

# The City and Multicultural Identity in Zadie Smith's Novels

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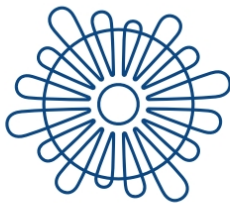
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(dvopredmetni)

**Melisa Rumora**

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Diplomski rad

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Zadar, 2021.



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## 1. Introduction

As Michael Perfect argues in his book *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism*, there has been an increasing amount of literary fiction since the middle of the twentieth century that has portrayed experiences of migrants from former British colonies to London (11). It is significant that, when their experiences are discussed and represented in literature, we are mainly talking about negative experiences. The white British feared the new inhabitants. This fear generated racism and perpetuated various stereotypes about immigrants, making their lives in a new city extremely difficult. The newcomers do not feel welcome, cannot find jobs, and are even considered dangerous. These issues are explored in the novels of many contemporary British authors, such as Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi, or Andrea Levi. As Perfect states, Zadie Smith, who has a white British father and a Jamaican mother, clearly uses her own life, childhood, and biracial identity as an inspiration for the character of Irie Jones in *White Teeth* (9), which is one of the novels under discussion in this diploma paper. As we will see, many of Smith's characters are mixed-race and are struggling to accept their identity, living in predominantly white cities. Apart from Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi also draws on his life in his work. In his *Collected Essays*, he describes the hostility first- and second-generation Pakistani immigrants experienced in Britain in the 1960s. Racist jokes and slurs, ignorance, injustice, stereotypes, and attempts to frighten the newcomers are some of the examples that Kureishi portrays in his essays, as we are going to see later in this paper.

According to Perfect, describing London as a multicultural city means referring to it as a city with a great number of immigrants who moved to London from former British colonies after the end of the Empire (5). He states that, although London never was 'monocultural', the white British had problems with accepting the new multicultural London and perceived the new inhabitants as 'the Other' (4). Edward Said presents the difference between the "Orient",

or the East, and the “Occident”, or the West, explaining that the notion of the East being different and exotic was created by the West (41). This clear demarcation between a Westerner and the ‘exotic Other’ from the East is an inevitable part of contemporary multicultural society in Smith’s novels. Marginalization, lack of freedom and choice, and the unhealthy obsessions with white beauty standards are also important issues in these novels. While many of the women’s issues in the selected novels will be analysed in the light of feminist theory, I will examine the issue of class and its connection to race in the context of cultural studies.

The texts I will be analysing in this diploma paper are four novels written by British novelist, essayist, and short-story writer Zadie Smith. Her debut novel *White Teeth* (2000) focuses on the lives of the Bangladeshi Samad Iqbal, his English friend Archie Jones, and their families in contemporary London. Samad, his wife Alsana, and their twins Millat and Magid experience racism on a daily basis and are throughout the novel seen as exotic and different. While Archie and his wife Clara do not have to deal with racism, their mixed-race daughter Irie is struggling with her biracial identity. The novel revolves around the characters’ struggle to find their place in society while dealing with racism and different family problems. *On Beauty* (2005), another novel to be discussed in my paper, centres on the lives of the Belseys and the Kipps, who live in Boston. Howard Belsey is a white Englishman married to an African-American woman called Kiki, with whom he has three children. Their son Levi and daughter Zora are very aware of the racism that is ubiquitous in American society and try to fight it. Apart from racism, the novel deals with themes such as family life, marriage, political views, as well as cultural and ethnic differences between the UK and the US.

*NW* (2012) is again set in London. Leah Hanwell, who is white, and the Jamaican Keisha (Natalie) Blake are the main protagonists of the book. The two friends have different backgrounds, but what they have in common is the North West part of London where they

spend their childhood. They both plan to have successful careers and move out of North West London, but only one of them succeeds, as we will see in my analysis. *Swing Time* (2016), Smith's latest novel, again focuses on two friends who grow up in North West London. The narrator, who remains unnamed in the course of the novel, and Tracey are childhood friends and, although they are both mixed-race and have similar backgrounds, grow up to have very different lives.

These novels, which are set in contemporary London, as well as other locations, such as Boston, New York, and even Africa, also share the theme of power distribution and class inequality in the context of racism. The aim of this diploma paper is to show how Zadie Smith conveys issues of identity, racism, and multiculturalism in contemporary urban setting. I will explore how immigrant and mixed-race protagonists deal with the ways the white British look down upon them, as well as the ways they try to find their place in society. I will also demonstrate how Smith's multicultural society functions in relation to issues of class and gender.

## **2. Britain in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries**

As James Tilley and Heath Anthony explain, 'Britishness' serves as a "constructed identity" that connects the British nations (662). According to Perfect, a celebration of British identity was the opening ceremony of the London Olympics on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2012, directed by the British film director Danny Boyle and watched by millions of viewers around the globe (1). It was called 'Isles Of Wonder' and had the goal of presenting and honouring the British past, but this past was also connected to the present British reality and all the changes happening at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These changes refer to the rapid growth of the capital of Britain,



the numerous immigrants who started to move to London and other parts of Britain after the Second World War, as well as the changes in the social life of the white British, who now have to live with the immigrants and their mixed-race British-born children.

Perfect especially emphasizes the year 1948 (2). It was the year when the National Health Service (NHS) was created, making healthcare available to all people in Britain, which was an important change. It was also the year when the *Empire Windrush* arrived in Britain with 492 West Indian immigrants. These immigrants, called the Windrush generation, were the first Caribbean immigrants who came to Britain, symbolising the beginning of a multicultural London. Perfect explains that this year was also the year of the British Nationality Act of 1948 that provided UK Citizenship to members of the Commonwealth nations, making it possible to migrate to Britain (mainly London) from former British colonies, which naturally followed the Act (2). All these events led to the rise of a more ethnically diverse and multicultural London and Britain.

With the creation of the NHS, the Windrush generation, and the British Nationality Act of 1948, more immigrants started to move to Britain, which slowly led to a very diverse population of London, making it one of the most diverse cities to ever exist, as Perfect states (4). Analysing the 2011 census data, he explains that 37 per cent of the London population was not born in Britain but in other countries, and only 45 per cent of the population consider themselves 'white British' (4). From this data, he concluded that most of the London population of 2011 is considered 'mixed race', making it the population group which was growing the fastest (4). Magali Cornier Michael explains that the British-born children of these newcomers and the generations that were born after them are a big part of the British population in the first 15 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2). The presented numbers show how fast the London population was changing and how diverse it was becoming.

Apart from the changes in population and different ethnic groups in Britain, life in British cities started to change in many other ways. The ‘white British’ and the first- and second-generation immigrants from former British colonies had to participate in each other’s lives since immigrants started working in the cities. Cornier Michael explains that the cities themselves started changing, as well as the working places and conditions (3). Although it was not desirable to live in city centres in the 1980s, it became a trend during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since life in these centres became expensive, not everybody could afford it, which is why those who did not live in the city had to commute to work every day. The middle class became the dominating class, but there were still observable differences between classes in neighbourhoods, often affecting the working and middle classes. Some people lived in gated communities, where those who were seen as a danger were separated from the rest of the population.

