



Negotiating Postcolonial Identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Abstract

This study critically examines the representation and negotiation of postcolonial identity in zadie smith's white teeth (2000) through the lens of homi k. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, focusing on ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and the third space. Using qualitative textual analysis, the research explores how immigrant and second-generation characters embody fragmented identities shaped by colonial history and multicultural realities in london. The study finds that postcolonial identity in the novel is unstable, marked by psychological tension, emotional loss, and resistance rather than harmonious hybridity. Furthermore, london is portrayed as a postcolonial metropolis that facilitates cultural interaction but also imposes symbolic exclusion and surveillance, limiting true belonging and complicating the formation of the third space. These findings challenge optimistic interpretations of multiculturalism and hybridity, emphasizing the emotional and symbolic costs of identity negotiation in contemporary britain. This research contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by offering a nuanced understanding of hybridity as a site of ongoing struggle rather than cultural resolution.

Keywords: Postcolonial identity, Hybridity, Ambivalence, Third space, Zadie Smith's White Teeth.

Article information:

Volume Number: Vol 1, No 1, May 2026

Submitted: March 6th, 2026
Final Revised April 10th, 2026
Accepted: May 1st, 2026
Published: May 4th, 2026

Lexica: Literature, Education,
Culture, and Applied Linguistics
Homepage:
<https://journal.uag.ac.id/Lexica>

1. INTRODUCTION

1. Background

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) is a contemporary British novel that occupies a central position within postcolonial and multicultural literary discourse. Set in London, the novel portrays the lives of immigrant families and their descendants whose identities are shaped by the enduring legacies of British colonial history and the realities of present-day multicultural Britain. Within postcolonial studies, identity is not understood as a fixed or unified category but as an unstable and continuously negotiated process shaped by historical and cultural forces. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin state, "postcolonial identities are not unified or stable, but are constantly being formed and reformed" (2002, p. 225). This instability is inseparable from the lasting impact of colonial history, as "colonialism did not simply end with political independence; its effects continue to shape culture and identity" (Loomba, 1998, p. 7). In *White Teeth*, the tension between Britain's

colonial past and its multicultural present is embedded in everyday social interactions, revealing how colonial memory continues to inform contemporary experiences of belonging and exclusion within the metropolitan space of London (Young, 1996; Rutherford, 1990).

2. Research Gap and Objectives

A central concern of *White Teeth* lies in the identity struggles experienced by immigrant and second-generation characters who inhabit culturally ambivalent positions. While first-generation immigrants often retain strong attachments to their cultural origins, second-generation characters are caught between inherited traditions and dominant British norms, producing fragmented identities and persistent uncertainty. Their efforts to assimilate rarely result in full acceptance, instead exposing the psychological strain of living between cultures. This condition reflects the nature of hybridity itself, which, as Young argues, “is not a peaceful mixture of cultures but a site of political and cultural tension” (1996, p. 25). Identity in the novel is therefore marked by instability, anxiety, and contradiction rather than harmony, supporting the view that identity is “never complete, always in process, and constituted within representation” (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211).

Existing scholarship on *White Teeth* has predominantly focused on themes of multiculturalism, identity crisis, and second-generation immigrant experiences. Previous studies examine how language, culture, and social interaction shape identity formation within a multicultural British context, often emphasizing accommodation and coexistence (Almarkhan, 2020; Neupane, 2024). Other scholars highlight the erosion, fragmentation, and reconfiguration of identity under multicultural conditions, particularly in relation to diasporic subjectivity and generational conflict (Güven & Aldemir, 2025; Kara, 2025; Nazir et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies establish *White Teeth* as a significant text for understanding multiculturalism and postcolonial identity in contemporary British literature. However, much of this scholarship tends to approach hybridity and cultural negotiation in affirmative terms, frequently treating hybridity and the third space as productive sites of cultural creativity and resolution.

Despite acknowledging identity fragmentation, many previous studies remain focused on social and cultural processes, offering limited engagement with the psychological burden and symbolic tension experienced by postcolonial subjects. Hybridity is often framed as a solution to identity conflict rather than as a condition marked by loss, ambivalence, and failed belonging, particularly for second-generation characters. As a result, the affective dimensions of postcolonial identity such as alienation, anxiety, and emotional instability remain under-theorized within discussions of the novel (Kara, 2025; Nazir et al., 2025).

This gap indicates the need for a critical reassessment of hybridity that attends to its psychological and symbolic costs rather than its celebratory potential.

