



## Unraveling History and Fiction: Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth' as Historiographic Metafiction

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### Abstract

The paper aims to inspect the interaction of history and fiction in the novel *White Teeth* through the perspective of Linda Hutcheon's theory the *historiographic metafiction*. The problem of research is to find the systematic approach of knowing history turned into fiction by lying truth. The research is qualitative and content analysis is used as tool in this research. The objectives of the research are to explore the impact of history on culture, manipulation of truth and different perspectives. Smith employs a narrative technique that goes beyond mere storytelling; she engages with historiographic metafiction, weaving together history, fiction, and self-reflection to create a narrative that challenges traditional notions of truth and reality. There occurs the interplay of history and reality. According to theory, subjective tools are used in the novel depicting that reality is constructive. In order to avoid exploitation by fixed truths constructed by those in power, subjectivity of reality should be taken into account.

#### Keywords:

Manipulation of truth,  
multiple perspectives,  
Historiographical meta-  
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## Introduction

Title of this article suggests that novel *White Teeth* (2001) engages with and reflects the historical and cultural context in which it is set, particularly the post-colonial and multicultural aspects of British society. It involves examining how historical events and social changes are portrayed and interpreted in the narrative. Novel's self-awareness as a work of fiction and its use of metafictional techniques are explored. In the case of *White Teeth*, it paper investigates how the author plays with narrative structures, characters' awareness of being in a story, or the blurring of fiction and reality within the narrative. In essence, analyzing history and metafiction in *White Teeth* helps readers understand how Zadie Smith uses the novel as a medium to comment on both the past and the nature of storytelling itself. The novel demonstrates the genre of historiographic metafiction, a term coined by literary critic Linda Hutcheon to describe works that meld history, narrative, and self-reflection into a thought-provoking literary concoction. Historiography is a technique which is used by postmodern writers. There is a fact which is created by postmodernism that nothing can be created it is always generated from the previous extinct, we only shape-up and mold the old things in new forms according to the market trends so that it seems ordinary not strange. Writers will never admit this thing that they are coping someone else works but fact is that they also know that they are plagiarizing someone else work but reshape it in a new form while carrying the past and presenting it in such a way that readers consider this thing is something new which is never written before. Somehow it is a good way to present our history which is folded in the cover of present so that we could always link with the past and could never forget it. Postmodern writers say that if we are coping someone else work you can never find out either its someone else work or a thing which is never written before because we make the copy more original than it is actual

in real. Everything which is created by the help of history also have something which is never produced before. So, everything is the mixture of new and old but nothing is created purely new. Metafiction tells that nothing is specific and nothing remains in its borderline. It confuses their readers by making the platter of real and fiction and readers always remain in maze of finding the truth but when we combine both the terms of historiography metafiction then we find out that it's a trick of mixing history with aestheticism. It shows that we can use history in its practical form with the aesthetic pleasure of writer's reflexive personality. Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones's experience in WWII can be seen as a historic metaphor reflecting the broader societal shifts and challenges and also shapes his identity and influences his post-war life. The aftermath of WWII symbolizes the aftermath of historical events which highlights the need for resilience and adaptation in the face of societal shifts. The historical influence on culture and multiple perspectives provides different viewpoints. Born in London in 1975, Smith's multicultural background and upbringing in a diverse neighborhood have greatly influenced her work. Throughout her career, Smith has continued to explore themes of race, identity, and multiculturalism in her novels. Her writing is characterized by its keen observations of human relationships and its ability to tackle complex social and cultural issues with both depth and humor. In addition to her fiction, Zadie Smith has made remarkable contributions to the world of literary criticism and non-fiction writing, often delving into topics related to literature, politics, and contemporary culture. In the context of society, Zadie Smith's use of historiographic metafiction in "White Teeth" can be seen as an annotation on the way historical narratives shape individual and collective identities (Williams, 2023). By blending historical facts with fictional storytelling, Smith highlights how history is often subjective, open to interpretation, and influenced by personal

perspectives. This challenges readers to question the dominant narratives that shape their understanding of society and encourages them to consider alternative viewpoints and histories.

