
Breaching Institutional Racism in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* : A Bhabhian Perspective

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Abstract:

Institutional racism is the existing problem to be dealt globally. Non- Europeans are migrating to European countries in the search of better jobs, while people who are hit harder by any war are taking refuge in the other countries just to be safe. Migration leads to cross cultural exchange which merges different cultures to form a cultural hybrid. This research paper aims to explore the way racial discrimination in the elite universities is ruining the life of many brilliant minds who seek admission in these universities to gain knowledge and to remain enlightened, unfortunately their dreams are shattered in the name of colour. Zadie Smith who is an internationally acclaimed author has got stable success after her novel *On Beauty* got published. Her novel *On Beauty* sets in Wellington University, a fictional setting. She gives a brief description the way American universities practice racial discrimination. This research also incorporates the theoretical ideas of Homi K Bhabha who has provided the concepts of cultural hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence and third space, implementation of these theoretical ideas make the institutional racism a dynamic study. Zadie Smith in her novel *On Beauty* explores the theme of racial discrimination, suppression of the poor Black, the existing economic disparity in US and the stifled relationship between parents and their children. The novel further elaborates the flaws of social injustice persisting in the society of U.S. This research paper further aims to study the racial discrimination into two parts: individual racism and systematic racism keeping the background of Homi K Bhabha's perspective to study *On Beauty* with modern approach.

Key words: Institutional racism, Third Space, cultural hybridity, mimicry, Ambivalence and cultural identity.

Introduction:

Zadie Smith is an English novelist, essayist and a short story writer. Her debut novel *White Teeth* made her globally acclaimed, a best seller and it bagged her several literary prizes. Zadie Smith was born to a Jamaican mother and the English father. Her novel *White*

Teeth was internationally received and it won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Betty Trask Award. Her second novel *The Autograph Man* published in 2002 was a commercial success. Her third novel *On Beauty* which was published in 2005. *On Beauty* sets in Greater Boston. *On Beauty* was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize but unfortunately could not nail it. *On Beauty* has won the 2006 Orange Prize for fiction and Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

This research paper incorporates the theoretical points of Homi K Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity this theory will help in exploring the dominant theme of novel that is institutional racism.

Hybridity is a biological term which is found to be used in various discourses such as race, identity crisis, post-colonialism, anti-racism, multiculturalism and globalization. In the discourse of literary theory hybridity has to be considered as concoction of races and cultures. "Hybrida" a Latin term which refers to "the offspring of a tame show and a wild boar". The supreme exponent of theory of hybridity who started emerging in early 1990s some prominent names are Homi K Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. The primary text which establishes "hybridity" as a major concept in literary theory is *The Location of Culture* written by Homi K Bhabha. In vast topography of post-colonialism Bhabha has been loomed as the exponent of "hybridity" he recognizes the complex relationship of 'colonizer' and 'colonized'. According to Bhabha cultural interaction is not a simple, unidirectional process but a complex web of interlacing, translation and reassessment of cultural merger. Another important term developed by Bhabha in the post-colonial discourse is "mimicry" – the disruptive double agent which talks about the imitation of colonizer's subject by colonized, it is not a passive process but it is actually a playful distortion. It is all about adopting colonizer's cultural habits, values, assumptions which results into a "blurred copy" of colonizer. "Third Space" plays crucial roles in the emergence of hybrid identities. Third space is the fertile zone of negotiation and alteration further it frames the new fluid identities. The experience of communities elaborate the third space as the major functional structure.

The novel *On Beauty* unfolds the conflicting ethnic and cultural differences. *On Beauty* is found to be based on *Howards End* by E. M. Forster. *On Beauty* is the narrative of cultural hybridity, it represents the way a culturally mixed British American family which stays in U.S. Further the novel reveals the cultural differences between England and the United States of America. Zadie Smith has taken the title *On Beauty* from an essay by Elaine Scarry – "On Beauty and Being Just". The Observer elucidates the novel as a "transatlantic Comic Saga". The most appropriate theory which can evaluate *On beauty* keeping cultural hybridity and institutional racism as it's central theme is Homi K bhabha's of *The Location of Culture* which has certain key terms to assess in *On Beauty* are hybridity, mimicry and third space.

