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Narrative Strategies in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Abstract:

Women's version of their own experience questions the male authority to describe female experiences. Women's writing throws up all kinds of queries related to oppression and colonization. It has helped both to build and express the idea of a female "self", and dismantles the concept of the all-inclusive male "I". Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*(2000)and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) are fictional works, though they incorporate elements based on their authors' personal experiences. The selected texts reveal the experiences of two ethnic minority writers in London. Monica Ali penetrates into the personal relations of migrants, while Smith captures the interaction among people belonging to different races. Monica Ali's microscopic view and Smith's wide ranging perspective give us a whole picture of multicultural London.The present paper analyzes the narrative strategies employed by Zadie Smith in *White Teeth* and Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*.

Key words: narrative, ethnic, women, race, female, self.

Jasbir Jain states in the introduction to *Women's Writing: Text and Context*(1999) women's writing has relevance and validity for more reasons than one. Not only does it project the observations, situations, responses and struggles of half of humanity, it also reflects a consciousness constructed by gender, the *being* which is defined traditionally by frameworks of kinship, marriage and procreation. It focuses attention on the definition of freedom and creativity. Women's writing throws up all kinds of queries related to oppression and colonization. It has helped both to build and express the idea of a female "self", and dismantles the concept of the all-inclusive male "I". Overcoming the physical and psychological barriers women have learnt to know and discover themselves.MamtaKalia

points out that in writing she finds some kind of emancipation from her inner turmoil. In her poem "I Write", she says, "I write/ because I can't bite/ It is the way/ the weak one's fight" (15). A transformation of the lives of women and of men is possible by finding the link between life and text. Women's version of their own experience questions the male authority to describe female experiences. The present paper analyzes the narrative strategies employed by Zadie Smith in *White Teeth*(2000) and Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*(2003).

The selected texts, *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* portray friendship and familial bonds that echo the lives of numerous Muslims across the continent. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is a modern classic on immigrant experience. It powerfully brings out the estranged relationship between the British and the immigrants. The novel, "a cauldron of ethnic hotchpotch" as EasminHaque calls it records the complex lives of immigrants in a playful manner. Smith's narration reminds of the postmodern method of taking things lightly when incapable of changing things. In "Melodramatic Postures", Puwar points out that the works of people like MeeraSyal, Meena Alexander and Zadie Smith come to function as a second order mediations on the, still, mysterious world of Otherness" (35).

White Teeth appears chaotic. The novel jumps around chronologically and the third person omniscient narrator highlights the events that are significant in this complicated, fun filled yet serious novel. The narrator provides commentary on the plot and gives the readers an insight into the emotions of the characters as well. The title, White Teeth reminds us of a different version of the same symbol – all bleed the same blood. Teeth symbolize humanity as a whole. The novel deals with three generations and takes us back along the tangled roots to help us get a better view of its characters. The novel deals with a diverse group of people in the North London neighbourhoods of Willesden and Kilburn. The action takes place in India, Jamaica and London between 1974 and 1992. The novel echoes Smith's own experience, present the various strategies of inhabiting in a multicultural setting and inscribe and validate the different ways of being British. Several aspects of Zadie Smith's life are reflected in her characters though she denies that they are direct portraits of her own experience. She had mixed race parentage—British father and Jamaican mother like her character, Irie. Claire Squires, a critic, states in *Zadie Smith's* White Teeth*: A Reader's Guide,* "While Smith denies that her characters are direct portraits of her own experience, she makes it clear that the details of her autobiography have contributed to the themes..." (9).

In *White Teeth*, a lot of characters are preoccupied with a lot of things and part of the charm of the novel is due to its ability to time travel. The novel's epigraph "what is past is prologue" uttered by Antonio in *The Tempest*, Act II, scene 1 illustrate another aspect of the story – the obsession of the characters with the past. Past and present are mixed up and the narrator moves back and forth between the serious and the playfulness. For instance, World War II does not take much space in the story but it takes much space in Samad and Archie's head. It is the world war that brings the English man, Archie and the Bangladeshi, Samad together – a friendship which forms a major element of the story and setting. The words and phrases like "But let's rewind a little" that appear here and there in the novel reminds us of the mixed up nature of the novel. The story is modern with characters rooted in tradition. Chapter 9 opens with a quiz that helps us to understand the way Samad's wife, Alsana views the world.

(a) Are the skies you sleep under likely to open up for weeks on end?

(b) Is the ground you walk on likely to tremble and split?

