

**Redefining Transgenerational Trauma in Zadie Smith's
White Teeth (2000)**

إعادة تعريف الصدمة عبر الأجيال في الأسنان البيضاء لزادي
سميث

Dr Karima BOUHARROUR-BENHAMMANA*

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Abstract

The paper is meant explore the transgenerational trauma in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). As witnesses of her people's pain of assimilation, the writer critically reiterates the need to redefine the experience of her community. The novel shows how trauma is perpetuated through systems of power and oppression. The younger generation of immigrant in the novel have an unquestioned assumption that they are as English as their white counterparts, but they still face racism and belligerence. This work is meant to explore the author's conception of Western theories of trauma and coping, and how her novel reveals the insidious feeling of unbelonging and postcolonial distress. Still despite the trauma experienced by the characters in the novel, Smith describes immigrants' trauma with certain optimism showing that there is hope for a better future.

Keywords: Original trauma, diasporic characters, Transgenerational trauma, cultural distress.

* University of Boumerdes: k.bouharrou@univ-boumerdes.dz
karimabouharrou@yahoo.fr

ملخص:

تهدف الورقة إلى استكشاف الصدمة عبر الأجيال في الأسنان البيضاء لزادي سميث. كشاهد على آلام شعبها من الاستيعاب، تكرر الكاتبة بشكل الحاجة إلى إعادة تعريف تجربة مجتمعها. تُظهر الرواية كيف تستمر الصدمة من خلال أنظمة القوة والقمع. لدى الجيل الأصغر من المهاجرين في الرواية افتراض لا جدال فيه بأنهم إنجليز مثل نظرائهم البيض، لكنهم ما زالوا يواجهون العنصرية والعدوان. يهدف هذا العمل إلى استكشاف مفهوم المؤلف للنظريات الغربية عن الصدمة والتكيف، وكيف تكشف روايتها عن الشعور بضيق ما بعد الاستعمار. رغم الصدمة التي تعرضت لها الشخصيات في الرواية، تصف سميث صدمة المهاجرين ببعض التفاؤل الذي يظهر أن هناك أملاً في مستقبل أفضل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة الأصلية، شخصيات الشتات، الصدمة عبر

الأجيال، الضائقة الثقافية.

Corresponding author Dr Karima BOUHARROUR-BENHAMMANA,
k.bouharrou@univ-boumerdes.dz

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Introduction:

Zadie Smith *White Teeth* provides a nuanced exploration of migrant trauma and its complexities of cultural distinctiveness in the context of migration. It delves into the experiences of diaspora, unbelonging, and the choices immigrants face in routing their new cultural environments. Smith's novel reveals the social, cultural, historical, and political facets of trauma.

Starting with her definition of original trauma, this paper explores Smith's challenge of Western theories of trauma and coping, and how her narratives expose the insidiousness of postcolonial suffering and feeling of unbelonging. This study then explores the transgenerational trauma, the tensions between remembering and forgetting and the possibilities of the ambiguities and contradictions of the postcolonial and diasporic characters Smith depicts. The exploration discloses Smith's effort to ethically redefine trauma from a postcolonial and decolonial standpoint, reiterates the need to acknowledge and work through colonial histories and postcolonial forms of oppression, and ultimately, reflects on our roles as witnesses of suffering of our times.

Discussion:

The concept of trauma, in its widest and most popular understanding, has permeated contemporary ways of seeing and thinking about the world. Since its emergence in the mid-1990s, and springing from the ethical turn of the 1980s, trauma studies have become one of the most common and powerful frameworks used to understand contemporary culture and its narratives. Conversely, trauma and diagnosing others and even oneself as traumatised has become common practice in neoliberal, Western cultures, especially with the rise of popular psychology and the self-help industry in the last decade. The different theorisations of trauma have explained what has been called trauma in fiction, a genre that started as a form of marginal literature but has gained momentum in the last few years.

The available literature on the topic acknowledges that trauma, be it individual or collective, represents a constant

context for literary criticism. Trauma indeed, was believed to be able to provide a bridge across cultures (Caruth, 1996) which may consequently acknowledge others' suffering. Nevertheless, some critics have challenged the prevalence of trauma theories and pinpointed their adequateness to some contexts, specifically in postcolonial ones, thus questioning its potential bridging merits. Therefore, Maria Root defined as insidious trauma, that which "refers to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit." (Root, 1992, p229). It is referred to as the trauma of the everyday, which calls attention to the structural violence that results in "daily micro-aggressions [...] [which] can build to create an intense traumatic impact" (Craps, 2013, p4). Moreover, according to Mengel and Borzaga "trauma is deeply linked to economic and political issues [...] inseparable from institutions and structures" and that what is required is "an understanding of trauma that sees it not only as a result of an identifiable event but as the consequence of a condition that came about historically" (Mengel and Borzaga, 2012, pXI). Both critics advocate that the way forward in trauma studies does not go only through their decolonization, but through the acknowledgment of "the systemic denial and exclusion from the canon of fundamental and insightful studies on the relationship between trauma, colonialism, and racism" (ibid.). Craps, Mengel and Borzaga concord in designating situations that Westerners may regard as traumatic are actually everyday reality for many subjects who continue to live through them without of any coping mechanisms. or by choosing some that differ from those set out

