

Postcolonial Narratives and Performative Language in Zadie Smith's *The Wife of Willesden*

Zadie Smith'in *Willesden'in Kadını* Eserinde Postkolonyal Anlatılar ve Performatif Söylem

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Abstract

This article examines Zadie Smith's *The Wife of Willesden* (2021) as a postcolonial adaptation that reimagines Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" through the culturally situated voice of its protagonist, Alvita. Drawing on J. L. Austin's (1962) speech-act theory, the study treats Alvita's language as performative action rather than purely communication. To contextualise the cultural and political significance of these acts, the article integrates postcolonial and diaspora theories, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "hybrid identity", Stuart Hall's (1990) notion of identity as "becoming", and Avtar Brah's (1996) framework of "diaspora space". Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study shows how Alvita's performative speech negotiates hybrid identity, challenges normative constructions of gender and race, and intervenes in broader negotiations of belonging within a multicultural London setting. The article argues that Smith's *The Wife of Willesden* uses performative language not only to characterise Alvita but also to enact a counter-discursive practice that disrupts Eurocentric literary traditions and reconfigures who is authorised to speak within them. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates how *The Wife of Willesden* generates new cultural meanings and opens alternative modes of reinterpreting classical texts in a postcolonial context.

Keywords: Alvita (character), Diaspora, Postcolonial, Speech act theory, *The Wife of Willesden* (2021), Zadie Smith

Öz

Bu makale, Zadie Smith'in *Willesden'in Kadını* (2021) adlı eserini, Chaucer'ın "Bath'lı Kadının Hikâyesi" (1392) adlı yapıtını, kültürel bağlamda konumlanan kahramanı Alvita'nın sesi aracılığıyla yeniden tasavvur eden bir postkolonyal uyarılama olarak incelemektedir. J. L. Austin'in (1962) söz edimleri kuramına dayanarak bu çalışma, Alvita'nın dilini bir iletişim aracı olmaktan ziyade performatif bir eylem olarak ele almaktadır. Bu eylemlerin kültürel ve politik önemini bağlamsallaştırmak amacıyla makale, postkolonyal ve diaspora teorilerini bir araya getirmektedir; özellikle Homi K. Bhabha'nın (1994) "melezleşmiş kimlik" kavramı, Stuart Hall'un (1990) kimliği "dönüşme" olarak tanımlayan yaklaşımı ve Avtar Brah'ın (1996) "diaspora alan" çerçevesi dikkate alınmaktadır. Bu disiplinlerarası yaklaşım aracılığıyla çalışma, Alvita'nın performatif konuşmasının melez kimliği nasıl ele aldığını, cinsiyet ve ırkın normatif yapılarını nasıl sorguladığını ve çokkültürlü Londra ortamında aidiyet konusundaki daha geniş müzakerelere nasıl müdahale ettiğini göstermektedir. Makale, Smith'in *Willesden'in Kadını* adlı eserinin performatif dili yalnızca Alvita'yı tanımlamak için değil, aynı zamanda Avrupa-merkezli edebi gelenekleri bozup bu gelenekler içinde konuşma yetkisine sahip olanları yeniden yapılandıran karşı-söylemsel bir uygulamayı gerçekleştirmek için de kullandığını savunmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, analiz, *Willesden'in Kadını*'nın yeni kültürel anlamlar ürettiğini ve postkolonyal bağlamda klasik metinleri yeniden yorumlamanın alternatif yollarını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Alvita (karakter), Diaspora, Postkolonyal, Söz edimleri kuramı, *Willesden'in Kadını* (2021), Zadie Smith