The changes that were happening were not welcomed by many British people. According to Cornier Michael, they led to the British feeling scared and angry, resulting in ideas among politicians for Britain to leave the EU, which were supported by many (2). In 2016, the British voted, and the majority supported the idea of Britain leaving the EU, which is known as Brexit. This idea became reality in 2020, as Britain withdrew from the EU. Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever explain that racism is often left out when talking about the reasons behind Brexit, yet it played a major role. They state that the British defined themselves against the “racialized minorities and migrants”, which ultimately led to Brexit (1803). As we are going to see in my analysis, characters in Smith’s novels are constantly targeted by the white British due to their skin colour and their non-British backgrounds, making living together difficult.

## 2. 1. Multiculturalism and urban setting in Britain

Multiculturalism as a term is rather complex and difficult to define, which then results in numerous incorrect usages of the term. Perfect explains that this term is often incorrectly used to refer to a society that consists of people with “differing beliefs, ideas, customs or social behaviours” (5). If this definition of multiculturalism is used when focusing on societies around the world, then every society could be defined as multicultural. According to Perfect, this would lead to the possibility of defining every group of people as multicultural, even if this group consists of three people in one room (5). However, contemporary multiculturalism in British context implies first and foremost, as he emphasizes, London where most immigrants have arrived from former British colonies following the end of British Empire. Since London as a city is often presented as diverse and multicultural, Perfect’s definition of multiculturalism can be helpful to understand many different cultures and ethnicities which can be found in London. As I will demonstrate, multiculturalism and diversity are essential to all four of Smith’s novels.

Nevertheless, Perfect criticizes his own definition of multiculturalism on two accounts. He explains that this definition does not portray how diverse London was when the Empire existed but only refers to the later period. Another criticism of his definition is the fact that many immigrants who live in London have not immigrated from former British colonies but also from other countries such as Poland or China (5). This makes his definition of multiculturalism inapplicable to many modern contexts of a multicultural London, emphasizing that “of course, European, Jewish and other ‘white’ migrant communities in London – and, indeed, other ‘non-white’ migrant communities – should certainly be considered part of the city’s multiculturalism in a broader sense” (6).

Sarah Song states that multiculturalism as a term serves to portray a diverse society, but it has also become “a normative ideal in the context of Western liberal democratic societies” (1). She explains that the goal is not to have immigrants and minority groups adjust to the dominant culture but to preserve their practices and protect and keep their identities now that they live in another country (1). Therefore, it is not enough to tolerate minority groups but also help them feel welcome and seen as equals. However, as Meghan Faragher notes, life for immigrants and minority groups is not easy, having to face prejudice and racial stereotypes in their everyday lives. For instance, one of the stereotypes is that the newcomers are dangerous, which causes fear among the British. As we will see in *On Beauty*, black people are perceived as dangerous, especially at night time and when women are alone. The black protagonists in the novel emphasize the presence of this fear on several occasions, clearly signalling their dissatisfaction due to this stereotype. As Faragher argues, an important factor in the spread of such hate and fear is the newspapers and media in general, which continued and became even more intense with time (105).

As Simona Veronica Abrudan Caciora states, “in the contemporary city, boundaries are more often symbolic than physical and clearly drawn”, with the symbolic boundaries referring to “demarcations of difference in terms of lifestyle, social class, culture, ethnicity, or race”, which actually divide the immigrants and the British (50). This is evident in the selected novels since protagonists are treated as ‘the Other’ due to their origins or social class. For instance, *White Teeth*’s Samad Iqbal works in an Indian restaurant and cannot find another job even though he is educated. Caciora argues that, due to these differences and changes happening to the population of the cities, both the immigrants and the host population have to find ways to adjust to these new circumstances (50).

It is evident that protagonists in Smith’s novels see and experience London in different ways. While some of them belong to higher classes, have a career, and can afford a

comfortable life for themselves and their families, others have to work harder to achieve their goals. As Molly Slavin says about *NW*, for instance, the two female protagonists of the novel “must negotiate the weights of personal and familial expectations, as well as those of larger society, to develop their own geographies for living in twenty-first-century London” (99).

## 2. 2. Racism, postcolonialism and ‘the Other’

As stated above, the selected texts analysed in this diploma paper deal with racism towards immigrants and the way they are perceived by the white British. Hanif Kureishi is, like Zadie Smith, British-born and mixed race. His essays are especially important for our discussion because he deals with experiences of an immigrant family and their mixed-race British-born son who struggles with racism in London even though he is a British citizen. This is evident in *White Teeth* and the racism the Iqbal twins and Irie Jones experience throughout the novel. Although they are born in Britain, they are constantly frowned upon by the white British due to their immigrant background or mixed-race identity. In his essay “The Rainbow Sign”, Kureishi explains that Pakistanis were often discussed in England in the 1960s. They often had language problems, were ridiculed on television and used by politicians, were given the worst jobs, and were represented negatively during the 1960s in England (3). He mentions racist ‘jokes’ he was told by teachers, such as speaking to him in an intense ‘Peter Sellers’ accent (referring to Seller’s character from the film *The Party*, who was Indian) and calling him ‘Pakistani Pete’ (4). However, he was not filled with hatred towards the white British. He perceived racism as “unreason and prejudice, ignorance and a failure of sense” and did not want to spread even more racism by hating white men, which is something many Pakistanis were doing (8). In his words, racism is a type of “snobbery” and is directly

connected to the class organization of society and the discrimination of certain classes (24). In Kureishi's words, the British were planning on reducing the multiculturalism in Britain in the 1960s, thinking that Britain was too multicultural (102). Therefore, they wanted to erase the immigrants and their culture, which he perceives as "a form of genocide" in his essay "Humouring the State" (139).

All four of Smith's novels which will be analysed in this diploma paper focus on the issue of identity in a multicultural society. Mindi McMann refers to *White Teeth* and states that "much of the critical reception of *White Teeth* has understandably attempted to position the novel within a postcolonial or multiethnic context" (617). Postcolonial studies examines and criticises the influence of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the way they affect the colonized countries and their inhabitants, such as stripping them of their land, identity, culture, and resources. Edward Said's theory about 'Orientalism' exerted a tremendous influence on the rise of postcolonial studies. In his famous book, he explains how the West has perceived and portrayed the East for centuries. The "Orient" or the East is usually seen as 'the Other', and the "Occident" is the West (for example Britain, France, and the USA). Therefore, he claims that the 'Orient' and the 'Occident' are presented as binary oppositions. He argues that the West is always portrayed as superior to the East which was enabled through texts which he calls 'Orientalist' and through the acceptance of the 'Orient' as such within Western society. He states that Orientalism is "a systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (3). Shehla Burney analysed Said's *Orientalism* and summarized some of Said's main points regarding the way the East is presented by the West. She cites Said and says that the "Orient was orientalised" and robbed of "its true identity, voice, and indigenous

culture” (26). This notion of the East being presented as ‘the Other’ or the ‘Orient’ and as inferior to Western society and culture, can be found in all four of Smith’s novels in this paper. While Western society is presented as superior, Eastern society is presented as inferior and often even dangerous.