by Western theories, such as silence. Hence, “Trauma paradigm”, “trauma culture”, “post-traumatic age”, all these academic buzzwords capture the impact that the notion of the psychological wound has made within and beyond literary studies. Sigmund Freud’s model of a breach in the protective barrier provided the starting point for the symptomatology of post-traumatic stress disorder (Kardiner, 1959). During the last two decades trauma studies have become one of the most common and powerful frameworks used to understand contemporary culture and its narratives. However, trauma and diagnosing others and even oneself as traumatised has become common practice in neoliberal, Western cultures, especially with the rise of popular psychology and the self-help industry in the last recent years. The different theorisations of trauma have explained what has been called trauma fiction, a genre that started as a form of marginal literature but has gained momentum in the last few years.

Sadie Smith’s *White Teeth* is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that offers a nuanced and complex portrayal of contemporary post war London. The characters struggle to reconcile their cultural heritage with their new lives in the city and the challenges of living in a diverse and rapidly changing society. The story explores the lives of two families, one Jamaican and, one Bangladeshi as they make their way through life in London. The novel portrays the cultural distress of those immigrants, by stressing the conflicts between the Westerners and the Easterners and between the first and the second generations of immigrants. The narrator of *White Teeth*, uses the term “original trauma” to describe the migrants' experience of diaspora. The novel portrays the cultural distress of immigrants,

by stressing the conflicts between the Westerners and the Easterners and between the first and the second generations of immigrants. The narrative also sheds light on the challenges and difficulties that diaspora has cast upon people that have to be tackled. The immigrant experience illustrated in the novel highlights the impact of power relations between the former colonized and the former colonizer upon their lives. The novel actually, provides insight into the experiences of immigrants and their families in a new country.

Relying on trauma studies, which explores the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. This theoretical concept was first developed in the 1990s and relied on Freudian theory to develop a model of trauma that imagines an extreme experience which profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world. Our reading of *White Teeth* as a trauma narrative relies basically on the work of Cathy Carruth untitled *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Trauma theory as developed by different other scholars also, allows the analysis of literary texts seeking to identify trauma text though inherent in the narrative to create meaning due to extreme traumatic stress. It seeks to identify "trauma texts," which are writings expressing whatever kind of memory the traumatic event allow. Trauma theory allows us to "read the wound" with the aid of literature and provides a framework for grappling with issues of reality, bodily integrity, and belonging.

In his later work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud writes: "We describe as 'traumatic' any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the

protective shield ... with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli” (1920: 33). Trauma is imagined as both an external agent that shocks the unprepared system and an internal action of defense against overstimulation. This trauma model informs most conspicuously Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996) which takes a particular interpretation of Freud’s trauma theories to forward her analysis that sets the tone for the critical debate regarding trauma’s significance in literature and the relation between individual and cultural trauma. In her book Caruth examines the “rhetorical potential” of recurring figures in texts that capture the splintered referentiality that points to the “knowing and not knowing” of the traumatic past, which in turn reveals the “traumatic nature of history” itself (1996: 18). Therefore, Caruth argues that trauma’s invisibility disrupts the ability to fully understand or represent a traumatic experience. Both individual traumatic experiences and collective historical extreme events are ultimately never known directly but only through an interrupted referentiality that points to the meaning of the past only as a type of reproduction or performance (1996: 11). Cathy Caruth, equally argues that trauma is viewed as an event that fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation. Fragmentation or dissociation is viewed as the direct cause of trauma, a view that helps formulate the notion of transhistorical trauma, which suggests that trauma’s essential or universal effects on consciousness and narrative recall afford the opportunity to connect individual and collective traumatic experiences. This model emphasizes the suffering caused by an external source that makes internal changes to the mind and irreversibly changes personality. The critical emphasis on

trauma's unspeakability causes lasting damage and demanding unique narrative expressions. Trauma's ghostlike presence in consciousness, its lack of normal integration into memory and narration, generates a shadow that indirectly points toward trauma's meaning and the truth of the past.

Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* is analyzed as a trauma fiction that reveals the psychological and emotional "invisible" impact of colonialism and migration. Smith's work deals with the theme of trauma in various ways. The narrator uses the term "original trauma" to describe the sense of unbelonging and uprootedness experienced by peoples involved in mass migrations of the twentieth century. The term suggests that the trauma of the diaspora is rather a recurring experience that shapes the distinctiveness of those who have migrated. The concept is meant to capture the psychological and emotional impact of migration and colonialism on individuals and communities. The notion of "original trauma" in *White Teeth* relays the experiences of the characters as Archie Jones, a World War II veteran who feels disconnected from his own country and struggles to find a sense of belonging. Samad Iqbal, another protagonist, is a Bangladeshi immigrant feels torn between his cultural heritage and his desire to assimilate into British society. Smith's original trauma is also related to the concept of transgenerational trauma, referring to the idea that the trauma of displacement and migration is passed down through generations, that have not lived the traumatising event, but which inherit the absences, the shortcomings of memory, the fragmentation, and the silences of older generations. This phrase captures the way Smith's work seeks to decolonize trauma by acknowledging the

interconnectedness of different histories and experiences. This approach recognizes that trauma is not limited to a single event or group of people, but is instead a complex and interconnected phenomenon embedded in social structures.

Smith shows the same ambivalence and internal contradiction fatefully manifesting itself in the migrant families as much as in the white inheritors of the colonial legacy. The novel centers around multiple families, which are comprised of first and second-generation immigrants, and depicts familial conflicts and the ways in which parents can lose control of their children. The idea that people can have a sense of duality is inconceivable for the older generation, and their children are often seen as failures or lazy. The younger generation of immigrant characters in the novel have an unquestioned assumption that they are as English as their white counterparts. By her exploration of the generational trauma that comes with colonialism Smith exposes different ways trauma is manifested. Given all the issues with identity and the generational trauma forcing them to understand their colonial history, they have no clean slate compared to their contemporary and idealized White English counterpart

White Teeth delves into the different ways in which trauma is manifested and how it continues to affect individuals and families. Smith portrays characters who either choose to ignore the past or confront it uncompromisingly, showing that regardless of their choices, the history of trauma follows them. The novel follows the relationship between two families, represented by Archie Jones, a white man, and Samad Iqbal, a Bengali immigrant, in a multicultural setting in Northern

London. It explores the intertwining of identity and the haunting histories that span three generations. Cultural conflicts are likely to emerge when the rules and values of one cultural group are substantially different from another, and members of the cultures come in contact with each other. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* narrates the dilemma of the second-generation immigrants in Great Britain. It is a generation caught between two sets of moral values and between two cultural spheres. The novel centers on Britain's relationship with immigrants from the British Commonwealth.

Given the fact that the novel investigates the transgenerational trauma that comes with colonialism and highlights how it continues to manifest in different ways. The characters in the novel, such as Archie, Clara, and Samad, grapple with the effects of colonialism and the lasting impact it has on their lives. The novel explores generational trauma that comes with colonialism and exposes different ways trauma is manifested. Therefore, trauma studies and theories are used to critically revisit the notion of hybrid identity that is central to postcolonial criticism. Traumatic accounts have often sought to exhume the original event that generated individual and collective suffering. The analysis of Samad's suffering and repetition in light of the definition of original trauma thus suggest that he might be acting out, rather than working through, the trauma of colonialism and its traces in contemporary times. The novel *White Teeth* depicts the impact of racist microaggressions on the characters' sense of home and belonging in several ways, reflecting the complexity of their responses and the impact on their sense of distinctiveness. Some characters

respond to racial behaviour by remaining silent, either out of fear or a desire to avoid further conflict or because they do not want to draw attention to themselves. This internalization can lead to a sense of alienation and self-doubt. The character of Irie, in the novel does not respond when a classmate makes a racist comment about her. Undeniably, this leads some characters to internalize racist attitudes and struggle with their sense of whom they are. Millat For example, struggles with his identity as a Bangladeshi Muslim in British society and turns to radicalism as a way to assert his individuality. Resisting the erasure of his cultural heritage, leads him to extremist views and actions, with long-term consequences for the character and the community. The novel highlights the damaging impact of racist microaggressions on individuals' sense of home and their ability to navigate between their cultural heritage and British society. Most of the time, Racist microaggressions can lead to a sense of alienation and exclusion from British society. Clara, for instance, feels like an outsider in British society and struggles to find a sense of belonging. Her conduct emphasised the ways in which racism can create barriers to integration and assimilation. Therefore, some characters confront the individuals who make racist comments and directly challenge the discrimination they face, asserting their dignity and demanding respect. In her struggle, Clara, reactively, confronts a man who makes a racist comment about her in a pub, and Samad, equally confronts a man who calls him a "Paki." By standing up to racism and asserting their dignity, both protagonists set an example for others and create a more positive environment. This attitude highlights the importance of standing up to transgenerational trauma, but also the potential risks and challenges of doing so.