Introduction

Contemporary adaptations of classical literature in a postcolonial framework have gained considerable importance in the literary world. They serve both as a means of reinterpreting established narratives and as a platform for voicing marginalised perspectives. This approach allows authors to critically address canonical texts and bring to the fore the socio-political issues that the original works may have overlooked or ignored. Such adaptations provide a dialogic space in which grand narratives can be challenged and new meanings created, thus promoting a revisited understanding of the past and present¹. In this context of reimagining and rewriting, Zadie Smith's *The Wife of Willesden* (2021) stands out as a contemporary reinterpretation of Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales* (1392). Smith's adaptation is set in the multicultural London neighbourhood of Willesden, transposing Chaucer's medieval tale into a modern, diverse environment. It also represents an important milestone in her career, as it is the first time she has written specifically for the stage, establishing her entry into theatrical writing. The protagonist, Alvita, embodies the spirit of Chaucer's original character while providing a fresh perspective that addresses the concerns and experiences of the contemporary world. Moreover, with *The Wife of Willesden*, Smith bridges the gap between Chaucer's medieval England and London's modern and diverse landscape. By reimagining Chaucer's tale, Smith simultaneously pays tribute to the original work and undermines it by breathing new life into it. Her adaptation proves that classic literature has long had the power to inspire new stories and perspectives, especially in a postcolonial framework that seeks to challenge the conventional understanding of the literary canon.

Building on J. L. Austin's theory of performative utterances, this study employs close textual analysis to examine how *The Wife of Willesden* uses language as a form of action rather than simply a means of communication. The article argues that Alvita's voice becomes a performative site through which diasporic identity, sociocultural critique, and self-fashioning are simultaneously negotiated. While Austin illuminates how Alvita's speech accomplishes acts in the moment of speaking, the article also draws on postcolonial and diaspora concepts to contextualise the cultural and political significance of those acts. Alvita's challenge to social norms surrounding gender, race, and marriage is enacted not only through the content of her stories but through the performative force of her speech. The retelling of her life experiences becomes a site where cultural identity is continuously articulated and rearticulated, echoing Stuart Hall's (1990) understanding of identity as a dynamic process of "becoming". Through monologues and dialogues that accomplish acts in the moment of speaking, Alvita positions herself within what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) terms a hybrid "third space", in which she negotiates competing cultural inheritances and asserts an authority grounded in diasporic lived experience. Her speech acts function as forms of self-determination that reconstruct her social world, enabling her to fashion a narrative in which she enacts agency, desire, and power on her own terms. Additionally, Avtar Brah's (1996) framework of "diaspora space" helps situate Willesden as a site where multiple histories of migration, gender, and race converge and where Alvita's culturally inflected speech acts intervene in ongoing negotiations of identity and community. Alvita's speech acts thus become not only personal assertions but interventions in broader negotiations of belonging. Integrating Austin with these postcolonial perspectives enables a more balanced analysis, demonstrating how Alvita's language functions simultaneously as performative action and as a mode of negotiating hybrid identity and cultural dislocation.

The significance of this study lies in demonstrating how *The Wife of Willesden* extends beyond a contemporary retelling of Chaucer to function as a postcolonial adaptation that reimagines British cultural heritage as shaped by diasporic experience. The original contribution of the article is to reveal how Smith's play deploys performative language not only to characterise Alvita but to enact a counter-discursive practice that disrupts Eurocentric literary traditions and reconfigures who is authorised to speak within them. By integrating Austinian performativity with postcolonial concepts of hybridity and identity, the analysis illuminates how Alvita's speech generates new cultural meanings and opens up alternative modes of reading classical texts within a multicultural British context.

Theoretical Framework

To analyse *The Wife of Willesden* (2021) through J. L. Austin's speech act theory, it is worthwhile to focus not only on the mechanisms of performative language but on how Alvita's language represents Austin's concepts of felicity and infelicity, as well as illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. While Austin criticises the traditional view of language as simply a tool for conveying facts, he introduces the idea of performative utterances, which do more than describe reality; they enact actions. This distinction is vital for understanding how Alvita's language operates in the play. Austin defines speech acts as utterances

¹ Key postcolonial rewritings of canonical texts include Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which reimagines *Jane Eyre* from Bertha Mason's perspective; Derek Walcott's *Pantomime* (1978), a reworking of *Robinson Crusoe* that interrogates colonial power relations; Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), which revisits *Great Expectations* through the figure of Magwitch; and Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* (1979), which adapts Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* to expose postcolonial corruption and inequality.

that perform an action, in which the act of saying something is itself a form of action (1962, p. 6). Performative utterances, unlike constative ones, are not judged by their truth-value but by their felicity, whether they successfully perform the action they intend (Austin, 1962, p. 14). For instance, when Alvita speaks, her words not only reflect her reality; they shape it. Austin's categorisation of failures in performatives – misfires and abuses – can be applied to Alvita's speech acts, exposing moments in which her linguistic performance either succeeds or fails to achieve its intended power, authority, or impact.