### **Literature Review**

"The French Lieutenant's Woman" (1969) by John Fowles is a notable example of historiographic metafiction, a narrative technique which not only tells a story set in the past but also reflects historical nature and the act of storytelling itself. The novel play with the blending of real historical events and with the fictional figures particularly his character Sarah Woodruff. By doing so, he challenges the predetermined idea about the historical characters only to represent rigid history. Fowles also uses self-reflexive approach which puts the reader in a position of active participation to locate fiction and history.

D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981) and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991) both of works use metafictional techniques by using the characteristics of historiography. *The White Hotel*'s main objective was to change the traditional way of writing the history using the past - so the basic motive of the writer was to focus on traditional historiography. In *Time's Arrow* the primary issue is to revise the Holocaust itself and provide another version to write comprehensive writing rather than use traditional way of showing historical perspective. *The White Hotel* is the life story of Lisa Erdman who is brutally murdered in the Babi Yar massacre in 1941. *Time's Arrow*, on the other hand, tells story of a Nazi doctor Odilo Unverdorben, in a reversed sequential order from life to death.

Feminist and postcolonial literature, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983), and Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion and Sexing the Cherry* (1989) are examples in which fiction and reality is achieved by blurring the boundary. Winterson's *The Passion and Sexing the*

Cherry, question the truth-value of history by using the patriarchal discourse. In *Midnight's Children and Shame*, Salman Rushdie elaborates the themes of Asian traditions by using the history of Pakistan and India. Historiography a signifying system which not only represent the past but also signify it by which historical events turns into historical facts. Umberto Eco, writing of his novel *The Name of the Rose*, he discovered what writers have always known that every story has already been told (Umberto Eco, 1980) such as *The Name of the Rose* restates the same literature which already been wrote by many writers.

The neo-slave narrative points out the slave's history by unveiling the past through foregrounding African Atlantic exposures. The historiographic metafiction of the neo-slave narrative revises history with the objective of comprehending the past and leading to future reconciliation. Caryl Phillips's approach to the neo-slave narrative invites not to forget or dismiss the cruelties of slavery which is mentioned by him in the novel. Postmodern stylistic device; pastiche which is used to mix so that imitation of other artists could occur. *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993) by Caryl Phillips personify some of the typical features for the neo-slave narrative such as pastiche while Phillips, true to his own background and heritage, introduces his readers to the British-Caribbean history of slavery. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams also focus on Afro-American slave's history especially the history of slave women.

McLeod (2004: 161) reveals that 'Smith's novel offers a version of London in which the depressingly familiar social conflicts of previous decades are no longer primarily determining the formation of character and fortunes of plot. So, in this way, it deals more with post-postcolonial everyday living in the conurbation rather than recalling conflicts of postcolonial. Laura Moss (2003: 15) also prominences hybridity in *White Teeth*: 'This novel draws the everyday life– in a comic portrait of a hybrid community and in a portrait of quotidian racism – in order to show the

legacy of the history of multi-cultural Britain'. Hybridity of characters can clearly be seen through the second generation. They are living in contemporary society but they feel highly alienated. They linked to their past and felt unsatisfied by their lives in London. Ethnically diverse people live, narrate and make sense of their multicultural experience.

Similarly, Paul Jay (2010: 169) views the novel as 'a post-postcolonial world' occupied by characters with 'new identities' shaped by 'the combined effects of the history of colonialism and those of more contemporary forms of globalization'. "White Teeth" subtly critiques the colonial legacy and the power structures that persist in the postcolonial world. It raises questions about the unequal distribution of power and resources, as well as the lasting impact of colonialism on global politics and cultural dynamics. As Fernández (2009a: 148) emphasizes on, the novel 'moves away from such a binary tendency of thinking about who is considered to be inside or outside the realm of British identity by further exploring the outcomes of multicultural interaction'. The situation of belonging and not belonging make their ethnicities diverse. The spaces where these characters belong make them in a constant phase of change and their identities turned into fluidity. As Matthew Paproth (2008: 15) reveals that, 'Smith demonstrates the important but fractured relationship between past and present, as her characters approach their relationship with history from various perspectives'. The novel is set against the backdrop of post-World War II Britain and spans several decades. The characters' pasts are deeply influenced by the historical events and cultural shifts of this period. The Iqbals, for example, represent the immigrant experience and the challenges they face in adapting to a new country while retaining their cultural identity. Their past in Bangladesh informs their decision to move to England in search of a better life. The Joneses, on the other hand, have a history intertwined with colonialism, racism, and the legacy of empire, which affects their identity and relationships.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative method is used for this research and content analysis is the tool of this research. The text of Zadie Smith's novel, *White Teeth* is the sample of research and character of Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal are focus of research. The theory of Linda Hutcheon "Historiographic Metafiction" is applied in the research. One of the key features of historiographic metafiction, as outlined by Hutcheon, is its reflexivity. These texts are characterized by their self-awareness, often incorporating explicit references to historical events, figures, or texts within the narrative itself. By doing so, they highlight the artificiality of historical reconstruction and invite readers to interrogate the ways in which history is shaped by narrative conventions and ideological biases.