### **3. Multicultural identity and the notion of 'Otherness': “a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated“**

As we have already said in the first chapters of the diploma paper, London is a city known for its diversity and multiculturalism, where immigrants, however, are still not welcome. Such an image of London can be seen in *White Teeth*, where the main protagonists are British, Bangladeshi, and Jamaican. The novel features two generations, the first- and second-generation immigrants. Samad, Clara, and Alsana represent the first-generation immigrants, while Irie Jones and the Iqbal twins, Magid and Millat, are second-generation immigrants born in Britain. These protagonists seem to be in contrast with the white British characters in the novel all the time, such as the Chalfens or Poppy Burt-Jones. It can be argued that the white Chalfens or Poppy Burt-Jones and the mixed-race protagonists are presented as binary oppositions in the same way ‘the Occident’ and ‘the Orient’ are presented in Said’s theory about ‘Orientalism’. Throughout the novel, the white British treat newcomers as exotic and different, emphasizing their perception of immigrants as ‘the Other’. Said argues that the West was originally interested in the East for political reasons but later became interested in the Eastern culture and identity, which led to the desire to present it as the complex and different “Other” (12). This interest in the ‘exotic Other’ can be found in the

novels. For instance, Poppy Burt-Jones, a music teacher, is interested in Samad because she thinks that he is Indian. She eventually finds out that he is actually Bangladeshi:

“I’m not actually from India, you know,” said Samad, with infinitely more patience than he had ever previously employed the many times he had been required to repeat this sentence since moving to England. Poppy Burt-Jones looked surprised and disappointed. “You’re not?” (Smith, *White Teeth* 136).

The first-generation immigrants, such as Samad, experience discrimination on a daily basis. Despite being an educated man who fought in World War II, he is unable to find a better job in London, so he works as a waiter in an Indian restaurant in the city centre. He feels alienated in London and is struggling to find his place in British society. It seems that he is very scared (and even paranoid) of Western culture and its influence on his twin sons. His fear becomes so intense that he decides to send one of his sons to Bangladesh to save him from this bad influence since he does not have enough money to send both of them. He separates Magid from the rest of the family and shows how far he is willing to go to distance him from Western culture. Even though he fears that his sons would become westernized, it is Samad who is not strong enough to resist the temptations and pleasures that Western society offers. He has an affair with his sons’ music teacher Poppy Burt-Jones and considers this a Western vice. Unfortunately, it is not only the first generation of immigrants who have to face racism and discrimination on a daily basis. Mixed-race Irie has to endure racial slurs from schoolmates, and the Iqbal twins constantly experience hostility. Irie and the Iqbal twins are also perceived as exotic by the British. When Joyce Chalfen encounters Irie and Millat for the first time, she assumes that they are not British based on their appearance:

“Well,” said Joyce, released by Marcus and planting herself down at the circular table, inviting them to do the same, “you look very exotic. Where are you from, if you don’t



mind me asking?” “Willesden,” said Irie and Millat simultaneously. “Yes, yes, of course, but where originally?” (Smith, *White Teeth* 323).

As Ryan Trimm states, even though Irie, Magid, and Millat are born in England and do not know of any other home, they are not at peace and are still not perceived as British by the British (149). Such reactions and comments only add to misunderstandings and conflicts between mixed-race and white British. This is why Irie feels like “a stranger in a stranger land” (Smith, *White Teeth* 270) and why Millat knew:

that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelled of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people’s jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shopowner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a filmmaker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshiped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. (Smith, *White Teeth* 240).

Due to these insecurities, they try to either change themselves or find an identity they are comfortable with. As Trimm states, they cannot find a home they belong to which is why they wander between homes in search of hospitality and stability (157). In order to find her place in society, Irie tries to get closer to the Chalfens and white Britishness but realises that she should explore her Jamaican roots as well. Magid, who becomes interested in science, also gets closer to white Britishness, despite his father’s attempts to avoid this, while Millat joins an Islamic extremist group.

In *On Beauty*, we meet the Belseys and the Kipps, and their children Jerome, Zora and Levi Belsey, and Victoria and Michael Kipps. The biracial Belsey children, just like the children in *White Teeth*, are searching for their identity while living in a predominantly white

neighbourhood. The family lives in a fictional university town of Wellington, near Boston. In this novel, America is filled with racism and discrimination, just as Britain in Smith's other three novels. *On Beauty*'s black and biracial protagonists are not accepted and are seen as 'the Other' by white Americans. Kiki Belsey, who is black, is ashamed that her husband hires black women to clean their house: "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" (Smith, *On Beauty* 201). Levi, their youngest son, is affected by this more than his two siblings: " 'And don't be telling me I'm paranoid,' snapped Levi, slinging his damp vest on the table. 'I just don't want to live here any more, man... all everybody does is stare' " (Smith, *On Beauty* 87). We might argue that Levi identifies more with black people than with white people and relates to the discrimination they experience. As Regine Jackson argues, this connection to black people and where they are, rather than what they look like, leads Levi to go out in the 'streets', speak with a Brooklyn accent, and fight for the rights of black and Haitian people, all of which affects his behaviour in the novel (857). Although his sister mocks the way he behaves and talks, he continues to rebel against the stigmatization of black people.

As I have already mentioned, the stereotype of black men being dangerous is present in Smith's novels. In *On Beauty*, Levi is also perceived as dangerous:

A very old black lady sitting on her porch was eyeing him like there was no other news in town. (...) Isn't there anything on TV, lady? Maybe he should buy a T-shirt that just had on it YO - I AM NOT GOING TO RAPE YOU. (Smith, *On Beauty* 82).

As we can see, even a black woman is scared of him. It seems that the fear of black men spreads even among black people, contributing to their feeling of 'Otherness'. Black men are stigmatised not only by white people, which fuels Levi's anger and his desire to fight

stigmatization. Apart from Levi, Carl is another black male character that Smith uses to portray the marginalization of black people in America. Carl is an intelligent African-American who is invited to join the class Zora is attending at her university even though he cannot afford it. Zora uses this opportunity to fight for the rights of non-students to join the university classes, through which she actually fights for the rights of black people. It can be argued that Carl and other black people in the novel are seen as ‘the Other’ by white Americans. Since they are robbed of their voice, as the ‘Orient’ in Said’s *Orientalism*, Zora is speaking on behalf of black people:

‘I think it would be much more powerful if it was you speaking your own mind. I mean, what I’d really like to do is send Carl himself, but you know...’ said Claire, sighing. ‘Depressing as it is, the truth is these people won’t respond to an appeal to their consciences in any language other than Wellington language. And you know Wellington language, Zora’ (Smith, *On Beauty* 256).

Another aspect of Western society Smith portrays in *On Beauty* is the hypocrisy of people in fictional Wellington. As Jackson argues, the people of Wellington are so colour-blind and privileged that they do not recognize racial discrimination, taking into consideration that the story is happening in a predominantly white neighbourhood (871). Levi, who is aware of this discrimination, is trying to make other people aware of it: “ ‘So how do you do it?’ demanded Levi. ‘By paying people four dollars an hour to clean? That’s how much you pay Monique, man! Four dollars! If she was American you wouldn’t be paying her no four dollars an hour. Would you?’” (Smith, *On Beauty* 413). As we can see, the Boston neighbourhood where the Belseys live is often racist without even being aware of it.

