrades, is unable to kill a pleading person who has bloody tears in his face. Archie's experience while getting shot is also very peculiar, as the narrator puts it, "The pain was excruciating and strangely distant at the same time" [13]. To Archie, the pain of the bullet seems distant due to his mental condition caused by trauma yet excruciating as he fears the possibility of his own death.

These experiences dictate rest of the character's life. Samad, at one hand, loses his self-worth and self-esteem as he becomes a crippled man and suffers from inferiority complex for the rest of his life in the aftermath of the war. Furthermore, his friendship with Archie Jones and the partition of India and Pakistan as a direct result of war influence his decision to migrate to London with certain hopes. All these further complicate things for him and he suffers from identity crisis, cultural and generational conflicts.

On the other hand, Archie Jones' psychological scars during the war cause inertia, psychological disorientation and aimlessness in his later life. Although Archie is British, he "acquires mixed identity" and the beginning of his lifelong friendship with Samad in the military context can be viewed as a trauma response [14]. Thus, he becomes marginalised in his own community and he develops personal relationships with immigrants. He feels out of place in his own country just like the people who have migrated to England. He also becomes passive and suicidal as it is seen at the very beginning of the novel.

In other words, both of them develop certain behaviours and habits that can be classified as 'war neuroses' in their later life. Samad Iqbal, for example, repeatedly and compulsively goes back to the historical events of Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and the story of Mangal Pandey, who is claimed by him to be his great-grandfather, in order to compensate his identity crisis and self-worth. Although Mangal Pandey is a controversial historical figure, Samad goes to a great length to prove his heroism again and again to heal his own psychological damages and to compensate his own failure.

Ironically, Mangal Pandey has also failed in his endeavour to overthrow the British rule in India. So, Samad's attempt to grasp his true identity in this manner becomes more problematic. It is argued that "this historical uncertainly lets him contextualize his own identity" but he becomes "a great example of a character who exists in this constant transition state" [16]. Furthermore, despite his passive and negligible participation, his selective recollection of some imaginary yet glorious events and his contribution to the war several times during the course of the novel indicate how his traumatic experiences are repressed and his memory undergoes significant changes.

Archie Jones, on the other hand, repeatedly flips coin while taking important decisions of life instead of thinking rationally. He does so while killing a Nazi, while committing suicide and numerous other times throughout the novel. Furthermore, he marries two women both of whom are immigrants. While marrying an immigrant is not a bad thing in itself, the ways he gets involved with his two wives indicate that his decisions are not made on rational grounds rather these are a simple way of getting out of the suffering that he faces due to the trauma he experiences during the war. Archie's dissociation or fragmentation of self and his marginalisation in his own community are evident in his passive response to the offer of luncheon vouchers by his office's boss so that he does not bring Clara Bowden, his Jamaican wife, to the office's dinner. Archie's psychological disorientation is evident here that he fails to decode his boss's subtle manipulation immediately after offering those vouchers when he says, "We put the names in a hat and yours came out. Still, I don't suppose you'll be missing much" [13].

Apart from them, Mr. J. P. Hamilton, a veteran of Congo war, also suffers from the adverse effects of war trauma. It is evident from the fact that he keeps talking about the violence and atrocities of war in front of Magid, Millat and Irie, who visit him as part of their community service. He asks questions about brushing teeth regularly and goes on to say that a Negro can easily be identified by his white teeth. Then he starts talking his encounters with Negroes in the war and says,

All these beautiful boys lying dead there, right in front of me, right at my feet. Stomachs open, you know, with their guts on my shoes. Like the end of the bloody world. Beautiful men, enlisted by the Krauts, black as the ace of spades; poor fools didn't even know why they were there, what people they were fighting for, who they were shooting at. The decision of the gun. So quick, children. So brutal. Biscuit? [13]

Mr. Hamilton's preoccupation with narrating war experiences in general conversation having no proper context and obsession with the cleanliness of teeth testify to the disruption of his mental health. He seems to have lost his idea of social contexts and sense of appropriation as he talks about the war in such a way and in front of those who are not old enough to comprehend his experiences. Though Mr. Hamilton's racist attitude is very apparent, such articulation of his is nothing but an outburst of his war trauma. He offers biscuits at the end of such a sinister comment that also indicates his mental instability. Therefore, the children quickly run away from his house and consider him more "scary" than the other mad people who lived in the community [13].