(c) Is there a chance (and please tick the box, no matter how small that chance seems) that the ominous mountain casting a midday shadow over your home might one day erupt with no rhyme or reason? (210)

Smith's use of multiple choice quiz helps us perceive that, "Born of a green and pleasant land, a temperate land, the English have a basic inability to conceive of disaster, even when it is man-made" (211). A list of three days pops up in the middle of the same chapter. A lot of funny events occur here. The three different days analyzed in detail are October 15, 1987; January 14, 1989 and November 10, 1989. Chapter 10 deals with 1857, when MangalPande, Samad's ancestor attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate his English superior officer. Chapter 5 goes back to 1945 and traces the strange friendship of Samad and Archie. Chapter 13 tells the story of Hortense's birth during the Jamaican earthquake of 1907.

In the introduction to *Women's Writing,* Jasbir Jain refers to the comic strain in women's writing. She says women can write comedy, and a comedy which is not bogged down by narrow concerns, there is a female comic tradition and a pretty strong one at that (running right through AphraBehn, Fanny Burney, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte to Gaskell). She observes that comedy can be a means of subversion and criticism. Social and patriarchal structures, class-divisions, snobbery, fashion can all be criticized. In the novel, Archie's only

achievement of sharing thirteenth place for track cycling at the Olympics in London in 1948 is undercut by the narrator's comic description which discloses that he reached nowhere – "what Archie liked about track cycling was the way you went round and round. Round and round" (13).

Archie's life seemed to be boring and unremarkable. The cynical tone of the narrator is evident in the description of Archie's suicide attempt.

> Once the car started to fill with gas, he had experienced the obligatory flashback of his life to date. It turned out to be a short, unedifying viewing experience, low on entertainment value, the metaphysical equivalent of the Queen's Speech. A dull childhood, a bad marriage, a dead-end job – that classic triumvirate – they all flicked by quickly, silently, with little dialogue, feeling pretty much the same as they did the first time round. He was no great believer in destiny, Archie, but on reflection it did seem that a special effort of predestination had ensured his life had been picked out for him like a company Christmas present – early, and the same as everyone else's. (13-14)

Sometimes the words are capitalized and there is a shift in the narrative style.

> … he was the BIGGEST and the BADDEST, living his life in CAPITALS: he smoked first, he drank first, he even lost it – IT! – aged thirteen and a half. OK, so he didn't FEEL much or TOUCH much, it was MOIST and CONFUSING, he lost IT without even knowing where IT went, … that he was the best of the rest, on any scale of juvenile delinquency he was the shining light of the teenage community, the DON, The BUSINESS, the DOG'S GENETALIA, a street boy, a leader of tribes. (218)

This shift in the writing style indicates how Millat might think or talk.

Smith employs repetition both as a trope and a thematic motif throughout the book. One of the phrases that recurs like a refrain is "past-tense, future-perfect" which represents the "myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect" (448) – the dream of all immigrants that the miserable past life will be transformed in the future. In *White Teeth*, Archie is shot in the leg a second time while saving Dr. Perret's life. There are several near escapes from death – Archie's attempt to kill himself, his return to his tank during war to find the rest of the crew killed and he narrowly escapes from being crushed to death by a tree during the hurricane of 1987. Like Samad's grandfather, MangalPande, Millat too

unsuccessfully attempts to assassinate Dr. Perret. Archie who was familiar with Samad's repeated accounts of MangalPande's story recognizes that Millat was "a Pandy deep down" (526) and rescues Dr.Perret.

The story goes on even when it appears to end. At the end, the Future Mouse escapes and Archie thinks, "Go on my son!" (542). The mouse with its brown colour is similar to the South Asians and its escape indicates new possibilities. According to the critic, Claire Squires, "The name of Joshua's animal rights group, Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation (FATE)is a heavy hint of the themes played out in the novel".

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* employs hysterical realism. Hysterical realism is a term coined by the English critic, James Wood in his essay on Zadie Smith's *White Teeth.* He sees it as a literary genre which strongly contrasts between absurd prose, plot or characterization on one hand and careful, detailed investigations of real, specific social phenomena on the other. In "This is how it feels to me", Smith states, "It is a painfully accurate term for the sort of overblown, manic prose to be found in novels like my own *White Teeth* and a few others he was sweet enough to mention. These are hysterical times; any novel that aims at hysteria will now be effortlessly outstripped – this was Wood's point, and I'm with him on it". In "Post Hysterics – Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity", David Marcus refers to James Wood's review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth.*

James Wood perhaps best captured this line of criticism in his 2000 review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. The problem with "hysterical realism," as he called it, was not only that it imitated the world around it too closely but that it also confused motion for vitality, narrative acrobats for emotional complexity, catalogues of facts for the drama of knowing. "The conventions of realism are not being abolished," Wood argued, "but, on the contrary, exhausted." The hysterical novel failed not "at the level of verisimilitude, but…morality." It reproduced the chaos it hoped to resist, replacing meaningful self-discovery with the solitudes of self-consciousness. It knows, Wood concluded, "a thousand different things—How to make the best Indonesian fish curry! The sonics of the trombone! The drug market of Detroit! The history of strip cartoons!—but [not] a single human being" (Marcus 2013).