This can also be seen in Smith’s third novel, *NW*, where the two female protagonists with immigrant backgrounds try to succeed in London. As we see, London and Boston in the first two novels are represented as multicultural but at the same time predominantly white,

racist, and hostile towards immigrants and biracial characters. As Slavin states, in *NW*, Smith focuses on a particular part of London, and that is the North West part of the city, seen by many as insignificant and as a 'nowhere' in comparison to London's centre (99). Leah Hanwell and Natalie (Keisha) Blake grow up in Caldwell, which is perceived as unstable, chaotic, and lonely, and are dreaming of moving to central London. Natalie's parents are Jamaican and Leah is Irish, "the only white girl on the Fund Distribution Team" (Smith, *NW* 38). It can be argued that Leah fits in the white British society more comfortably than Natalie due to her looks and white skin. Therefore, Leah has a better chance of building a career and having a comfortable life since she is more likely to be accepted by the white British than her friend. Natalie, on the other hand, has to work harder than Leah and the white British because she is obviously not perceived as equal and good enough. She is aware of that and decides to change her name from Keisha to Natalie. She knows that London (and British society) still discriminates against black people and wants to make her journey to success easier by making her name stand out less. This is an aspect of multiculturalism that I have already mentioned when Song argues that newcomers should feel welcome in the new country, without having to alter their identity to fit in (1). Natalie accepts the fact that she has to re-make her identity in order to have a career and succeed in life.

As Slavin explains, it is also important how Smith's "characters inhabit that location, and how they draw cartographies that mediate between the weight of history and myth and the weight of personal lived experience" (100). Natalie and Leah have different visions of both Caldwell and central London. Willesden and Kilburn, other parts of north-western London also mentioned throughout the novel, are seen as "not truly English", as Slavin argues (101). When Leah's mother reads *The Mail*, she clearly states that Brent, the district in which Kilburn and Willesden are located, is not seen as 'British': "Today this is Brent. Tomorrow it could be Britain!" (Smith, *NW* 44). The fact that Brent is not perceived as British enough

shows how the problem of discrimination goes beyond the lives of the protagonists and is a problem of the whole nation. Leah and Natalie struggle throughout the novel, but only Natalie achieves social mobility and manages to move from one social class to another by changing her name, moving out of North West London, becoming a lawyer, and marrying a wealthy Italian. It can be noticed that neither of the two friends marries a British man. Instead, their husbands are French and Italian, showing that they establish relationships more easily with people of different nationalities than with the British who make them feel unwanted in the country they live in.

Like Willesden and Kilburn, neither of the two friends is seen as 'truly English' due to their immigrant backgrounds. Leah is an Irish protestant from a middle class family that is able to provide her with a good childhood, while Natalie's parents are working class Jamaican immigrants. It can be argued that neither Leah nor Natalie belongs to the white British of central London, and even though Leah is white and fits in more than Natalie, they are both being perceived as 'the Other' in the same way the immigrants in the first two analysed novels. Therefore, the binary opposition of the West and the East, or the white British and the 'exotic Other', is present in this novel as well. Furthermore, both Leah and Natalie feel a connection to Caldwell. Leah has a different relationship to Caldwell in comparison to Natalie: "Leah is as faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries" (Smith, *NW* 13). Even though she later becomes jealous of Natalie's career, she does not have the true desire to change her life and move elsewhere. She cannot fight the connection she feels to Caldwell, which is why she continues to live there. Natalie, on the other hand, is chasing a career in London but in the end returns to Caldwell, which shows that she also feels an emotional connection with the place she grew up in.

In Smith's latest novel, *Swing Time*, we also follow the lives of two girlfriends, their dreams of being successful, and leaving North West London. The two friends have a lot in common, but, as we will see, their lives go separate ways. The narrator and one of the main protagonists (who remains unnamed throughout the novel) meets Tracey when they are both children, as their "shade of brown was exactly the same—as if one piece of tan material had been cut to make us both—and our freckles gathered in the same areas, we were of the same height" (Smith, *Swing Time* 16). The reason why the narrator of this novel is unnamed remains an enigma, but similarities can be drawn between the narrator's and the author's life since they are both children of a white and a black parent and are raised in the North West part of London. While the narrator has a white father and Jamaican mother, Tracey has a white mother and Jamaican father, which is another thing the girls have in common. As Suzanne Scafe explains, the story takes place in London, New York, and West Africa, which are the geographies of the Black Atlantic, used to show how black people and their presence is created and changed by the uneven power distribution in the world, which I will elaborate more in the context of culture later in this diploma paper (104). The term Black Atlantic was first used by Paul Gilroy in 1993 and refers to the fusion of black culture with other cultures in the Atlantic. As Paul Tiyambe Zeleza states, Gilroy wanted to present the fluidity and mobility of the black race as well as separate it from any kind of African presence since the "black Atlantic cultural identities" emerged in other places in the diaspora as a reaction to racism (36).

*Swing Time's* multicultural London is once again a racist city. For instance, the girls go to different elementary schools; while Tracey "went off to her single-sex school, in Neasden, where almost all the girls were Indian or Pakistani and wild", the narrator's school "in Willesden, was milder, more mixed: half black, a quarter white, a quarter South Asian" (Smith, *Swing Time* 34). Yet, the white British seem not to be aware of the discrimination of

the black British. When the narrator shows Lily, a white girl, her favourite movie, this is her reaction: “ “Why was everybody black? It was unkind, she said, to have only black people in a film, it wasn’t fair. Maybe in America you could do that, but not here, in England, where everybody was equal anyway and there was no need to “go on about it” “ (Smith, *Swing Time* 96). In *Swing Time*, black people are targeted and most often experience racism, just like in her other novels. As in *On Beauty*, black men are perceived as stereotypically dangerous men who “ “lurked in the shadows” with iron bars to break the knees of lily-white dancers” (Smith, *Swing Time* 32). Furthermore, black children obviously do not have the same rights as white British children: “Neglect of state schools in the borough, neglect of black children in those schools, of black people in England, of black working class people in England, of single mothers, of the children of single mothers” (Smith, *Swing Time* 314). Tracey remains at the bottom of the social scale and continues to live in the same neighbourhood she was born in, has three children and is poor, while her friend/the narrator moves upward on the social scale and lives a much more comfortable life. Something they have in common is the discrimination and racism they have to endure on a daily basis. However, as we are going to see in the next chapter, they also have a lot in common with black and mixed-race female characters in other novels.

