

Issue of Race in *White Teeth* *İnci Gibi Dişler*'de Irk Sorunu

Fırat YILDIZ¹
Yüçüncü Yıl Üniversitesi

Abstract

Zadie Smith's novel, *White Teeth*, deals with the issues such as multiracialism, multiculturalism, migration, etc. Race is a sensitive topic and Smith takes it as a key subject in her novel. The novel is constructed around Iqbal, Chalfen and Jones families from ethnically and culturally very different backgrounds. Iqbals are Bengalis, Chalfens are Jews and Jones family consists of a Jamaican mother and British father. The multi-ethnicity of England is mainly projected through these three families. It is obvious that the colonial period has certain effects on the formation of the multiracialism in England. The colonization caused confrontation of different races, and *White Teeth* mainly takes the lives of descendants of the colonized nations into account. In this scope race becomes a substantial part of the *White Teeth* and his study focuses on issue of race in *White Teeth*.

Key Words: Race, Culture, Immigration, Colonial Period.

Özet

Zadie Smith'in *İnci Gibi Dişler* adlı romanı İngiltere'deki çok ırklılık, çok kültürlülük ve göçmenlik gibi konuları ele alır. Özünde hassas bir konu olarak ırk, romanın anahtar konularından biridir. Roman, etnik ve kültür açısından çok farklı Iqbal, Chalfen ve Jones aileleri etrafında kurgulanır. Iqbal ailesi Bangladeşli, Chalfen ailesi ise yahudi kökenlidir. Jones ailesi de bir Jamaikalı anne ile bir İngiliz babadan oluşmaktadır. İngiltere'nin çok etnikli yapısı ağırlıklı olarak bu üç aile çerçevesinden ele alınır. İngiltere'de çok ırklılığın oluşmasında sömürgecilik döneminin etkisi açıktır. Sömürgecilik süreci farklı ırkların karşılaşmasına neden olmuştur ve *İnci Gibi Dişler* ağırlıklı olarak sömürülmüş toplumların neslinden olup İngiltere'ye göç eden insanların yaşamlarını göz önüne serer. Bu bağlamda ırk *İnci Gibi Dişler*'in önemli bir parçası haline gelir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Irk, Kültür, Göçmenlik, Sömürü Dönemi.

¹ Yrd. Doç. Dr., Yüçüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Dil Bilimi Bölümü, e-mail: fyildiz@yyu.edu.tr

Introduction

Race is a notion that entails additional sensitiveness when construing on its sociologic construction. Its sensitive structure becomes ever increasingly more delicate as different races and civilisations mingle with each other. There are certain motivations that lead to confrontation of races. Some of these factors can be listed as wars, colonization, immigration, trade, etc... When some people live in hard conditions they look for new opportunities in different parts of the world. However; the new arrivals often go through a tough process at the new place and they are not always welcomed by the local people. The expectations from immigration do not come true in some cases. Zadie Smith's first novel, *White Teeth*, touches on subjects within this context. The lives of some immigrant families and individuals are in perspective of *White Teeth*. Smith's own life pertains the immigration experience. Smith's mother is a Jamaican who migrated to England and married an Englishman. Smith has a mixed-parentage and it can be suggested that the issue of race has a place in her life. When she is asked about the place of 'race' in her novel, she stated that; "I wasn't trying to write about race. . . . Race is obviously a part of the book, but I didn't sit down to write a book about race" (Hastings, 2011). Well, this study does not claim that *White Teeth* is totally based on the concept of race but it is obvious that race has a substantial scope in it. Therefore, Smith's prudence about the topic does not conceal the existing.

Discussion

Overall, *White Teeth* is about three families from fundamentally very different backgrounds. In Jones family Archie is English and married Clara who is Jamaican and immigrated to England. The Iqbal family, Samad and Alsana, are both Bengali and they are immigrants as well. The most English looking family is the Jewish Chalfen family and they are admired by Irie Jones for their pure Englishness. She thinks; "Chalfens are more English than English" (Smith, 2001: 328). However, Chalfens are descendants of immigrants by third generation from Poland and Germany. In addition to these, other characters are Indian, Pakistani, Italian, Spanish, Iraqi, Russian, Swedish, Bulgarian, Thai and many other races in minor roles. Therefore, it can be suggested that there is a flood of races in *White Teeth*. Smith is quite attentive in manifesting races of each character and even the objects take their share from this approach in that she often states the origin of objects such as Afro hair, Germanic tobacco, Swedish chair, Spanish bubbly, Mexico bean, Indian sweets, Italianate vineyards, etc. It seems that Smith is obsessed with sense of belonging. She constantly attributes characters or objects to somewhere.