Alvita's speech acts operate within a hybridised space of identity, as theorised by Homi K. Bhabha (1994). She manoeuvres between conflicting cultural norms, and her language reflects this through the strategic use of performative utterances. For example, when Alvita challenges traditional gender or racial roles, she is not simply making a statement but enacting a defiance against those norms. This dynamic goes hand in hand with Austin's notion of illocutionary acts. In this context, Alvita's utterances negotiate her hybrid identity, which is a process that reflects the intersection of multiple cultural forces, as explored in postcolonial studies (Bhabha, 1994). The role of authority in Alvita's performative language also corresponds to Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of identity as "becoming". Alvita's evolving self-concept, articulated through her speech acts, challenges fixed cultural identities and illustrates the fluid, dynamic nature of identity as outlined by Hall (1990). Her language does not solely represent her cultural positioning; it enacts her transformation, demonstrating how language shapes the social reality around her. Moreover, from the perspective of diasporic theory, particularly Avtar Brah's (1996) concept of "diaspora space", Alvita's speech acts can be understood as responses to her sense of dislocation and belonging. Her utterances are not only shaped by the multicultural London setting but also dynamically participate in negotiations of belonging, establishing her presence in a space where cultural identities intersect and collide.

Drawing on the work of Hall, Bhabha, and Brah, the article situates Alvita's diasporic and hybrid positioning within an established postcolonial framework, while strengthening its contribution by bringing these concerns into dialogue with Austinian performativity. Alvita's speech acts are not simply expressive but function as culturally and historically inflected interventions that actively produce social relations. Positioned at the intersection of authority, gender norms, and diasporic belonging, her utterances must be read in relation to Austin's criteria of felicity and illocutionary success, which show how language serves as a site of negotiation over power and legitimacy. In *The Wife of Willesden*, performativity thus exceeds a narrowly linguistic model, becoming a postcolonial practice through which dominant narratives of race and gender are contested, and hybrid identity is enacted rather than described.

Postcolonial Narratives and Performative Language in Zadie Smith's *The Wife of Willesden*

The Wife of Willesden (2021), Smith's first work for the stage, was originally performed by the Kiln Theatre in London in 2021. The play is set in the Colin Campbell pub. In the introduction to *The Wife of Willesden*, Smith shares the story behind her adaptation of Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" into a contemporary play. It all began when Brent, her beloved borough in London, was named the 2020 Borough of Culture, and she was asked to write something in its honour. After wrestling with the idea of celebrating London, she drew inspiration from *The Canterbury Tales* (1392), particularly "The Wife of Bath's Tale". The project started as a playful idea to translate Chaucer into the local dialect, eventually developing into a full play. However, Smith did not initially realise how far it would go. She discusses how much the character of Alyson (the Wife of Bath) resonated with her experiences in Kilburn and London, seeing the medieval figure as someone who could easily exist in today's world (Smith, 2021, p. 10). Smith reflects on the process of adapting the tale, the merging of medieval elements with modern life and how themes such as sexual politics, class and personal freedom remain relevant across the centuries. The author also explains how she worked within the constraints of the original text – rhyming couplets and ten-syllable lines – while adapting it for a modern audience. She makes adaptations, such as replacing certain Chaucerian characters with modern equivalents (e.g., a charity worker and a bailiff) and moving the setting of the story to 18th-century Jamaica to better suit her main character, Alvita, a bold, outspoken woman from Kilburn. Ultimately, what begins as a reluctant commission eventually becomes a joyful and creative challenge, merging Chaucer's work with Alvita's own life and experiences.