David Marcus also refers to Smith's 2003 essay on Forster's novels where she clarifies,

> … her turn from style to ethics and from exuberant self-expression to restrained empathy. When "you put people on paper and move them through time, you cannot help but talk about ethics." A novelist cannot merely manufacture "an exquisitely worked game"; he or she must also create a world complex enough to preserve the often-muddled ambiguities of human experience. (Marcus 2013)

Referring to the Joycean qualities in Smith's narrative, Marcus points out, "to be sure, the novel does invoke many similarities: the bold challenge of its stream of consciousness, the jarring peculiarity of its use of page and punctuation, the post-Newtonian sense of space and time. But the novel's true inspiration is perhaps less Joyce than his often-neglected acolyte: the American novelist Henry Roth" (Marcus 2013).

Brian Finney in the essay, "Zadie Smith's *White Teeth"* citesSandhu who points out, "Occasionally, Smith's eagerness to show the weird interconnectedness of all things leads her to nurture stories and situation tragedies more diffuse than she can fully carry off". Finney states that Smith is said to lose control of her narrative in the course of painting on so wide a multicultural canvas. The novel initially focuses on Archie Jones about to end his wretched existence. He refers to Smith's view that this sleight of hand, by means of which she lures readers into thinking they are entering a conventional novel about white Britons was "a small act of subversion". Archie has to be rescued by Mo Hussein Ishmael, an Asian Jewish halal butcher. Mo is seen fighting an on-going war against the pigeons whose excrement covers the buildings of Willesden. SukhdevSandhu's review of the novel titled "Excremental Children" highlights the way shit constitutes one of the key metaphors in it: "Shit . . . is what those dusky immigrants . . . are told they are, almost every day of their lives" (5). Jan Lowe in "No More Lonely Londoners" points out that Mo's daily battle with London's pigeons suggests that, "[f]ar from bringing filth and disease to Britain, the immigrants clean it up and save the Archies of this world from the scrap heap of history" (169).

Both *Brick Lane* and *White Teeth* celebrate the multicultural nature of multicultural London. Finney states citing John Clement Ball that for Zadie Smith and Monica Ali, London becomes a "semi-detached signifier: it is and is not Britain; it is and is not the world" (9). Ali and Smith are not only of mixed ethnicity but are second generation immigrants born and brought up in England. They are baffled when they find themselves treated as foreigners in a land which they regard as their own.

Monica Ali who was born in Bangladesh and raised in Bolton, England did not intend to write her life's story in the novel but the theme of the in-between life of the immigrant experience resonates in the core of the novel. The book is at times comic and then tragic. The power of the novel resides in Ali's scrutiny of its miserable yet hopeful characters. The story in *Brick Lane* is told mainly in third person from Nazneen's point of view. In *Brick Lane,* we get to know of the various events through Nazneen's eyes and the novel elaborates only Nazneen's thoughts. Her observations too become mature as she emerges out of her passivity. From a psychological perspective, *Brick Lane* appears as a bildungsroman that narrates thirty four years of Nazneen's life. Ali's preferred mode like that of Smith is satirical. *Brick Lane* is Ali's first novel where she is more interested in character than in language.

Showalter points out that women's fiction can be read as a double-voiced discourse containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story what Gilbert and Gubar called a 'Palimpsest'. Women's stories subvert the dominant ideology and are double voiced discourses that provide multiple meanings. Such instances of multiple meanings are evident in several parts of Ali's text for instance, when Nazneen rejects Karim, she suspects that there was a "little bit of a smile around his lips" (451).

Nazneen remains passive in about the first 300 pages. Nazneen's feelings towards her husband,Chanu are not clear: "Was she beginning to love Chanu, or just getting used to him?" (40). But the warmth and affection involved in Nazneen's attachment to her daughters is evident.In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Nancy Chodorow points out that mothers and daughters have "a prolonged symbiosis and narcissistic over identification" between them (104). Boys who move out of the pre-oedipal phase devalue what is feminine and rejects his attachment to his mother. "Girls emerge with a basis for "empathy" built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own […] girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object world" (167).

The novel, *Brick Lane* written in English is supposed to have taken place in Bengali. Nazneen's sister, Hasina elaborates about her situation in Bangladesh through excessively long letters written in broken and often incorrect English.