#### **4. Women in Smith’s novels: “and for a woman it’s even harder, you see”**

The selected novels, as we have seen, also portray family life, marriage, the upbringing of children, career choices, and education. Many of the female protagonists deal with biracial/non-British identity and have to cope with insecurities linked to white beauty

standards. Clara Bowden, Alsana Iqbal, and Irie Jones are the female protagonists in *White Teeth*. Alsana, for example, was promised to Samad even before she was born, and their arranged marriage shows to what extent women in patriarchal families are controlled. Once married to Samad, she becomes a housewife and takes care of the children and the household. She is uneducated, and although she calls herself a “barefoot country girl” who “never went to the universities”, she is not insecure and shares her opinions about different subjects throughout the novel (Smith, *White Teeth* 85). For instance, she explains that she likes Samad less every time she gets to know him a little better: “Now, every time I learn something more about him, I like him less: “So you see, we were better off the way we were” “ (Smith, *White Teeth* 82). She fights with Samad and even hits him in a fit of anger but stays married to him and does not speak to him for years after he sends Millat away:

Alsana had decided to stop speaking directly to her husband. Through the next eight years she would determine never to say *yes* to him, never to say *no* to him, but rather to force him to live like she did—never *knowing*, never being *sure*, holding Samad’s sanity to ransom (Smith, *White Teeth* 219).

As an immigrant woman in an arranged marriage, Alsana is expected to stay married and be a good wife and mother, despite being unhappy. She resorts to being passive-aggressive towards Samad, while other characters find different solutions. Equally unhappy, some of them react with jealousy towards other people’s success, like *NW*’s Leah, some with extramarital affairs, like her friend Natalie. Alsana’s Jamaican friend Clara marries her husband Archie for different reasons. After abandoning Jehovah’s Witnesses, Clara is searching for stability which she finds in Archie:

she saw more in him than simply a rather short, rather chubby, middle-aged white man in a badly tailored suit. Clara saw Archie through the gray-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, *White Teeth* 50).

Soon after getting married, Clara realises that their marriage is rather boring and unhappy. Nevertheless, she stays married to him because he can provide the stability and safety that she needs. Both Alsana and Clara are unhappily married and depend on men, but Clara wants to change her life circumstances. She starts attending a class at a university and is trying to create a life outside her marriage with Archie. Clara and Archie's daughter Irie struggles with her biracial identity, her curly hair and dark skin: "Irie believed she had been dealt the dodgy cards: mountainous curves, buckteeth and thick metal retainer, impossible Afro hair, and to top it off mole-ish eyesight that in turn required Coke-bottle spectacles in a light shade of pink" (Smith, *White Teeth* 272). McMann states that "the novel exposes the ways that advertisements, demands placed on female bodies, and the images of white European standards that surround Irie affect wider perceptions and understandings of race" (626). Due to her desire to be accepted by the white British and seen as beautiful by the Iqbal twins, she decides to go to a hair salon and straighten her hair, which eventually totally destroys her hair. This attempt to alter her appearance to look more 'white' results in a lot of criticism from her friends: "'But that's not your hair, for fuck's sake, that's some poor oppressed Pakistani woman who needs the cash for her kids,'" said Neena, giving it a tug and being rewarded with a handful of it" (Smith, *White Teeth* 288). Irie learns to embrace the ways she looks and her mixed-race identity by the end of the novel, but she is not the only protagonist who struggles with insecurities and the desire to achieve white beauty standards.

In *On Beauty*, we follow Zora on her path to self-acceptance. As Colleen Fenno argues, Zora is attempting to build her own identity in the novel, despite the fact that her father, who is also her idol, works at the same university she attends (183). Although she is a bright young woman who attends poetry classes and actively fights for the rights of black

people, her appearance and the obsession with beauty standards seem to be her priorities. She constantly compares herself to other girls, such as Victoria Kipps, who symbolises the ideal woman in the novel. Unlike the other three novels, the ideal woman in this one is a black woman, and Zora is jealous of her. Even though Victoria represents the ideal of black beauty in the novel, Zora still pursues white beauty ideals. These are forced upon girls more frequently than black beauty ideals. As Fenno argues, Zora is trying to achieve a beauty ideal that remains unachievable for her no matter how hard she tries, which leaves her frustrated (185). It can be argued that she is obsessed with her looks and the way other people perceive her, which does not allow her to achieve fulfilment as a student and a young politically active woman.

Issues of (white) beauty ideals and what women are supposed to look like are interspersed throughout the novel. Claire who teaches creative writing at Wellington College, for instance, notices how magazines negatively influence young girls and their self-esteem: “Still starving themselves, still reading women's magazines that explicitly hate women, still cutting themselves with little knives in places they think can't be seen, still faking their orgasms with men they dislike, still lying to everybody about everything.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 221). Kiki, who is overweight and obviously does not conform to beauty standards, notices the way men (and society in general) are obsessed with women's bodies. She is even criticised by her own husband, who cheats on her and tries to blame the affair on Kiki and her weight problem: “Well, I married a slim black woman, actually. Not that it's relevant” (Smith, *On Beauty* 201). Howard's statement shows just how much men value women's physical appearances. Such beauty standards, unfortunately, create differences and conflicts between women, which pit our female protagonists against each other. On the other hand, the ideal and more traditional mother and wife in the novel is embodied in the character of Victoria's mother, Charlene Kipps. Charlene happily dedicates her life to her husband and

children: “‘I don't ask myself what did I live for,' said Carlene strongly. That is a man's question. I ask whom did I live for' ” (Smith, *On Beauty* 172). This is very much appreciated by her traditional husband, who says that she is “the ideal 'stay-at-home' Christian Mom” (Smith, *On Beauty* 168).

As we can see, *White Teeth* and *On Beauty* focus on women's roles in their family, as well as on their bodies. In *NW* and *Swing Time* the focus is more on different life paths and life decisions of the female protagonists, who are trying to achieve success in London. Natalie in *NW* becomes a successful lawyer, has a rich husband and children, while Leah remains in North West London, marries but has no children, and has a low-paying job. Although Leah's life seems good because she has a job and a “proper family orientated” husband (Smith, *NW* 37), she is not happy. She envies Natalie and her life, yet does nothing to create one for herself. While Leah is passive and does not work hard to improve her life circumstances, Natalie tries her best to achieve her goals in life. She does not really understand her friend's lack of effort and thinks that Leah is “completely stuck. Stasis. She can't seem to dig herself out of this hole she's in” (Smith, *NW* 260).

Leah's decision not to have children is criticized both by her mother and her husband: “To be very objective about it, it is the woman's fault that they never discussed children” (Smith, *NW* 29). She takes birth control pills and even has an abortion without telling her husband because she knows he would not approve of it. It can be said that this is the only sphere of her life where she takes control and decides for herself. By deciding that she does not want to have children, she is defying societal expectations of women. She is also avoiding discussing this issue with her husband since she knows that her husband and mother disagree with her. Nevertheless, she takes control and lives her life the way she wants. As we can see, society expects women to have children and criticizes and judges them if they choose to live a life without them. It seems that Leah is making herself a priority in her life and is not afraid of

judgement and criticism. She knows that only she can decide whether or not she wants to have children, no matter what society, her mother, or her husband expect of her. Despite their differences, Natalie defends her choice not to have kids in front of Leah's husband: "Leah loves you. She always has. She just doesn't want to have a baby" (Smith, *NW* 295).