On Beauty chronicles the two inter-wined families with fathers in academics. First family is The Besley family which has Howard Besley a white English Rembrandt scholar, his Afro-American wife Kiki and their children Jerome, Levi and Zora. The Besley family lives in a fictional town Wellington, near Boston. Howard is an unprejudiced professor at Wellington where Zora studies and Jerome is a student of Brown University and Levi is in high school. The other family in *On Beauty* is the Kipps family which is composed of Monty a Trinidadian –British, a conventional university professor with his wife Carlene and their two kids Victoria and Michael. Both Monty and Carlene are of British-Caribbean origin they have great affection for their inheritance. In order to tackle the problem of racism and social discrimination Zadie Smith has followed the narrative style of ‘hysterical Realism’ or ‘Recherche Post-modernism’. Hysterical realism is a term coined by James Wood in 2000. Hysterical Realism is a literary genre which is actually the stringent contrast between an absurd prose, plotting or characterization further this absurd narrative runs parallel with careful, detailed investigation of real specific existing social phenomenon. *On Beauty* is a succinct satire on the conservative educational policies of the elite universities which deny the idea of “Education for All”. Zadie Smith through her novel *On Beauty* wants to reveal the flaws of elite universities which provide education to the privileged section of the society. Zadie Smith wants to express her opinion that racism is not having any currency in our conversation but it do exists in the minds of people and their approaches the Whites want to overpower the Blacks which shows their racist mind sets. To highlight the problem of racism Zadie Smith uses a fictional university Wellington University in her work *On Beauty*. Her novel *White Teeth* brought her global acclaim but her novel *On Beauty* made her stable in the literary world. Another important contemporary author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who talks about the trauma of institutional racism faced by black people the way they are sheer helpless in her work *Americanah* “why must we always talk about race anyway? Can’t we just be human beings? And professor Hunk replied- that is exactly what white privileged is, that you can say that. Race does not really exist for you because it has never been a barrier. Black folks do not have that choice”(Adichie)

Zadie Smith infuses the impact of racism through her novel *On Beauty* which unfolds that racism makes the Blacks as a weaker economic section. Zadie Smith wants to unfold that racism is not only practiced by the whites but also by the upper crust black people like Monty Kipps, an antagonist in *On Beauty* who does not remain inclined in helping the poor blacks like Carl who cannot afford the university education. To put it more clear Black American Minister Benjamin Hooks has said, “Black men who succeeded have an obligation to serve as role models for the young men entrapped by vicious cycle of poverty, despair and hopelessness”

Sir Monty Kipps is a Caribbean-British academician who has published several literary contributions which fuels jealousy in the heart of Besley. Monty Kipps is an intellectual enemy of Howard Besley. Monty Kipps is a traditionalist while Howard Besley

is broad-minded. Kipps and Besley are polar opposites in their approaches. Both Besley and Kipps are different in their ideologies including the uplifting of 'the other' black people like Carl, Cho, Felix and the other who are the victims of racial discrimination. Both the rival families are well paid and privileged with a tight hold in Wellington University. Zadie Smith uses a satire in pointing out the rift between the black people in *On Beauty*. Further Zadie Smith who understands the troublesome relationship of parents with their kids in *On Beauty* Howard Besley and his son Jerome Besley are different in their political ideologies. Jerome loves his father but his father becomes his staunch enemy when Jerome goes to live with Kipps family who are Black people while Howard Besley is a British-Caribbean who finds it hard to digest. Besley got married to a black woman Kiki out of his father's permission. The mode of communication between Howard and his father was through emails "I love here it's the different universe. This house is just wow- early victorian, a terrace assuming looking outside but massive inside-but there's still a kind of humility that really appeals to me -almost everything whites"(Smith)

Howard suffers from the idea of being superior he feels jealous from Monty and he never wants to share an opinion with him

Howard wants to talk to Michael and asks: "Michael-Can say I something? (Smith 36)

Michael did not respond and Howard speaks further:

"Look, I don't mean in any way to offend anyone in your family and I can see we agree basically anyway. I can't see the point in arguing over it. Really we need to put our heads together and just think of ... well, I suppose, the same way, some means of convincing both of them you know, that this is the bloody insane idea, I mean, that's the key thing no ?" (Smith 36)

Howard says that he does not want to harm Kipps family he says that he believes in reconciling in response to Howard Michael says:

"Look man, said Michael tersely, quickening his step. I am an intellectual, right? I'm not involved in whatever the argument in regarding my father. I 'm a forgiving Christian and as far I 'm concerned whatever in between you and he does not change the way we feel about you he does not change the way we feel about Jerome- he is a good kid man and that's the main thing so there's no argument"(Smith 36)