> *I think of Amma too sometime as well. She is not come in dreams as she come to you. Why you think she angry? Sometime I feel angry to her. She have no reason be angry*

> *with me or with you sister. You remember what Abba use to call? 'A saint she come from family of saints'. He go to other women. He want to take other wife but she give threat to kill own self. My husband tell me. Everyone know it but us. Tears will come but I tell the truth.* (italicized in the original 156)

This astonishes the reader who finds it as an odd decision because the narrator reveals at the beginning, "Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you" (19). Listening to Dr. Azad's anglicised daughter, "Nazneen (catches) the words pub and money". Nazneen's daughter, Shahana speaks English at home against Chanu's will.

The narrative does not reveal the rural background in Bangladesh but we find that the people of Dhaka are familiar with Britney Spears and Pantene Head and Shoulders beauty contests.

The action of the novel, *Brick Lane*takes place between 1967 and 2002. 1967 is the date of Ali's and Nazneen's birth. The events in 1967 highlight the importance of fate. Nazneen's early experience in London occurs from 1985 to 1988. The events in Bangladesh from 1988 to 2001 are revealed through letters from Hasina to Nazneen. Major development in Nazneen's life occurs from February 2001 to March 2002. A series of interludes are provided by Hasina's letters.

In "Come Hungry, Leave Edgy", SukhdevSandhu states, "Some of the figures used to evoke rural Bangladeshi life are plaintively telling: Nazneen sees a couple of schoolchildren who look 'as pale as rice and loud as peacocks'; a fridge hums 'like a giant mosquito'; wearing a Parka coat, Chanu resembles 'a Kachuga turtle'. We are told that Nazneen has forgotten most of the details of her birthplace, yet the exotic imagery racks up with increasing excess: she talks to the machines keeping her son alive in hospital 'like a mahout calms an angry elephant'; a surprised Chanu 'looked ambushed, raided by dacoits'; making love to Karim, 'like a Sufi in a trance, a whirling dervish, she lost the thread of one existence and found another.' It's as if Sir Richard Burton had set out to write a Mills and Boon romance". John Mullan in The Guardian finds the similes as both nostalgic and reassuringly comic". "To get to the other side of the street without being hit by a car was like walking out in the monsoon and hoping to dodge the raindrops". "A horn sounded like an ancient muezzin, ululating painfully". The comparisons remind us of her lost life in Bangladesh. When she crossed the road while stepping out with another woman she felt, "like a calf with its mother". The city office block beyond Brick Lane had glass "dark as a night pond".

Machines in the hospital "purr like civets" and the women she meets have "strange hair. It puffed up around their heads, pumped up like a snake's hood". The sequins on the clothes that she sewed "looked like fish scales". As Mullan says, "Similes reach out to the experiences of the story's original audience, and like those in Brick Lane, to a simpler, agricultural world". The two things compared are as much different as they are similar. Similes make the novel more poetic and the language seems to be more picturesque.

As Ali alerts us early in the narrative, Nazneen comes to be "as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye" (16). The symbol of iron fist that Rupban feels just before the birth of Nazneen is a symbol of the hardship that Nazneen encounters in later life – separation from her homeland and early death of her mother. Fate is the novel's strongest theme. "What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne" (16) introduces fate as a major theme of the novel. Nazneen overcomes her fate as a dependent woman in an arranged marriage and becomes an autonomous woman. Brick Lane is also a symbol of Bengali culture and one need to go beyond Brick Lane to meet the challenge of the outer world. Another symbol is the fallen woman. It is used in the novel both figuratively and metaphorically. The novel refers to the woman falling from her window, Hasina counting her fallen state, stories of other fallen women and Nazneen's mother, Rupban fallen by spear in the store room.

The anecdote by Mrs. Islam which Ali incorporates in chapter 3 reveals an understanding of the inner feminine wisdom. The anecdote tells how the woman in the village were told by a prostitute that the only way they would get water for their village is by withholding sex until the well was dug. She says,

> There is another kind of labour we perform, and if we withdraw it that will be a discomfort only for the men … A man cannot live without water. He cannot live without it, but he can bear the thought of no water. A man can live without sex. He can live without it, but he cannot bear the thought of no sex … That's how the women in my village got themselves a new well. If you think you are powerless, then you are. Everything is within you, where God put it. If your husband does not do what is required, think what you yourself have left undone. (65-66)

Ali's narrative thus gives an insight into how a Muslim woman gains power. The writer and activist, Germaine Greer criticised Monica Ali's "lack of authenticity". But

Salman Rushdie accused Greer for getting involved saying that her statements were "philistine, sanctimonious and disgraceful, but … not unexpected".

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* are fictional works, though they incorporate elements based on their authors' personal experiences. The selected texts reveal the experiences of two ethnic minority writers in London. Monica Ali penetrates into the personal relations of migrants, while Smith captures the interaction among people belonging to different races. Monica Ali's microscopic view and Smith's wide ranging perspective give us a whole picture of multicultural London.

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