However, as Judith Taylor argues, "Natalie and Leah struggle with their own life trajectories and feelings of emptiness, but they also judge one another" (459). She explains that Leah envies Natalie's success, her expensive home, and her dinner parties, making her question Natalie's 'blackness', while Natalie criticizes Leah's low effort and lack of motivation to try to improve her life and career (459). Even though Natalie is successful, has a rich husband and children, she is unhappy. Despite her 'perfect' life, she desires exciting fantasies with new people, which is something she cannot even share with Leah: "Natalie Blake had an urge to tell her friend about the exotic brother she had seen in Kirkwood's class. She said nothing" (Smith, *NW* 188). Taylor argues that Smith criticizes the fact that neither Leah nor Natalie are being honest with each other, themselves, nor their husbands (461). Fearing that they would be judged and criticized by one another for the decisions they make, these two female protagonists remain unhappy and ultimately unable to confide in each other. They seem to be trapped in their lives and feel helpless but remain friends despite everything, like the two female protagonists in *Swing Time*.

In *Swing Time*, the narrator has a successful career, while the other one, Tracey, does not go anywhere, has children out of wedlock, and gradually becomes increasingly jealous of her friend. Jealousy seems to go both ways, as the narrator admires Tracey's mysterious childhood: "I remember feeling intensely envious of the glamour of Tracey's family life compared to my own, its secretive and explosive nature" (Smith, *Swing Time* 53). However, as we could see, Tracey's life is far from perfect. She has an unstable childhood and is sexually assaulted by her father, which, undoubtedly, traumatises her. It can be argued that

Tracey is dealing with this trauma throughout her entire life, and this can be the reason why she is unambitious and destroys every chance for success she has. While Tracey's behaviour remains problematic, the narrator distances herself from her friend and follows her own way to success. Her mother plays an important role in the novel, being a proclaimed feminist and fighting for the rights of black women and black children. She has a great impact on her daughter/the narrator of the novel and is teaching her about the discrimination black people experience. The narrator learns from her mother, a confident black woman with curly hair who tries to make her daughter equally confident about her looks. When she finally comes to terms with her non-British identity, after constantly trying to achieve white beauty standards (a little bit like Irie in *White Teeth*), it is obvious that her mother has passed on a legacy:

after years of forcing my hair straight with the hot-comb I now let it frizz and curl, and took to wearing a small map of Africa around my neck, the larger countries made out in a patchwork leather of black and red, green and gold (Smith, *Swing Time* 228).

The final scene, however, focuses on Tracey. The narrator watches her dancing on the balcony with her children: "She was right above me, on her balcony, in a dressing gown and slippers, her hands in the air, turning, turning, her children around her, everybody dancing" (Smith, *Swing Time* 357). Since the novel is open-ended, we can only assume which of the two friends achieves a happier and more fulfilled existence. *Swing Time* clearly presents the differences in opportunities available to people of different social classes. How the issue of class, especially working class, is portrayed in Smith's novels and how it is related to the issue of race are the main themes discussed in the final chapter of my paper.

## **5. Class and multicultural society in Smith's novels: "not everyone can be invited to the party"**

Cultural studies investigates power relations within a society, such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, and socioeconomic status. As we have already seen, protagonists of different races and socioeconomic statuses can be found in Smith's novels. Her protagonists in *White Teeth* belong to the working class and the white upper-middle class, the latter being portrayed as much more privileged than the former. Archie Jones is a white working class man and fares better in British society than Samad. Archie, portrayed as dull, boring, and passive, works in a printing shop, where he is "designing the way all kinds of things should be folded—envelopes, direct mail, brochures, leaflets" and says it is "not much of an achievement" (Smith, *White Teeth* 22). Throughout the novel, he does nothing to improve his working class life. His daughter Irie, however, is not satisfied with such a life and unsurprisingly looks up to the white upper-middle class Chalfens. She "wanted to merge with the Chalfens, to be of one flesh; separated from the chaotic, random flesh of her own family and transgenically fused with another. A unique animal. A new breed" (Smith, *White Teeth* 347).

As we have already said, Archie's friend Samad cannot find a better job despite his education. As a waiter, he does not earn enough to provide for his family, and his wife Alsana also works in order to improve the budget. His sons are ashamed of their father's job, especially Millat: "All his life he wanted a Godfather, and all he got was Samad. A faulty, broken, stupid, one-handed waiter of a man who had spent eighteen years in a strange land and made no more mark than this" (Smith, *White Teeth* 501). The twins want to move up the social scale and become more English, which is why they spend time with the Chalfens, as does Irie Jones. The Chalfens are shown as a privileged white family, an ideal which Smith

seems to defy in the novel. They do not have many friends and do not usually spend time with those belonging to a lower social class than their own. The way they frown upon Irie and the Iqbal twins can be seen in the fact that the mother, Joyce, who is a horticulturist, perceives these children as not looked after, not taken care of, and in need of “nurturing”, just like plants (Smith, *White Teeth* 327). They seem to think that their parents are not paying them enough attention, which is a common stereotype about immigrant parents and the manner in which they raise their children. The way the Chalfens look down upon the working class (and other races) can also be seen in the fact that Marcus Chalfen hires Irie as a secretary, implying that he does not trust her for anything else than making his schedule and answering the phone. It can be argued that the Chalfens perceive themselves as superior to Irie and the Iqbal twins. According to Said, the ‘Orient’ was created by and exists because of Europe and the Western society, with the West being superior and the East being inferior, exotic, and underdeveloped. He argues that the white British contrast the newcomers intentionally, as the West builds its identity and gains strength by emphasizing the difference between the West and the ‘Orient’ while highlighting the underdevelopment of the ‘Orient’ (3). This opposition between the allegedly superior white British (or the West) and the inferior immigrants (or the East) is, unfortunately, still being fuelled by families such as the Chalfens. Even though they are at first presented as an ideal family, Perfect explains that they are “caricatures of upper-middle-class Englishness” because they think of themselves as the perfect family while being condescending to every other class and every other family, like the Iqbals and the Jones’ (91).

In *On Beauty*, differences between the middle and working class and their links to race are also present. Both the Belseys and the Kipps belong to the middle class and have good socioeconomic statuses, which the Belseys gained mostly through inheritance: “An inheritance on this scale changes everything for a poor family in America: it makes them middle class” (Smith, *On Beauty* 23). The mixed-race Belsey family can afford university

education and are not stigmatised, as the black working class. Carl, the young black man whom Levi and Zora befriend, belongs to the black working class and cannot afford the education he wants. His social class and socioeconomic status do not allow him to get university education. Even after he starts attending the poetry class at the university, he is still seen as 'the Other'. It can be said that his financial status and the class he belongs to, as well as his race, create invisible symbolic boundaries. These boundaries make it impossible for Carl to have the same opportunities for success as, for instance, the Belseys. Claire believes in Carl, yet she still fears him, because black people are perceived as dangerous, as we have already seen: "Claire had that special teacher thing he hadn't felt since he was a really small boy, back in the days before his teachers started worrying that he was going to mug them or rape them: *she wanted him to do well*" (Smith, *On Beauty* 253). She is aware of the position and perception of Carl and other young black people in society which is why she asks Zora to speak on behalf of Carl. She knows that people at the university will be more open to listen to Zora's speech than to Carl's speech due to his skin colour and the social class he belongs to.