Smith's mother, Yvonne McLean, migrated from Jamaica. Jamaica had been colonized by British for more than three centuries. The reflections of this background are observed in the *White Teeth*. One of the main characters Clara has migrated from Jamaica with her mother Hortense. They are not the only immigrant characters came from once colonized world. The Iqbal family also

migrated from Bangladesh, a former colony of England. England is a multiracial and multicultural country and the contribution of colonial period to this multiplicity cannot be underestimated. Colonization process is against the benefits of the colonized, in other words it is a disparagement for the colonized. Naturally, it has something to do with the balance of power. Samad defines this circumstance eloquently as; "One strong man and one weak is a colony" (Smith, 2001:92). The strong one looks down on the weak one. Charles Taylor (1994) highlights this situation as follow; "It is held that since 1492 Europeans have projected an image of such people as somehow inferior, "uncivilized," and through the force of conquest have often been able to impose this image on the conquered" (26). This study does not aim to scrutinize the colonial or postcolonial periods. It touches the topic briefly to show that its effects are still progressing. The descendants of colonial period show up as English citizens in *White Teeth*. Their ancestors were deemed inferior during the colonization period. Unlike their ancestors, they are supposed to be esteemed as equal citizens. The colonization period is over but it is hard to believe that the descendants of the colonized are not disparaged.

In *White Teeth*, the concept of colour plays a significant role. Predominantly the colour of skin but the whiteness of teeth also has a significant place in the novel. Smith is attentive to mention skin colour of each character. Specifying the skin colour of characters becomes almost a sine qua non. When we come back to teeth, it is apparent that the 'white' in the title of the novel refers to the bright white teeth of the non-white races. One of the minor characters, Mr. Hamilton, once a soldier, narrates one of his war memories about peril of having the white teeth to Magid, Millat and Irie. "Clean white teeth are not always wise, now are they? Par exemplum: when I was in Congo, the only way I could identify the nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth, if you see what I mean. Horrid business. Dark as buggery, it was. And they died because of it, you see?" (Smith, 2001:171-2). There is a contrast between the skin colour and the whiteness of the teeth. When the skin colour provides a chance for concealment in the dark, the whiteness of the teeth functions just the opposite, it reveals their place of covert. Here the white colour becomes the weak point of African soldiers. Mr Hamilton's approach to the topic from this point of view gives a hint about his racism. Later Mr Hamilton uses another expression, "black as the ace of spades" (Smith, 2001:172) to define African soldiers' skin colour. It is stated that the word 'spade' evolved into a racist expression in twentieth century (Gandhi, 2013). It should be kept in mind that he is talking to a girl with mixed parentage and two Bengali boys. Mr Hamilton's obtrusive manner offends the kids and Millat feels essential to justify their rightful existence in England. He tells about his father's participation to the war on behalf of English army. However; Millat's effort to prove his acceptability is repelled as; "I'm afraid you must be mistaken," said Mr Hamilton, genteel as ever. "There were certainly no wogs as I remember...no Pakistanis...what would we have fed them? ...I could not possibly have stomached that rich food?" (Smith, 2001:172). Another racially offensive word 'wog' (Clark, 2005) is used by Mr Hamilton to refer dark skinned races. It is striking that Mr Hamilton is

talking with small kids who are assigned by their teacher to visit his house in scope of a program that helps the local community. It is striking that he does not change his genteel manner when performing a cruel racist interview with small kids. He declines the contribution of other races to England. In other words, he is reluctant to recognize the existence of other races. Taylor (1994) refers to this circumstance as follow;

“...our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (25).

Taylor (1994) states that being recognized or being ignored has a role on formation of identity (25). Recognition is dignification whereas nonrecognition is abasement. Samad had joined the war and fought for England. However, it is rejected by Mr Hamilton with a certain language because Samad is not English but he is a wog. Kids efforts to prove the rightness of their claim is pointless. Mr Hamilton is so determined that he does not even listen to them. There is a kind of misrecognition and this situation suffocates and hurts the feelings of the kids. Taylor (1994) suggests that such misrecognition may lead to low self-esteem (26), which is painful for the misrecognized ones.