To address this gap, the present study draws on Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, particularly his concepts of ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and the third space as articulated in *The Location of Culture* (1994) and "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" (1984). Bhabha conceptualizes identity as produced through ambivalence, a condition in which colonial authority and subjectivity are mutually destabilized. As Bhabha notes, "cultural identity is articulated in the tension of difference rather than in the harmony of diversity" (1994, p. 2). Hybridity, within this framework, does not signify cultural balance but ongoing tension, while mimicry exposes the limits of assimilation, since "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126), producing subjects who are "almost the same, but not quite."

These dynamics unfold within what Bhabha terms the third space, an in-between site of cultural negotiation where identity is never fully stabilized. Importantly, the third space does not guarantee empowerment or coherence, as "the third space is the in-between space where meaning and representation have no primordial unity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). In *White Teeth*, this space is manifested through the urban landscape of London, which functions as a postcolonial metropolis that facilitates cultural encounters while simultaneously reproducing historical and symbolic constraints rooted in colonial power relations. The city thus becomes a space that both enables and constrains identity formation, revealing the limits of belonging within multicultural Britain.

By reading hybridity not as a space of cultural resolution or liberation but as a site of emotional loss, anxiety, and unresolved belonging, this study seeks to critically reposition postcolonial identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* through an examination of character negotiation and the limits of the third space.

The present study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1: In what ways do the characters in *White Teeth* embody and negotiate postcolonial identity within the context of cultural ambivalence and hybridity?

RQ 2: How does London function as a postcolonial space that enables yet constrains the formation of the third space in *White Teeth*?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using textual analysis as its primary methodological approach. Textual analysis enables the systematic interpretation of

meanings, representations, and discursive patterns embedded within literary texts (McKee, 2003). This approach is appropriate as the study seeks to explore how postcolonial identity is constructed and negotiated, rather than to measure variables quantitatively (Creswell, 2014).

To ensure methodological rigor, the analysis is conducted through a systematic, theory-driven procedure. The analytical procedure follows a purposive sampling of textual data, where specific dialogues and narrative descriptions are selected based on their density of postcolonial markers. These data units are then subjected to thematic coding, using Bhabha's conceptual definitions of ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry as the primary coding manual to ensure objective classification and interpretation. The selected data are subsequently coded and categorized using Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial concepts ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and the third space as analytical categories. In this study, Bhabha's theory is explicitly positioned as an analytical framework that guides both data classification and interpretation. Each textual unit is examined in relation to these concepts to identify recurring patterns of identity negotiation and cultural tension within the narrative.

To maintain analytical clarity, the categorized data are organized in accordance with the study's two research questions. The analysis is structured into two interrelated dimensions: character representation (RQ 1) and spatial articulation of London as a postcolonial setting (RQ2). Data collection is conducted through careful and repeated close reading of the novel. During this process, relevant passages are identified and selected based on their alignment with the study's analytical focus on identity negotiation and experiences of in-between. The selected data are then systematically organized to support a structured analysis. In relation to RQ 1, the analysis focuses on character representation, examining how the novel constructs the backgrounds, psychological conflicts, and identity negotiations of its characters, particularly those belonging to immigrant and second-generation communities. This includes attention to characterization, internal conflict, and patterns of belonging and non-belonging that reflect ambivalence and hybridity. In relation to RQ 2, the analysis concentrates on narrative articulation, particularly the use of dialogue, narration, and significant narrative scenes that construct London as a postcolonial space. This stage examines how urban settings, social interactions, and narrative voice function to both enable and constrain the formation of the third space. Through this approach, London is interpreted not merely as a physical setting but as a symbolic and socio-cultural space where postcolonial identities are negotiated within historical and structural limitations.

The analytical procedure is carried out through a theory-driven qualitative textual analysis. Each selected passage is systematically examined and coded based on Homi K. Bhabha's key concepts are ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and the third space which function as the primary analytical categories. These concepts guide both the classification

and interpretation of the data, ensuring that the analysis remains consistent with the study's theoretical framework. The findings are then interpreted in relation to broader debates on postcolonial identity and multiculturalism in literary studies. Overall, this methodological design provides a systematic, transparent, and theoretically grounded framework for analyzing *White Teeth* and addressing the research questions of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Postcolonial Identity Negotiation in Character

The findings show that *White Teeth* presents postcolonial identity as unstable and continuously negotiated rather than settled or resolved. Through the lives of its main characters, the novel questions optimistic views of hybridity by showing how multicultural life in Britain often produces tension, uncertainty, and emotional strain. In line with Homi K. Bhabha's theory, identity in the novel is formed in an in-between space where belonging and exclusion exist simultaneously. Importantly, these dynamics are not only constructed through narrative events but are also reinforced through language use, word choice, symbolism, and narrative tone, which deepen the representation of identity conflict.