Alvita's Performative Sovereignty and Infelicitous Speech

A contemporary retelling of Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale", *The Wife of Willesden* centres on Alvita, a Jamaican-born British woman in her mid-fifties. Like Chaucer's Alyson, Alvita epitomises self-confidence, sexual freedom and a refusal to conform to societal expectations of women. The play begins with a community gathering at the Colin Campbell pub to celebrate Brent's appointment as a cultural district (Smith, 2021, p. 18). Alvita takes centre stage and tells the story of her five marriages, which are characterised by humour, expressing her relentless pursuit of personal satisfaction. She not only narrates but acts through her language:"

Let me tell you something: I do not need
Any permission or college degrees

To speak on how marriage is stress. I been
 Married five damn times since I was nineteen!
 From mi eye deh a mi knee. But I survived,
 Thank God, and I got to say, of the five,
 None of them were total wastemen (Smith, 2021, p. 25).

Through *Alvita*, Smith depicts a strong and confident voice asserting authority. The opening line, "Let me tell you something: I do not need / Any permission or college degrees", serves as a performative claim of knowledge. The narrator doesn't need external validation to express her experience or views on marriage. *Alvita* performs her identity as a survivor of multiple marriages: "But I survived, / Thank God, and I got to say, of the five, / None of them were total wastemen" (Smith, 2021, p. 25). This statement is not only informative; rather, it is a performative declaration of resilience and experience. Surviving multiple marriages, *Alvita* asserts, is a form of triumph. Each word reinforces her identity as a strong woman who has overcome the challenges of marriage. She not only reflects on the past but also affirms her survival as an ongoing reality. From an Austinian perspective, *Alvita's* experience of being married five times indicates potential infelicities in those marital vows. According to Austin (1962), infelicities in performative utterances are instances when speech acts fail because of certain unfulfilled external and/or internal conditions (p. 14). In this sense, *Alvita's* five marriages can be seen as an abuse of the performative act, as they were not sincerely honoured. This is corroborated by *Alvita's* declaration that she does not need formal confirmation, which indicates a resistance to the norms of felicity conditions. This attitude makes her previous marriages vulnerable to infelicity since institutional approval is unimportant to her. *Alvita* speaks openly about her desires and weaknesses and admits that she tries to subjugate her husbands to her power and secure her happiness. The men in her life range from older white Englishmen to younger men from the Caribbean, standing for her diverse and adventurous spirit.

Austin's doctrine of infelicities facilitates an understanding of how language functions as an active force in social and cultural interactions. Smith's *Alvita*, like Chaucer's *Alyson*, champions women's sovereignty in marriage and asserts their right to control their relationships. She speaks with wit and a mixture of accents, blending Jamaican patois and North West London accent, giving the play a vernacular linguistic distinction:

With me! Yep. Nothing about bigamy
 In there, or more-gamy-than-that (cough, cough).
 So how come some people slagging me off?
 Nah, I'm not having it. Count the pickney
 And women of Marley. How 'bout Stevie?
 Now, you know Stevie's had more than one wife!
 Blindness don't stop him enjoying his life.
 I should be so lucky as Bob Marley.
 Rita? Miss Jamaica? He had plenty
 Woman, and I'm sure he had a good time
 With them all, back in the day. And that's fine.
 But let's also thank God for my five men:
 Ian, Darren, Winston, Elridge and Ryan. (Smith, 2021, pp. 26-27)

Alvita's above monologue illustrates how performative utterances operate within a particular cultural and linguistic context. The rhythmic and vernacular delivery of her speech functions as a performative assertion of identity and agency that paradoxically represents and challenges social norms. *Alvita's* use of humour and rhetorical questions – "So how come some people slagging me off?" – demonstrates her awareness of potential infelicities in her self-presentation (Smith, 2021, p. 26). She appears to justify her polygamous relationships by citing examples from the personal lives of cultural icons such as Bob Marley and Stevie Wonder and equating them with her own situation. The performative nature of *Alvita's* utterance thus lies in her attempt to claim moral or cultural legitimacy for her lifestyle. Understandably, she therefore makes a bold claim to her sovereignty in relationships. However, based on Austin's classification of the doctrine of infelicities elaborated in the theoretical part of the study, it can be argued that *Alvita's* attempt to gain popular approval by comparing herself to figures such as Bob Marley and Stevie Wonder lacks the necessary authority or conventional acceptance to validate her actions in the way she intends.