Unexpectedly, Some characters respond to racism with humor and wit. They use shrewd comebacks or sarcasm to deflect the negativity and maintain their sense of distinctiveness. For example, Archie responds to a racist comment by joking that he is "a bit of a Paki" himself. This highlights the ways in which humor can be used as a coping mechanism in the face of racism. Therefore, *White Teeth* depicts the impact of racial violence on the characters' sense of individuality and belonging by highlighting the damaging effects of internalization and alienation, the importance of standing up to racism, and the potential for humor as a coping mechanism. Seeking individuality and belonging, the novel depicts the long-term traumatic effects of experiencing racism and discrimination on the characters' mental health, reflecting the complexity of this transgenerational experience. Some characters confront racial discrimination head-on, while others use humor or internalize the negativity. Smith's novel therefore reveals how the younger generation of Londoners develop positive relationships with each other despite experiencing racial trauma. By promoting cultural exchange and understanding, sharing similar experiences, confronting racism, and using humor and wit as coping mechanisms, the novel reveals the complexity and resilience of individuals navigating the intersection of cultural heritage and British society, and the potential for positive relationships and support despite the challenges of racism and microaggressions.

Undeniably, *White Teeth* portrays the challenges the traumatic difficulties and cultural distress faced by immigrants and their families in London. The narrative subtly explores the conflicts between the Westerners and the Easterners and between

the first and the second generations of immigrants. Living in a multicultural city, or living in a different country than one's native country, and especially being from a multicultural family, as portrayed in *White Teeth*, makes it more difficult to define one's distinctiveness and sense of home. The novel introduces a critique of essentialist understanding of distinctiveness, displaying the inevitably porous borders of cultural uniqueness against a narrative of hybridity and cultural mixing. The characters in the novel struggle with issues of individuality and belonging in a society that is often hostile to them. The novel also sheds light on the impact of power relations between the former colonized and the former colonizer upon their lives, as it provides insight into the experiences of immigrants and their families in a new country and the challenges they face in adapting to a new culture and society.

Conclusion:

Trauma is a recurring theme in *White Teeth* that is explored through the lens of migration, colonialism, and generational trauma. Addressing migrant trauma, Smith's novel *White Teeth* provides valuable insights into the experiences of immigrants and their families, and the challenges they face in adapting to a new culture. The paper uses trauma theory to explore the experiences of immigrants and their descendants in Britain in order to highlight the long-lasting effects of colonialism and the ways transgenerational trauma is perpetuated through social structures and institutions. Some characters grapple with their cultural heritage and their place in British society. They navigate the tension between assimilation and preserving their cultural distinctiveness. This struggle can manifest in various ways, such

as seeking radicalism or exploring different aspects of their heritage. Some others internalize the racist hostility they experience, leading to a sense of alienation and self-doubt. This can have long-term effects on their mental health, contributing to anxiety and depression. This experience of racial trauma contributes to the characters' struggles with sense of individuality and belonging. They may feel caught between their cultural heritage and the pressure to assimilate into British society, leading equally to a sense of confusion and disorientation. Alternatively, some of Smith's *white Teeth* characters developed some coping mechanisms to deal with this ongoing transgenerational trauma. Nevertheless, while this can provide temporary relief, it may also mask deeper emotional pain and contribute to long-term mental health issues. The novel depicts the long-term effects of racial microaggressions on the characters' mental health by highlighting the internalization of negativity, struggles with individuality and belonging, radicalization, and the use of coping mechanisms. The novel ultimately reveals the complexity and resilience of individuals navigating the intersection of cultural heritage and British society, and the impact of racism on their mental health and well-being. Zadie Smith's novel does not explicitly suggest any solutions or strategies for addressing the long-term effects of this transgenerational trauma. However, the text does offer some insights and themes that could be interpreted as potential strategies or solutions. These include confronting racism, using humor and wit as coping mechanisms, promoting cultural exchange and understanding. Seeking distinctiveness and Belonging, the novel portrays characters who grapple with their

cultural heritage and their place in British society in order to address the long-term effects of racial attitudes on their mental health. *White Teeth* reveals the characters' struggles to reconcile their cultural heritage with their experiences in British society by highlighting vulnerability, cultural hybridity as it contributes to contemporary debates on diaspora and distinctiveness.

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