The pain of misrecognition can sometimes push the limits and become tormenting. This occurs for people who fall from grace. As an example, Alsana comes from a respected old family of Bangladesh (Smith, 2001:62). However, her respectful background becomes meaningless in England. She does not have a respected position in England. On the contrary, her race is looked down on. Taylor (1994) states that the colonized people have been contemplated as inferior by the western world (26). England has a notorious fame as a precursor colonizer. “British ideology has been known for its hegemony over some other races, especially colonized ones” (Işık, E., & Tekalp, S. 2012:342). Alsana is member of a respected family in Bangladesh but the image she represents is considered as inferior in England. So this circumstance becomes more painful for people like Alsana.

In some cases, even the white characters pay for their close intimacy with other races. Archie’s marriage to a Jamaican woman and his friendship with Bengalis become an issue for some people. Maureen who fancies Archie actually feels sad for him because of his connections with Caribbeans and Bengalis. Maureen is almost choked when she sees Archie’s wife, Clara’s skin colour (Smith, 2001:69). Archie is summoned urgently by his boss and he is dismissed from the company dinners that they participate as couples again because of

Clara's skin colour (Smith, 2001:72). The boss asserts that he is a non-racist (Smith, 2001:72) when he displays the most racist performance. Dark skin colour becomes a means of discrimination. Taylor (1994) says that; "...white society has for generations projected a demeaning image of them" (26), the 'them' in the quotation refers the races with dark skin colour. A dialogue between Samad and Archie whose friendship "crosses class and colour" (Smith, 2001:96) becomes an evidence for this claim. Samad talks about his alleged hero grandfather. And how the English academics discredit his grandfather because of his race. Archie's verifies Samad's thesis; "That's true...They don't speak well about Indians back home; they certainly wouldn't like it if you said an Indian was a hero...everybody would look at you a bit funny" (Smith, 2001:99-100). According to Archie's statement, Indians have a negative image in England and assuming the existence of an Indian hero seems funny. Archie's candid expression displays racist views on behalf of British society. At the time of this dialogue, Samad has not immigrated to England yet, he still lives in Bangladesh and he is not directly object of this kind of racism. It is striking that the racist approach that takes place even at the far end of the world hurts Samad's feelings and he begs Archie to fight against bias about East when he goes back to England. It shows that no matter how far it is, the painful effects of racism are felt from long distances.

Surely it is not only Samad who feels the pain of racism in the *White Teeth*. Shiva, who is another immigrant character, plans to establish a security firm and his plans are ruined due to racial issues. Because it is specified that; "nobody wanted to hire Paki bouncers" (Smith, 2001:142). This circumstance has a sole interpretation; nobody feels secure with Paki security around. It is ironic that he is determined as a source of insecurity and that is why his intention to become a security guard turns into an absurd action. To be regarded as the distrusted person is despairing for Shiva. He does not feel that he belongs to western culture. He longs for his country and culture. These turbulent feelings lead Shiva to join a fundamentalist group. That is how he develops a sense of belonging. The members of this group share the common traits. They are mostly from families migrated from once colonized countries. They fit into the concept of 'otherness.' They do not feel as the members of the society they live in. Because the racist approaches make them feel alienated. People who do not feel as a part of the society feel alone. The lonesome person is a weak person. In order to feel strong such people need to attach themselves to somewhere that will welcome them. Joining such a group makes the members feel more secure and strong. The group acts as a shield against racist approaches for them.