***Alvita's* Hybrid Self: Diaspora, Performance, and Cultural Negotiation**

Seen in a postcolonial context, it is noteworthy that Smith deliberately plays with the idea that women can enter into multiple marriages by equating them with their male counterparts. In reality, however, in postcolonial societies with strong patriarchal traditions and conservative religious practices, multiple marriages of women are considered socially unacceptable

or even stigmatised. Indeed, men remarrying or having multiple marriages is frequently normalised, while women face judgment or marginalisation for similar choices. Hence, by placing Alvita's multiple marriages at the centre of the narrative, Smith challenges these patriarchal structures and advocates for women's autonomy in personal relationships. This narrative positioning converges with Hall's (1990) understanding of cultural identity, which is not a fixed essence but a process: "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'... subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (p. 225). Viewed in this light, Alvita emerges not as a stable or predetermined subject but as one whose sense of self is continually shaped and reshaped by the intersecting forces of migration, gender, community, and cultural memory. Her identity must therefore be understood as dynamic rather than static, developing in response to the social and historical conditions that structure her life. Accordingly, Alvita's identity is not a fixed essence but an evolving performance of the self shaped by diasporic experience. Her marital history, linguistic fluidity, and refusal to conform do not solely represent who she is but participate in the ongoing formation of who she is becoming. Through her bold self-articulation, she reclaims the conditions under which her identity can be known, recognised, or validated.

In terms of Austinian sincerity and intent, on the other hand, there is no clear indication in the extract that Alvita's statements also lack sincerity; on the contrary, her tone of voice and her references suggest that she is genuinely defending her choices since Austin interprets the opposite as "an abuse of the procedure" (Austin, 1962, p. 16). Moreover, if Alvita's intent were manipulative or if she rejected cultural norms while seeming to follow them, this would constitute abuse. However, the extract shows that she is questioning social norms rather than falsely adhering to them. From this, it can be deduced that the infelicities in Alvita's speech primarily fall under misfire, as the "procedure" to validate her lifestyle in the given context in terms of social, legal or moral norms is not successfully executed, as it undermines the legitimacy of her performative justification. In this respect, the insertion of the figure of Black Jesus into the play suggests an irony of seeking divine approval for what is seen as socially transgressive and forcing the audience to question the validity of such social judgments.

Hall's notion of becoming also helps shed light on this irony: Alvita's performances, whether linguistic, marital, or narrative, expose the instability of the norms that seek to contain her. By refusing the terms through which patriarchal society traditionally recognises women, she disrupts the norms of cultural intelligibility, staging an identity that emerges in the interstices between resistance and self-fashioning. As Hall (1996) elaborates,

Though identities seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (p. 4)

It follows that Alvita's identity cannot be read as a stable identity derived from her Jamaican heritage or her marital history alone; rather, it is an ongoing performance that negotiates the resources of language, history, and culture available to her in a diasporic context. Her self-representation, expressed through humour, vernacular speech, and a deliberate challenge to patriarchal expectations, illustrates how identity is constituted within representation rather than emerging naturally or pre-given. By strategically deploying these cultural and linguistic resources, Alvita not only asserts her agency but also creates space to redefine normative expectations of womanhood, marriage, and belonging.