The university system portrayed in the novel is rather strict and does not allow working class students to take classes only because they cannot afford university education. Although there are characters who are fighting for such students, money continues to play an important role at the university. Victoria's father Monty Kipps is against the inclusion of non-students who cannot afford to attend the university classes, stating that this sends the wrong message. Apart from Carl, there are other black students who are not allowed to attend classes, whom Monty addresses here:

"she wants to continue taking a Wellington class for which she does not pay and for which she is entirely unqualified. She wants this because she is black and poor. What a demoralizing philosophy! What message do we give to our children when we tell them



that they are not fit for the same meritocracy as their white counterparts?" (Smith, *On Beauty* 352).

Even though Kiki and Howard, as well as their son Levi and daughter Zora, fight for the rights of the black working class, it seems that they are not aware of the discrimination these people experience daily. Howard hires black working class women to clean his house, which makes Kiki uncomfortable: "Kiki stayed in her strange moment, nervous of what this black woman thought of another black woman paying her to clean" (Smith, *On Beauty* 16). However, as Jackson argues, Zora reminds the readers of the limitations of the black working class through her disagreement with Carl (867). Despite the Belseys' attempt to include black people in the university, by the end of the novel it becomes clear that the black working class, represented by Carl, is still not equal to the white middle class, is seen as the inferior 'Other' and does not belong to the world of the privileged university education:

Zora wiped her nose and cut her eyes at Carl imperiously. 'Carl, please don't talk about our father. We *know* about our father. You go to Wellington for a few months, you hear a little gossip and you think you know what's going on? You think you're a *Wellingtonian* because they let you file a few records? You don't know a thing about what it takes to belong here. And you haven't got the *first idea* about our family *or* our life, OK? Remember that.' (Smith, *On Beauty* 401)

Although immigrant, black, or mixed-race working class characters are aware of the discrimination against them, some of them try hard to climb the social scale and improve their living conditions, as does Natalie in *NW*. The novel begins with Leah's attempt to write the sentence "I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me" (Smith, *NW* 10). Unfortunately, her pen is not working, making it impossible for her to write the sentence. This can be read as the start of Leah's story about wanting to succeed in life but failing and eventually staying in North West London as part of the lower-working class. She is "fenced"

(Smith, *NW* 10), which can be connected to the fence of London and the fence of the working class she belongs to, as well as to the symbolic boundaries Caciora discusses, which I mentioned earlier in this paper. She is also “born and bred, never goes anywhere” (Smith, *NW* 50).

Natalie, on the other hand, does not settle for the lower-working class status and is very determined to move up the social ladder. In order to fit in and be accepted in the higher classes, she even decides to change her name. As Taylor argues, this decision separates her past from her present and enables her to create a distinction between the class she wants to achieve and the reality of the class system (458). Even though she is more successful than Leah, she is not happy with her life either, as we have already seen. As Slavin states, “Natalie's intensely upwardly mobile mindset contrasts sharply with Leah's complacency”, which affects their friendship (103). We see Leah being constantly jealous of her friend throughout the novel:

Natalie laughs. Frank laughs. Michel laughs hardest. Slightly drunk. Not only on the Prosecco in his hand. On the grandeur of this Victorian house, the length of the garden, that he should know a barrister and a banker, that he should find funny the things they find funny. ... She looks up at her best friend, Natalie Blake, and hates her (Smith, *NW* 58).

Leah is stuck in the working class setting, as well as between wanting more and being happy with what she has: “She feels she deserves exactly what she has, no more, no less. Any change risks fatally upsetting this balance” (Smith, *NW* 30). It can also be argued that she feels more privileged and entitled than she should be. When she comes across Shar, a drug addict, she feels guilty and wants to help her, noticing her dirty clothes: “Perhaps Shar needs money. Her clothes are not clean. In the back of her right knee there is a wide tear in the nasty fabric. Dirty heels rise up out of disintegrating flip-flops. She smells” (Smith, *NW* 13). Shar

clearly represents the lower-working class in the novel. Apart from Shar, Smith introduces Felix Cooper, another working class protagonist from the bottom of the social scale, a man “without any means whatsoever”, prone to making bad decisions as well (Smith, *NW* 98). Felix is a drug addict and alcoholic and is eventually murdered in the streets of London.

Smith also uses Shar’s character to show social differences and class boundaries. Shar describes Leah’s street and upper classes as “snobby”, showing the way lower-working class people feel and the way they are treated by them: “–Proper snobby, this street. You the only one let me in. Rest of them wouldn’t piss on you if you was on fire” (Smith, *NW* 19). As Susan Alice Fischer argues, Shar recognizes Leah from school, but now, thirty years later, they are not in the same socioeconomic class (25). Leah is aware of class differences and states that: “This is not the country for making a stranger tea” (Smith, *NW* 15). She accepts the view that people from different socioeconomic classes are strangers to one another and that “drinking tea” with each other would be highly unusual. This can be connected to Richard Johnson’s explanation of the ways socioeconomic differences and capitalism create discrimination and struggles between classes but also with the way the white British treat working class immigrants, which I have already discussed earlier in this diploma paper (39).

In *Swing Time*, the narrator and Tracey both come from working class families, as we have already seen. While the narrator has her mother’s support and is ambitious enough to leave North West London and succeed in life, Tracey, who is passive and traumatised by the sexual assault in childhood, starts consuming drugs and destroys every chance of success she gets. As Scafe suggests, London, and the community in the novel, is presented as a place of “a complex interconnection of cultural sameness, difference and inequality” (99). She also gives the example of the different elementary schools the narrator and Tracey go to, which I have already mentioned earlier in my diploma paper. While the narrator’s mother chooses a school in a middle class area in Willesden, Tracey goes to a single-sex school that is “a rough school

with a lot of fighting” (Smith, *Swing Time* 34). The narrator’s mother is a proclaimed feminist and an educated woman aware of the discrimination against minority groups. She wants her daughter to have a better life than she had and decides to send her to a school in a middle class area. Scafe emphasizes the role of the narrator’s mother in the novel due to her immigration history, her decision to pursue education, and her awareness of class discrimination in society. She explains that, after having a difficult childhood, the narrator’s mother decides to “return to study as a mature student and young mother herself, passing her A Levels then working for a degree at a local polytechnic” (9).