The first generation of immigrants struggle with adaptation problems. They do not completely feel as a part of England. The hybridized cultures and values cause fragility on the identity of those immigrants (Çelikel, 2011: 47). The main problem that the next generation confronts is the sense of belonging. They sometimes stay in limbo. It is difficult to determine which culture or

country they belong. In order to survive they should comply with the culture and rules of the host country. However, some of them are very sensitive about conserving their values. This dilemma usually causes conflicts among family members. As an example, Magid's inner struggle about sense of belonging starts from childhood. Being deeply embarrassed of his eastern name, Magid, he introduces him as Mark to his friends. He calls his mother as 'mum' in the presence of his friends instead of Bengali equivalent 'amma' (Smith, 2001:151). He is not satisfied with his eastern family, the ideal family he wants to be in is a western family where the mother plays cello. The place he wants to attach himself is the west world. Samad takes it as degeneration. He believes that he and his family are being corrupted by England (Smith, 2001:144). He wishes to clean up at least one member of the family. Samad sends one of his sons, Magid, back to Bangladesh with the intent of upbringing him according to Bengal culture as a pious boy. Contrary to his expectations, Magid turns to an atheist who canonizes western world after all. Paradoxically Magid and Millat tend towards radically two different ways. Magid who is brought up in Bangladesh becomes a fan of western world and Millat who lives in England becomes a fundamentalist. Actually, at first Millat used to live just as a westerner young boy. So the question may cross one's mind, what makes him turn into a fundamentalist? The answer to this question is given in the section titled 'Mutiny' in *White Teeth*.

"But he 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 shop-owner 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. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country..." (Smith, 2001:233-4)

He is well aware of the role casted to him by white society. He believes that he is an outsider and no matter what he does to mingle with the society, his skin colour is an identity that reveals where he really belongs. Millat's reaction is mostly result of the biases. One of the sensitive subjects is the misrecognition of their real nationality. He is Bengali but he and his equivalences are all projected as Pakis, which offends them. There are other biases that become source of distemper for them. Such as; they smell curry, their sexual identity has no importance, they occupy job positions etc. Their occupational advancement has a limit and whatever they do, they cannot pass this limit. They are very sensitive about such unfair biases and these biases function as barriers for them to fit into society.

Sense of belonging improves for an individual when he is being accepted by a society. If an individual is valued, respected and accepted by society he feels attached to that society. Such individuals may develop healthy relations in society. The Chalfens fit into such a definition. They are projected as a perfect, celebrated white family. They are emotionally stable and mentally healthy (Smith, 2001:313). They are healthy eaters and they deal with humanitarian and universal subjects. Briefly, they are perfect examples of citizenship. However, Chalfens are also descendants of immigrants. But they fit into society perfectly because they do not have dark skin colours that will peach against them. Therefore, they do not have a problem with sense of belonging to British community. They are accepted and respected by the society. Smith gives the Chalfen family as an example to make a comparison between dark skin and white skin coloured immigrants. The former remains as the 'other' and the latter fits into society perfectly in the end. The latter is respected by society as required.

According to Abraham Maslow (1994) there are basic needs for an individual no matter which race or culture he belongs. These needs are; "Physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs" (125). In order to outreach the self-actualization process, an individual needs to meet the mentioned basic needs. The physiological needs of non-British characters of *White Teeth* are more or less fulfilled. However, the other needs are not completely fulfilled. It is hard to claim that other races are respected equally. The following quotation from Joyce Chalfen is quite striking to exemplify this claim.

"You read a lot about how Afro-Caribbeans seem to find it hard to establish long-term relationships. That's terribly sad, isn't it? I wrote about one Dominican woman in *The Inner Life of Houseplants* who had moved her potted azalea through six different men's houses; once by the windowsill, then in a dark corner, then in the south-facing bedroom, etc. You just can't do that to a plant" (Smith, 2001:322).

The paragraph starts up with a bias about Afro-Caribbeans. However, it becomes worse as it progresses. The centreline of the main subject changes from Afro-Caribbeans into a plant. The life conditions of the plant outrun the Dominican woman's life conditions. The so-called intellectual and humanitarian Joyce feels the pain of the plant however, the sociological aspects of a human being, the Dominican woman, escape her mind. This grave dilemma is a barrier for the other races to grow the feeling of self-esteem.

As a social fact, the immigration process has multiple directions. From a nationalist point of view, penetration and miscegenation may be great threats for their nation. Because the miscegenation may cause racial degeneration.