Complementing Hall's observations, Bhabha (1994) argues that the site of identity formation is a productive "in-between" or hybrid space which unsettles fixed meanings and allows new cultural forms to emerge. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha (1994) suggests:

The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. It is the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. (p. 56)

In Alvita's case, her marriages to men with typically British names, her movement between Jamaican patois and London vernacular, and her performance of a transgressive female sexuality place her squarely in this "in-between" space. Her identity is neither fully rooted in her Jamaican past nor wholly absorbed into British normative culture; instead, it thrives in the liminal zone of diasporic translation and negotiation. In Bhabha's terms, this hybrid identity is productive precisely because it overturns the binary of coloniser/colonised and destabilises any claim to a fixed cultural origin. By inhabiting this hybrid area, Alvita both reflects and disrupts the norms of her multiple cultures, enacting what Bhabha describes as "the articulation of cultural difference" (p. 56). Thus, her story becomes a performative enactment of hybridity, a living example of how identity is composed not by stable roots but by continual translation, resistance and innovation.

Queen Nanny and Challenging Britishness

The theory of performative utterances also suggests that language not only describes a reality but also enacts or constitutes an action when spoken under the “appropriate circumstances”, which Austin describes as “suiting the action to the word” (1962, p. 85). In this context, it is worthwhile that, as ironic as it may sound, all five of Alvita’s husbands have typically British names: “Ian, Darren, Winston, Elridge and Ryan” (Smith, 2021, p. 27). The choice of names for Alvita’s five husbands is related to performative utterances and their relationship to social and cultural signifiers. Austin (1962) explains that “suiting the action to the word” demonstrates a connection between language and action in which the words either accompany or substitute the act they describe (p. 85). With husbands bearing British names, Alvita locates her life within a British socio-cultural framework in which each name indicates interaction or integration with British society. Nevertheless, given that Alvita is a character with Jamaican roots, the British names may also challenge expectations about cultural belonging and identity, suggesting assimilation since the term itself, when used in the postcolonial sense, is aimed “at the suppression of difference” (Griffiths, 2006, p. 168).

In *The Wife of Willesden*, the portrayal of a woman of Jamaican descent who is married five times to men with typical British names illustrates the transitional and hybrid character of postcolonial cultures, “which challenges the tenets both of an essentialist nationalism which sublimates or overlooks regional differences and of an unconsidered multiculturalism (mis)appropriated for the purposes of enforced assimilation rather than for the promulgation of cultural diversity” (Huggan, 2006, p. 432). In terms of Austin’s theory of performative language, by assigning typically British names to Alvita’s husbands, Smith performs a linguistic act that mocks the stereotypical cultural indicators of Britishness. The irony here lies in the “internal contradiction” when the utterance undermines its own sincerity or authority (Austin, 1962, p. 57). On the surface, Alvita’s marriages conform to British marital norms, but on the other hand, by multiplying and parodying the act, the author undermines the moral foundations of the marriage institution.

Smith adapts the story with postcolonial sensibilities, replacing Chaucer’s Arthurian setting with a narrative set in 18th-century Jamaica during the time of Queen Nanny, a legendary Maroon leader: “Back in the Maroon days of Queen Nanny, / Who Jamaicans love to the nth degree / All the island full up ah duppy, / And all kind ah spirit a roam free ...” (Smith, 2021, p. 65). This change allows Smith to address colonialism and the history of resistance, placing Alvita’s defiance within an indigenous context of the rebellion against oppression led by the Jamaican freedom fighter Nanny, the Maroon leader. Maroons are descendants of Africans who were enslaved and brought to the Americas, later liberating themselves from slavery (Zips, 1998, p. 191). Nanny of the Maroons is a significant figure in Jamaican and African history and “the most celebrated woman from the era of slavery in Jamaica” (Sharpe, 2003, p. xvi). She lived at the time when Britain first began establishing its West Indian colonies (Sharpe, 2003, p. xii). It is believed that “she was forced into slavery as a child in Jamaica following her abduction from Ghana” (Igomu & Musa, 2022, p. 630). A well-respected and intelligent woman, Queen Nanny, helped organise the Maroon people and developed strategies to free the enslaved Africans (Igomu & Musa, 2022, p. 631). Queen Nanny’s powers have achieved legendary status through her depiction in oral traditions, her portrayal in poems and novels and her recognition as a national hero (Sharpe, 2003, pp. xvi-xvii). Along with Smith’s reference to her in *The Wife of Willesden*, the Maroon leader has inspired several other literary works. Authors² reimagine or invoke her as a symbol of resistance and community survival. It is no coincidence that Smith sets “The Wife of Willesden’s Tale” in early 18th-century Jamaica. The author introduces the British audience unfamiliar with Queen Nanny and connects women’s historical fight for independence to contemporary discourses on postcolonial identity, gender, and agency.