Personal, Social and Cultural Trauma: In the novel, personal, social and cultural trauma intersect and form a complex web of interconnected experiences that shape the characters' sense of identity, their perceptions of the world, displacement, dissociation, behaviour and daily responses. The characters' origin, their histories and displacement are not only limited to themselves but also extend to influence the lives of other characters. As most of the characters, in the novel, are immigrants, there is a pattern of traumatic experiences that they face while living in a 'multicultural' society. That is why it has been argued that "the dilemma of *White Teeth*'s characters is related to their lives 'in-between' different cultures, customs, religions and beliefs" [17].

To present these complex issues effectively, the novel employs a non-linear narrative structure where the perspectives shift from one character to another and from one time period to another. Also, frequent use of flashbacks of different characters and the events of the past allow the third person omniscient narrator to present the complexities of the characters' life. Thus, the novel encapsulates the disjointed and fragmented memories of the characters, the long-lasting emotional impact, intrusion and recurrence of such memories, and the psychological disorientation of the characters by employing such strategies.

For example, Ophelia Diagilo, the protagonist Archie Jones's first wife, struggles with her mental stability that significantly affects their marriage and ultimately alters Archie's course of life. Ophelia, being an Italian descent and person whose family shares a history of mental breakdown, faces problems of different sorts, loses herself and believes herself to be the "maid of the celebrated fifteenth-century art lover Cosimo de' Medici" [13]. Ophelia like all the other characters of the novel shares what Bhabha calls the "third space" where historic memories, sense of self and all other known and used concepts are continuously modified, reconstructed and redefined [18].

Although the reasons behind her psychosis are not clarified in the novel, it can be speculated that she develops her mental condition as a result of her shared history of madness, her inability to assimilate in the host culture and her association with a passive and psychologically disoriented war veteran Archie Jones who himself undergoes trauma of different sorts. As a result, their marriage remains a turbulent one from the very beginning. Although they get separated, their turbulent marriage continues to influence Archie's later life. The marital life of Ophelia and Archie points out the transmittable nature of trauma both from one person to another and from one generation to another.

Similarly, Archie's suicidal attempt and his eventual marriage with Clara Bowden are the culminating effects of all his traumatic experiences. Clara Bowden shares a Jamaican lineage because of which she navigates through the complexities of race, identity and cultural heritage as she is raised under the strict supervision of her mother Hortense Bowden who is a Jehovah's Witness. Hortense Bowden as a first generation immigrant encounters unpleasant experiences and resorts to religious dogmatism as an escape. Her position in the society is best explained by Scott who argues that most first generation immigrants are despised by the Londoner. As a result, it "leads to a feeling of marginalization and rejection of the immigrants – a certain type of ghettoization" [16]. Of course, this marginalisation inevitably extends to the next generation.

So, Clara Bowden, due to the religious dogmatism of her mother and her mixed origin, suffers emotional repression that significantly influences her later life. She marries Archie Jones only after meeting for a while with the hope of getting a stable life that remains absent in her parents' household. The marriage is an act of asserting her freedom and a means to escape from the traumatic experiences she shares with her own family and society in general although the marriage proves to be a double-edged sword at the later phase of the novel.

Furthermore, Clara as a second generation of immigrant faces racism and her identity is marked by her cultural heritage and displacement in a postcolonial Britain. She is marginalised in the community where she is born. It is evident in the novel when the staffs of Archie's office do not like the idea of dining with her. Furthermore, Clara's Jamaican accent highlights the linguistic barrier in a community where she struggles to express and establish her own identity. Although she shows resilience and strength by asserting her own agency, her life becomes a site of investigation of traumatic experiences.