The character that represents the white upper class in the novel is the Australian pop star Aimee, the narrator’s famous and rich employer. Aimee is an entitled white woman who wants to raise publicity and decides to go to Africa and build schools for the black children in Africa. As the narrator explains, “to Aimee poverty was one of the world’s sloppy errors, one among many, which might be easily corrected if only people would bring to the problem the focus she brought to everything” (Smith, *Swing Time* 105). It can be argued that Aimee’s character is inspired by contemporary celebrities who are often portrayed as vain, shallow, and self-obsessed in their attempts to help African people. Like many of these celebrities, such as various singers and actresses, she sees an opportunity to increase her popularity by using Africa’s poverty. Aimee’s character is exaggerated, which can be seen in the fact that she adopts a black baby towards the end of the novel. Aimee does not see nor comprehend the reality of the world of black people, which is something the narrator’s mother immediately recognizes: “Poverty is not just a headline, my love, it’s a lived reality, on the ground—and education is at the heart of it” (Smith, *Swing Time* 125). Aimee also sees and patronises African people as the ‘inferior Other’. Said explains that Westerners perceive ‘the Other’ based on their own representation of ‘the Other’ (1), which is why Aimee does not bother to see the reality of African people and their issues. Although the narrator assures her mother

that she knows poverty is not just a headline, it is not only Aimme who does not see the reality of black people in Africa. The narrator is also shocked by the images she sees in Africa: “ “Jesus Christ, if you’re gonna be shocked by every fucking sign of poverty you see here, this is going to be a mighty long trip. You’re in Africa!” ” (Smith, *Swing Time* 158). Power distribution is also one of the issues; “power had preyed on weakness here: all kinds of power—local, racial, tribal, royal, national, global, economic—on all kinds of weakness, stopping at nothing, not even at the smallest girl child” (Smith, *Swing Time* 251).

As the novel progresses, we realise that the main protagonist/narrator is not aware of the way the black working class lives and the problems they have to face. Tracey, a working class mother of three children, is seeking help for her son with ADHD but is blatantly ignored by the authorities, and she explains this reality to her friend:

“They can talk it up in Parliament all they like, but I’m on the ground in here, and your mother’s meant to be repping these streets. She’s on TV every other night, but you see anything different round here? My boy’s got a 130 IQ—all right? He’s been tested. He’s ADHD, his brain goes so fast, and he’s *bored every day* in that shithole. Yeah, he gets into trouble. *Because he ’ s bored*. And all these teachers can think to do with him is expel him!” (Smith, *Swing Time* 318).

Tracey is extremely frustrated with the discrimination and neglect she and her children, and many other working class families, have to experience every day. She even accuses her friend and her feminist mother of being part of the system: “You can call it by any fancy name you like, love: there’s a system, and you and your fucking mother are both a part of it” (Smith, *Swing Time* 320). Feminists are fighting for equal educational rights of black women and children, which is why the narrator’s mother should fight for Tracey and her son. Yet, the problem is not in the narrator nor her mother but the distribution of power in society.

As Scafe explains, the geographies of the Black Atlantic are used to show the uneven distribution of power in the world and the way it affects the presence of black people (104).

## 6. Conclusion

The four novels of Zadie Smith which I have analysed in this paper present the struggles of biracial or black first- or second-generation immigrants finding their place in a contemporary urban society that is explicitly hostile towards them. The issues I have explored in my paper are linked to race, gender, and social class in contemporary Britain and America. Black or biracial protagonists are constantly perceived as ‘the Other’ throughout these novels. As we have seen, especially women in these novels are marginalized and are partly or completely dependent on men. Many of Smith’s female protagonists are portrayed as women who are not allowed the same opportunities as men and have to work harder to achieve their goals. There are other protagonists who do not belong to traditional patriarchal families anymore but are still struggling to achieve the same success as men. Nevertheless, Natalie in *NW* or the unnamed narrator in *Swing Time* manage to become part of a higher social class and create a better future for themselves or their children.

The struggle with biracial identity, like that of Irie Jones in *White Teeth* or that of Zora Belsey in *On Beauty*, is present in the novels as well. Most female characters are constantly surrounded by white beauty standards, which is why they try to change their appearances to be more attractive in predominantly white surroundings. Although both Irie and Zora come to terms with their identity by the end of the novels, the theme of self-acceptance and the focus on white beauty standards constantly run through these four novels. Some of the characters

feel isolated and alone as black or biracial people in predominantly white neighbourhoods, such as Kiki or Levi Belsey in *On Beauty*, while some completely reject their biracial or immigrant identities and try to become more 'British', for instance, the Iqbal twins in *White Teeth*.

The last issue which I have analysed is the issue of class and unequal life opportunities. This discrimination is most noticeable when we focus on the living conditions of the black or immigrant working class and the more privileged white middle and upper class in the novels. In *On Beauty*, for instance, Carl, an intelligent young black man, cannot afford university education and is continuously seen as 'the Other'. In *Swing Time*, working class Tracey is disappointed with the system when she is not able to provide her son with the help he needs in school. The issues of (working) class and race are constantly intertwined in Smith's novels.

After having read and analysed the selected novels, it can be argued that Smith's perception of multicultural British society is mainly negative. She criticizes British society and stigmatization of black and biracial people, as well as the discrimination against immigrant men and women. She presents contemporary urban setting as a multicultural setting in which people of a different origin or a skin colour different to that of the white British are stigmatized and still perceived as 'the Other'.

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## 8. Summary

### The City and Multicultural Identity in Zadie Smith's Novels

This diploma paper demonstrates how issues of mixed race/non-British identity, racism, class, and multiculturalism are linked to contemporary urban setting in Zadie Smith's novels *White Teeth* (2000), *On Beauty* (2005), *NW* (2012), and *Swing Time* (2016). In the light of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the paper attempts to show how Smith's novels largely portray non-British / mixed-race / multicultural identity as the 'Other'. Focusing on immigrant and/or biracial protagonists mainly from working class backgrounds, my analysis suggests that Smith's protagonists are constantly marginalised, looked down upon, and never really accepted as part of British society. The paper also shows how Smith's female characters often depend on men and are constantly exposed to white beauty standards which they desperately try to achieve in order to fit in the still predominantly white British society.

**Keywords:** multiculturalism, racism, mixed race, the 'Other', urban, white beauty standards, discrimination

## 9. Sažetak

### Grad i multikulturalni identitet u romanima Zadie Smith

Ovaj diplomski rad pokazuje kako su problemi miješane rase/ne-britanskog identiteta, rasizma, klase i multikulturalizma povezana sa suvremenim urbanim okruženjem u romanima *Bijeli zubi* (2000), *O ljepoti* (2005), *London NW* (2012) i *Vrijeme swinga* (2016) Zadie Smith. Na temelju Edwarda Saida i njegovog djela 'Orientalizam', rad pokušava pokazati kako romani Zadie Smith u velikoj mjeri prikazuju ne-britanski / miješani / multi-kulturalni identitet kao 'Drugi'. Usredotočujući se na imigrante ili na protagoniste miješane rase,

uglavnom iz radničke klase, moja analiza sugerira da su protagonist Zadie Smith stalno marginalizirani, gledani s visoka i nikada doista prihvaćeni kao dio britanskog društva. Rad također pokazuje kako ženski likovi Zadie Smith često ovise o muškarcima, te kako su stalno izloženi bjelačkim standardima ljepote koje očajnički pokušavaju postići kako bi se uklopili u još uvijek pretežno bijelo britansko društvo.

**Ključne riječi:** multikulturalizam, rasizam, miješana rasa, 'Drugi', suvremeno, bjelački standardi ljepote, diskriminacija