Reimagining Chaucer’s tale within the context of eighteenth-century Jamaica, Smith not only challenges the Eurocentric ideological construction of the British literary canon but also brings to the fore histories that dominant discourse has long overlooked. By positioning this Caribbean narrative within a canonical British text, the author destabilises fixed notions of “Britishness” and instead argues for a more expansive understanding that incorporates diasporic identities. Avtar Brah’s (1996) concept of “diaspora space” is particularly useful here. Brah (1996) describes this space as the site where genealogies of dispersion intersect with those of “staying put”, characterising it as a dynamic arena shaped by transnational movements of people, cultures, and capital (p. 16). This space is neither solely geographical nor historical but a continually negotiated field in which memory, identity, and belonging are constructed and contested. Although diaspora usually evokes “traumas of separation and dislocation”, Brah asserts that it can simultaneously become “a site of hope and new beginnings”, where fragmented memories encounter one another and reorganise into new cultural formations (p. 190). Extending this concept, Joel Kuortti (2007) describes “imagined diasporas”, in which “transnational formation extends particular nationally confined boundaries” (p. 4). Kuortti (2007) argues that “new imagined communities arise that not simply substitute old ones but form a space in-between various identifications, a hybrid space accommodating often uneasily joining parts” (p. 8). This idea

² For some of these works, see Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s *Rites of Passage* (1968), Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* (1984), Sylvia Wynter’s *The Hills of Hebron* (1984), Lorna Goodison’s *Turn Thanks: Poems* (1999), and Kei Miller’s *Augustown* (2016).

emphasises how diasporic individuals negotiate multiple affiliations – cultural, linguistic, gendered, and experiential – to create evolving, hybrid identities that cannot be contained by singular national or historical narratives (pp. 7, 32). By situating Smith’s text within these theoretical models, it can be observed how the reworking of Chaucer becomes a literary enactment of diaspora space: a hybrid, contested terrain in which multiple histories meet, collide, and issue new possibilities for imagining Britishness itself.

Smith’s narrative exemplifies the intersection of Brah’s and Kuortti’s approaches. By situating Alvita’s story within Queen Nanny’s historical and legendary framework, Smith constructs a literary diaspora space in which individual and collective memories of African and Caribbean diasporas are reassembled and reimagined. This space becomes both performative and imaginative: it allows historical narratives to be reclaimed and hybridised, while simultaneously generating a site of postcolonial agency that challenges Eurocentric constructions of history, gender, and British identity. The narrative thus operates in the in-between, echoing Kuortti’s hybrid space where multiple identifications coexist, sometimes uneasily, but always dynamically, fostering new forms of belonging and collective consciousness. Thus, by setting the tale in 18th-century Jamaica and invoking Queen Nanny, Smith’s narrative asserts postcolonial agency, challenges Eurocentric histories, and questions the boundaries of Britishness.