Moreover, the Iqbal family also struggles with the same kind of personal, social, cultural and religious trauma. Both Samad Iqbal and Alsana Begum migrated to London from Bangladesh, a former British colony. Their assimilation in a multicultural London is characterized by racism, marginalisation and discrimination. Both of them struggle to anchor themselves in that society due to their culture, religion and history. Samad, at one hand, desperately tries to preserve his own values, religion, culture and historical lineage but faces the same fate like other immigrants. The cultural dissonance that he faces culminates in his chronic masturbation and nightmare.

Alsana, on the other hand, goes through multiple traumatic experiences due to certain behaviours and decisions of her husband and the cultural displacement after moving to London. When Samad decides to send Magid to Bangladesh to learn the tradition and values of their ancestors, she goes through a phase where she resorts to ambiguous use of language. In other words, the readers notice disruption of language in expressing her thoughts as a direct result of her trauma of getting separated from her son. The family rift also contributes to her personal, social and cultural isolation.

The Chalfens, a Jewish family, also show signs of personal, social and cultural trauma. Marcus Chalfen's attempt to genetically modify an animal points out his obsession with controlling the fate and environment around him. His attempts can also be linked with his historical trauma of the holocaust. His anxiety of disorder and uncertainty result from his from his latent Jewish identity. Joyce Chalfen, his wife, also shares same kind of obsession but in a different way. Although the Chalfens have assimilated perfectly to the multicultural society and enjoy certain privileges, their deep rooted historical trauma dictates their actions, obsessions and present life.

As for the next generation, the children of these three families share more intense trauma that is passed down to them from their previous generations. Irie Jones, Archie and Clara's daughter, faces the barrage of personal, social and cultural trauma because of her mixed origin, physical appearance and her cultural heritage. She grapples with her own sense of identity, social exclusion and sense of belonging. Among many of her responses to such complex issues, the idea of straitening her curly hair can be given as an example. She undergoes a painful hair transplant process just to be recognized because she believes that having straight hair would fill her void of non-recognition. Her journey of self-discovery is also linked with her desire to go back to Jamaica where she believes she will get some peace that is threatened by all her internal conflicts in London.

Millat and Magid, the twin of Samad and Alsana, also face racism, generational gap and cultural crisis from the very beginning of their life. When Magid is sent to Bangladesh by Samad, they are separated for almost eight years. In these eight years, Millat gets involved with things that he believes will get him some recognition from other people. His Don Juan lifestyle, addiction to marijuana and eventual involvement with the radical group called Keepers of Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation or KEVIN are nothing but the result of marginalisation, racism, dissatisfaction with his parents' decision and his expressions of all the repressed desires. KEVIN offers him an identity that he always lacks.

Magid, on the other hand, turns out to be a fine gentleman who, instead of internalising his own traditional values and religion, prefers to become "More English than the English". His obsession with cleanliness, use of proper language and clothing can be linked to his desperate attempt to assimilate to the dominating culture at that time. At the end of the novel, when the twin finally meets in a room, they are unable to communicate with one another which indicate the disruptive quality of language in extreme situations. Their mutual indifference to each other is nothing but an expression of deep rooted traumatic experiences passed to them by their previous generations.

Conclusion: The narrative structure and characterization strategies of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* offer a unique position for the readers to perceive the detrimental effects of war, problems of living in a multicultural society and the predicaments of immigrants with a colonial history to assimilate in the culture of their former ruler. It further shows how such problems intervene in the lives of people across generations and shatter their sense of belonging, perception of self, cultural values, religion and history. In doing so, Smith reveals the multiple layers of personal, social and cultural trauma of the characters and how the causes and effects of such traumatic experiences intersect. She further captures how trauma is transferred from one person to another and one generation to another, although the nature of traumatic experiences is unconscious and the pervasive effects of such experiences challenge the limits of language, the writer gains a unique agency in depicting such experiences. In short, the novel emerges as a trauma novel as it successfully addresses both the causes and effects of visible and invisible trauma in the lives of the characters while remaining well within the limits of language.

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