Moreover, Hutcheon emphasizes the intertextuality inherent in historiographic metafiction. These texts frequently engage with other historical or literary texts, both explicitly and implicitly, drawing on existing narratives and discourses to enrich their own storytelling. Through these intertextual references, they create layers of meaning and invite readers to consider the ways in which history is mediated and interpreted through multiple textual sources. Hutcheon also highlights the playfulness and ambiguity characteristic of historiographic metafiction. These texts often challenge traditional notions of historical truth and authority, presenting multiple perspectives, conflicting accounts, and unreliable narrators. By destabilizing fixed meanings and inviting interpretation, they encourage readers to actively engage with the text and question their own assumptions about the past.

## **Significance of the Research**

The research strongly contributes in the Knowledge. This research provides the knowledge about history and fiction. This research will contribute as beneficial source for realism

and anti-realism study further it contributes as source of reference for other researchers. It will also provide knowledge for further research.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

"White Teeth" highlights the multifaceted ways in which culture influences and diverts the perspectives of characters. It showcases the tension, adaptation, negotiation, and transformation of identity that occurs as they grapple with their cultural heritage and the cultural context in which they find themselves. The novel offers a nuanced portrayal of how culture shapes the lives and perspectives of the second generation in a multicultural society.

Samad Miah Iqbal is a complex figure who serves as a lens through which the novel investigates themes of cultural identity, tradition, and the clash between generations. A Bangladeshi immigrant to post-war Britain, Samad grapples with the challenges of reconciling his traditional values with the rapidly changing world around him.

Samad, as an immigrant from Bangladesh, faces the added pressure of trying to uphold traditional values and expectations from his homeland while living in a Western society with different norms. As a father, Samad's relationships with his children, particularly Millat, reflect the generational divide and the difficulties of transmitting cultural values in a new cultural context. His authoritarian approach and rigid adherence to tradition contribute to the family's internal strife, underscoring the challenges faced by immigrant families in maintaining their cultural heritage. Magid and Millat Iqbal struggle with their dual identities as British-born individuals with Bangladeshi heritage. Millat and Magid are raised in different environments and under different influences. Millat grows up in London with his mother and becomes exposed to the multicultural and sometimes chaotic nature of the city. Magid, on the contrary, is sent to Bangladesh at a young age to receive a more traditional and religious upbringing. Millat's exposure to the diverse and

liberal culture of London leads him to rebel against his cultural and religious roots. He becomes involved in a radical political group and indulges in a hedonistic lifestyle, embracing Western vices and secularism. In contrast, Magid's upbringing in Bangladesh reinforces his adherence to traditional values and religiosity. Millat falls in with a group of friends who encourage his rebellious behavior and radical political activities. This peer influence further pushes him away from his family's cultural values. Magid, isolated in Bangladesh, lacks such peer influence and continues to follow a more conservative path. The expectations placed on each twin by their father also contribute to their differences. Millat is expected to be the "bad boy" who will carry on his father's legacy of secularism and rebellion. Magid, on the other hand, is expected to embrace religion and tradition, serving as a symbol of his father's devout beliefs. They both turned out totally different what their father expected them to be. Alsana also directly rejects Samad's version of religion and no longer even pretends to follow her husband's orders.

"Either everything is sacred or nothing is. And if he starts burning other people's things, then he loses something sacred also. Everyone gets what's coming, sooner or later." (p. 226).

Samad's decision on sending Magid to Bangladesh, his both sons turned totally different as he expected, Alsana's rejection of religious views of his husband and accepting feminist views of Clara show that cultural perspective of history.