Blame Me, Not Chaucer: The Art of the Pre-emptive Apology

Remarkably, Smith begins and ends the play with an apology; in “The General Lock-in”, she apologises to her audience as they may: “spot [themselves] and / Think I’ve made you posher or more common / Than you’d like: sorry. I’ve got a good ear, / But I can only write down what I hear ... (Smith, 2021, p. 23). Likewise, in “A Retraction”, where Smith again uses the author’s voice, she apologises to her audience for any errors in her version of events and for any offence she may have caused with “all the swearing and cultural appropriation” (Smith, 2021, p. 86). She also asks her audience to blame her for the entire work she has created:

blame me ... And all credit to Chaucer if you liked it – he’s the source of all the actual wisdom ... But, look, on the other hand, if it annoyed or offended you in some way, that’s just a lack of finesse on my part, probably ... so don’t blame Chaucer ... I take full responsibility ... (Smith, 2021, p. 86)

The author’s voice, which pronounces an apology in “The General Lock-in” and “A Retraction”, is a performative act in itself. She is not simply stating that an apology is needed; she is also performing the apology by addressing the audience. She shifts responsibility onto herself, takes full responsibility for the work and at the same time shifts responsibility away from Chaucer. The author’s voice, steeped in apologies, offers several interpretations from the perspective of Austin’s performative language. This act can be seen as a self-correction by which the author attempts to manage how her audience perceives her relationship with her source material. On the other hand, it can be read as an attempt to regulate the illocutionary force of her words and to clarify the intention behind her actions, i.e. to protect herself from misinterpretation. The author’s apology could also be interpreted as an attempt, so to speak, to soften the infelicity of any offence or cultural appropriation her work might cause. Thus, by apologising in advance, she is trying to avoid potential infelicities in the reception of her play.

Conclusion

Zadie Smith’s *The Wife of Willesden* (2021) transforms Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” by situating it in the cultural, linguistic, and historical realities of modern London and postcolonial society. By centring Alvita, a Jamaican-born British woman in her fifties, Smith bridges the temporal gap between the Middle Ages and the present, exploring themes of identity, agency, and the negotiation of social norms. Through Alvita’s witty, outspoken, and vernacular voice, the play defamiliarises traditional expectations of women, offering a perspective on gender and identity that is simultaneously local and diasporic. Alvita’s speech acts exemplify the performative power of language as theorised by J. L. Austin. Her declarations about marriage, personal desire, and autonomy do not simply describe experience but actually constitute it, challenging societal conventions and exposing the infelicities built into institutional norms. Her five marriages, narrated with humour and resilience, function as both literal and symbolic assertions of self-sovereignty, accentuating the reversal of patriarchal expectations while demonstrating the challenges of life in a diasporic, postcolonial context. Alvita’s linguistic hybridity, a blend of Jamaican patois and North West London vernacular, reinforces the performative nature of her identity. Smith’s use of language enacts diasporic agency, situating Alvita in a liminal “in-between” space that represents Hall’s (1990) notion of identity as a process of becoming and Bhabha’s (1994) concept of hybridity. In line with Avtar Brah’s (1996) notion of the “diaspora space”, Alvita inhabits a social and cultural terrain that is simultaneously transnational and local, where multiple identities, histories, and power relations converge. Identity, in this context, is neither fixed nor monolithic; it emerges through the negotiation of historical memory, cultural affiliation, and social interaction. By integrating historical references such as Queen Nanny of the Maroons, Smith places Alvita’s narrative within a postcolonial framework, connecting contemporary

struggles for autonomy with historical acts of resistance and emphasising the reclamation of marginalised histories. Smith's pre-emptive apologies further demonstrate the reflexive and performative dimension of the play. By acknowledging potential offence or cultural appropriation, she regulates the illocutionary force of her work, anticipating audience reception and mitigating possible infelicities. These acts of self-reflexivity mirror the hybrid, negotiated space of the narrative itself, in which social norms, historical memory, and personal expression intersect. Ultimately, *The Wife of Willesden* establishes a creative dialogue with both Chaucer and contemporary cultural realities, redefining adaptation within a postcolonial and diasporic context. Through its interplay of medieval and modern elements, its linguistic and performative experimentation, and its interaction with historical and cultural memory, the play claims a space for diasporic voices within British literary tradition. Smith's work celebrates the fluidity of identity, interrogates the boundaries of belonging and agency, and challenges audiences to reconsider the frameworks – historical, cultural, and linguistic – that shape understanding of the self, autonomy, and cultural inheritance.

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