Institutional racism of *On Beauty* has to be studied in a dynamic way. Zadie Smith has portrayed well the difference between the Black and the White. The excerpt from the novel *On Beauty* "Kiki's face resolved itself into emotionless Blackness. Kiki is from Florida but her remarkable feature which makes her oriental is sphinx statue's facial expression".(Smith) Zadie Smith further elaborates the concept of racism which reveals that it's not white only who dominate black but sometimes black people do not want the 'the other' black to grow. This perspective gains currency when Kiki Besley and her newly appointed maid servant Monique come together on work front Monique who has migrated

from the poor Haiti to U.S. in search of jobs she was ready to work for any trifle amount of money. Kiki's mind has inner conflict she contemplates continuously what Monique will think about her? A Black woman dominates a Black woman? Will Monique consider that Kiki is exploiting her? Will Monique think that Kiki is taking advantage of her poverty? Another important aspect from *On Beauty* gives momentum to the existing institutional racism often the cause of clash between Kiki and her husband Howard Besley is their different races. Besley assets white supremacy on the black Kiki. Kiki too assets her domination because the home in which they live is inherited by Kiki, Kiki shows her lineage to Besley- Kiki's grand great grand- mother, a house slave, great grand -mother, a maid and then her grand -mother who was a nurse. It was Lily who was a nurse and inherited this home from a generous white doctor with whom she worked in Florida.

The novel *On Beauty* shows the complexity which arises due to inter-racial interactions due to cultural merger. Handling racism in the educational institutes is ever challenging and it leads to serious problems of early school drop-outs, lesser job opportunities, confines access to housing, health care and life opportunities. In 2020 an extreme harassment by police lead people to voice out against the existing institutional racism within the metropolitan police services. Zadie Smith unfolds the fact that there are ideological differences with in the academic circle. Howard Besley and Monty Kipps differ in approaching arts, culture, language people and academics which highlight the intellectual differences present within the academic web. "May be they even knew something of the culture war shaping up on the campus. two days ago Kipps had argued strongly against Howard's Affirmative Action Committee in the Wellington Herald"(On Beauty 156) *On Beauty* is a provocative literary piece which delves deeper into complexities within academic circle and the academicians differ ideologically within the higher education system. Victoria Kipps, daughter of Monty Kipps participates actively as a student reflecting academic culture which is prevalent in the modern European Institutions. The duel between the liberal and conservative academic values leads to the cultural ambivalence. The existing marital bond between the two different races is distorted and brings disharmony. Zadie Smith frames the culturally ambivalent characters. There is a persistent conflict between white and black. Kiki is an ambivalent character after negotiations and alterations she herself emerges as the cultural hybrid she always tried hard to fit herself into functional white frame which further leads her into disappointment, ambivalence, detachment, alienation and dislocation. It brings forth the loss of identity. The major concern of Zadie Smith is to reveal how immigrants are living in ambivalence and cultural dilemma making them to feel inferior especially the Monty Kipps family who is ruled by cultural hegemony. The collision of two different cultures created a state of perplexity upon immigrants who found them to be associated with disruption, broken identity, cultural hybrid, mimicry and cultural distortion.

Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* is a culturally ambivalent fiction where the characters are uncertain about eastern and western culture both. The novel focuses on culturally different

families. Barker states in his *Making Sense of Cultural Studies*: “Culture is the name for the domain in which contestation overvalue, meaning and practices take place and a tool by which to intervene in social life” (Barker 2000, p.67) characters of *On Beauty* suffer from identity loss but at the same time they reconcile to understand each other. Levi at the youngest son of Besley family he loves to hear Haitian music he searches for racial authenticity his friends are Hispanic and Haitian the song which Levi likes to sing “Ah-Ris-Teed Corruption, And Green And So We All See, We Still Air’t Free”(OB 228) this song has racial discrimination Natasha Kumar Warikos in his entitled sociological Forum comments that “while the parts of the novel on ideological conflict between academic rivals Montague Kipps and Howard Besley the members of the Besley family also understand beauty and human connection differently from one another (Warikos 2009, p. 468) fortunately Kiki and Carlene become friends they keep their racial differences aside.

Zadie Smith *On Beauty* is based on the reflections of ambivalence which also brings forward the concept of suffering, cultural identity, race superiority and inferiority, hyphenated identities, hybridity, diaspora and cultural distortion.

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