Samad's character was also marked by a sense of tragic irony. He was a sepoy in 1945 war. Samad was trained fighter pilot and he married in a wealthy family. These clues represent that Samad belongs to a higher class. However, Samad's race and skin color, as well as his colonial origins, place him on a lower social scale than Archie within the British Army.

"I mean, I am educated. I am trained. I should be soaring with the Royal Airborne Force, shelling from on high! I am an officer! Not some mullah, some sepoy, . . . (p. 87).

Mangal Pande was the heroic ancestor of Samad. He was sepoy in colony British Army and he rebelled against British in 1857. Samad always admired and take him as his ideal. "Of 1857! It was he who shot the first hateful pig fat-smearred bullet and sent it spinning off into oblivion!" (p.88).

In chapter 10, when Samad wants to put Mangal Pande's portray in O'Connell. But everyone opposed him except author A. S Misra. Archie and many other people believe that Mangal Pande was a fool who initiated fight with British and turned out as a failure. Every character has different perspectives about Mangal Pande. So, in this way, they don't provide with a single truth.

"[. . .], it does not follow that it is a correct representation of the character of Mangal Pande. The first definition we agree on: my great-grandfather was a mutineer and I am proud to say this. [. . .] But traitor? Coward. [. . .] Pande was no traitor and no coward." (p. 239).

Archie Jones is a complex and endearing figure whose life becomes a microcosm of post-war British society. As a character, Archie embodies the challenges and opportunities presented by a multicultural and rapidly changing world. Archie is introduced as a British war veteran, and his initial suicide attempt sets the stage for the exploration of his character. Despite facing personal setbacks and failures, Archie maintains a laid-back and affable demeanor, showcasing resilience and adaptability in the face of life's uncertainties. Archie's fail marriage and world war affected him badly. He tried to attempt suicide. His mixed-race marriage to Clara reflects a commitment to transcending societal norms and embracing diversity. Archie's character challenges stereotypes

and traditional expectations, offering a glimpse into the evolving nature of relationships in a multicultural setting.

Archie and Samad both were good friends. They met each other in war. And became good friends. When war ended, they both felt useless. Because they wanted to do something extraordinary but ended up in suicide attempt. In chapter 1, Archie tried to attempt suicide and Samad's cousin halal butcher rescued him. In chapter 5, Samad tried to attempt and Archie saved him. When the war ended, they both were sad that it ended and we didn't prove ourselves. So, for the sake of satisfaction of their manhood. They murdered Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret to overcome that uselessness. Samad asked Archie to murder him. Samad heard the sound of gun and believed that he killed Dr. But in last chapter, it revealed that Archie didn't kill him. So, in this way Archie manipulated the truth.

Each character is providing their own interpretation of events, reflecting their unique experiences and biases. Such as, Alsana and Clara offered contrasting perspectives of their husbands. In chapter 4, when Neena asked them about their husbands' friendship. They told her that they met in war but they did not see any meddle or awards, they received. "Shitty lies! If they are heroes, where are their hero things? Where are the hero bits and bobs?" (p. 78).

## **Conclusion**

The paper aims to inspect the systematic relationship between fiction and history in Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* by applying the theory of Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction. This theory says history is manipulated, it's a lying truth and cultural factors shapes it. Samad Iqbal's portrayal of his grandfather, Samad and Archie war experiences are the manipulation of truths. Mangal Pande who is the ancestor of Samad and Samad always idealize his character. He

considered him as his hero while others think he was a failure. In 1945 war, Samad and Archie met for the first time and became friends. When the war ended, they both felt useless and murdered Dr. Perret, which again turned a lie. Because Archie didn't kill him which disclosed at the end of the novel. Both characters tried to attempt suicide because of this uselessness. Samad's views on culture and religion turned out different from reality. Magid, whom he wanted to be religious turned out as secular and radical and Millat, who was supposed to be radical turned out as religious. It implies that the reality is subjective and it shatters the fixed truths. Moreover, there are multiple perspectives of the story and each character has different perspective about Archie and Samad.

So, in this way one gets to know that history is subjective. In both history and literature, acknowledgement of diverse perspective is crucial. There is no single and objective truth in history. Interconnectedness of different time periods, suggesting that past continuously reverberating in the present. This influence has contributed into the cultural influence on history on contemporary societies. It also aligns with challenging the fixed truth and embracing the idea that reality is subjective and constructive.

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