However, from an immigrant's point of view intervention may cause cultural and racial dissolution that will end up with disappearance. Either side has its concerns in this process. Samad states that; "I have been corrupted by England, I see that now – my children, my wife, they too have been corrupted" (Smith, 2001:144). There is a fine line between corruption and adaptation. These two concepts may be evaluated relatively from different points of view. For Samad conserving one's own values is crucial to avoid corruption. Yet, Millat becomes a member of a fundamentalist group, which regards conservation of values radically. Now Millat is a trouble for society and he is a corrupted character from western point of view. On the other hand, Magid celebrates western culture, he is in harmony with the society and he is an adapted character from western point of view. However, Samad considers him as corrupted, because he has lost his own values and culture. This dilemma is experienced by many immigrants. Millat develops an intimacy with white Chalfen family and this makes Alsana anxious. "I am saying these people are taking my son away from me! Birds with teeth! They're Englishifying him completely. They're deliberately leading him away from his culture and his family and his religion" (Smith, 2001:345). Alsana is quite concerned about the probability of his son's marriage to a white girl, because she fears of losing her Bengali genes. As another instance Hortense, who is half-white herself, stops talking to her daughter after she marries Archie, who is a white person. Clara, who is married a white man, has great concerns about the white friends of her daughter; "Clara saw an ocean of pink skins surrounding her daughter and she feared the tide that would take her away" (Smith, 2001:328). Cultural, religious and racial dissolutions are some of the common concerns of immigrants. Hortense defines this racial tension briefly; "Black and white never come to no good. De Lord Jesus never meant us to mix it up" (Smith, 2001:384-5). She deliberately bases her thought on a religious ground to strengthen her thesis.

Conclusion

The tension between races has been subject of studies for social scientists. One of them is colour blindness and the other is multiculturalism. Colour blindness; "proposes that racial categories do not matter and should not be considered when making decisions" (Richeson, & Nussbaum, 2004: 417). On the other hand; "multiculturalism, proposes that group differences and memberships should not only be acknowledged and considered, but also, celebrated" (Richeson, & Nussbaum, 2004: 417). It is obvious that Smith has not intended to produce a work in scope of 'colour blindness'. On the contrary, she shows ultimate attention to represent the different races, skin colours, nationalities of her characters. As mentioned previously there is a flood of races in *White Teeth*. Smith desires to represent different culture and ethnicities as much as possible. "Smith's novel emphasizes that multiculturalism should accept a mixing of ethnicity identified at the level of the individual rather than the nation" (Bentley, 2007: 496). However, it is hard to claim that her approach completely fits the concept of multiculturalism. Except for a few exceptions,

there is not any celebration of differences. Quite the contrary the differences between characters are projected. The tension between different races are represented with such a pessimistic atmosphere that Fernández (2009) asserted the following claim; "The novel has been accused of not giving a very accurate account of British multicultural reality and of ethnic identities and ethnic relations in the city of London" (144-5). The only character that celebrates the differences is Poppy Burt-Jones. She encourages her students to be open minded about other cultures. "We can learn about each other through each other's culture, can't we?" (Smith, 2001:16) It is hard to find any other examples that celebrate the cultural, racial and religious differences other than this. In this respect, Fernández's (2009) claim, "There is a "celebratory" attitude towards multicultural relations in the novel" (145) is unsubstantial. There is a flood of different cultures but there is not any celebration of cultural differences.

As mentioned previously Smith has not intended to write specifically on 'race.' However, she admits that the 'race' is a part of the novel (Hastings, 2011). Her tone about the role of 'race' in the novel is disdainful. Actually, the issue of race appears almost as the main theme of *White Teeth*. This may come into sight as a strong claim but there are strong supportive evidences throughout the novel. It can be asserted that *White Teeth* is almost based on issue of race. Taryn Beukema (2008) sets forth this claim; "For the most part, have focused on race, multiculturalism, hybridity and migrancy" (1). Contrary to Smith's claim, the novel is about race and issues related to race. *White Teeth* aims to unveil the unseen, the ignored or the misrecognized. "Smith's novel unearths the presence of "other" citizens in the city of London" (Fernández, 2009: 146). Smith feels responsible for the people who are considered as 'others'. She touches the sore points of races other than British and highlights the life conditions of the immigrants who go through a hard period in respect of adaptation, dissolution, assimilation, etc. There are characters struggling with adaptation problem and there are characters that are assimilated. There are characters that lose their essence and there are characters who strive to conserve their values. Smith tries to mention cases of such characters more or less. The issue of race becomes an obsession for Smith such that it remains as an inseparable part of her following studies.

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