Samad Iqbal illustrates postcolonial ambivalence as a state of inner conflict that leaves him emotionally unsettled. He is torn between his desire to preserve religious and cultural values and the reality of living in Britain, where those values feel constantly challenged. His dependence on history is evident in the statement, "it is only history that binds us" (Smith, 2000, p. 161). The word choice "binds" carries a dual meaning, suggesting both connection and constraint. The lexical choice of 'binds' functions as linguistic evidence of identity paralysis, suggesting that Samad's ambivalence is a structural trap that prevents his integration into the multicultural present. The tone of nostalgia mixed with frustration reinforces his psychological tension, indicating that his identity is shaped by unresolved contradictions. From Bhabha's perspective, this reflects ambivalence, where opposing cultural forces coexist without resolution.

Irie Jones represents hybridity as a condition marked by invisibility and emotional loss, particularly as a second-generation subject. As a mixed-race young woman, she struggles with dominant standards of beauty and belonging. Her desire to "merge with the masses" (Smith, 2000, p. 229) highlights a crucial lexical choice, where the verb "merge" implies disappearance rather than inclusion. This suggests that hybridity does not empower Irie but instead leads to self-erasure. Furthermore, her body functions as a symbolic site of identity conflict, where her physical features become markers of difference. The narrative tone surrounding Irie is often marked by insecurity and longing,

reinforcing her sense of not fully belonging anywhere. This supports the idea that hybridity involves psychological struggle rather than cultural harmony.

Millat Iqbal's identity is shaped by external labeling and social exclusion, which are strongly conveyed through language. The phrase "a Paki no matter where he came from" (Smith, 2000, p. 234) demonstrates how identity is imposed through derogatory word choice, reducing his complex identity into a fixed racial category. The derogatory label 'Paki' serves as a discursive tool of fixity that attempts to freeze Millat's identity into a manageable colonial stereotype, triggering his aggressive resistance. The tone in these interactions is dismissive and stereotyping, contributing to Millat's sense of anger and alienation. His later rebellious actions can therefore be interpreted as responses to this discursive exclusion. In Bhabha's terms, such resistance is produced within the same system that marginalizes him, rather than outside it.

Magid Iqbal presents a contrasting response through mimicry, reflected in his attempt to fully adopt British rationality and values. His characterization as becoming "more English than the English" reflects a form of hyperbolic expression, emphasizing the excessiveness of his assimilation. This exaggerated imitation highlights the artificiality of his identity performance. His preference for scientific logic and formal language further signals a rejection of his cultural roots, suggesting that mimicry operates not only at the behavioral level but also through discourse. However, as Bhabha argues, mimicry is never complete; it produces similarity without full acceptance. The subtle ironic tone surrounding Magid's portrayal reveals the gap between imitation and belonging, resulting in an identity that appears constructed rather than authentic. *White Teeth*. Together, these findings answer the first research question by showing how characters in *White Teeth* negotiate postcolonial identity through ambivalence, hybridity, resistance, and mimicry. These processes are not only reflected in narrative events but are also constructed through discursive elements such as word choice, symbolism, and tone, which intensify the representation of identity conflict. Rather than offering resolution, the novel presents hybridity as a condition marked by tension, emotional instability, and uneven recognition, reinforcing the idea that postcolonial identity remains an ongoing and unresolved process.

2. London as a Postcolonial Space and the Third Space

At the same time, the struggles faced by these characters suggest that identity negotiation cannot be separated from the environment in which it takes place. The repeated patterns of exclusion, surveillance, and non-belonging point toward London as more than just a background setting. Although often described as a multicultural city, London appears to function as a space that allows interaction while limiting true belonging. This observation leads to the next part of the discussion, which examines how London operates as a

postcolonial space that both enables and restricts the formation of the third space. London in *White Teeth* is often described as a multicultural city where different cultures coexist, yet the findings suggest that this coexistence does not automatically produce a sense of belonging. Instead of functioning as a productive third space, London appears as a site of constant negotiation marked by surveillance, symbolic exclusion, and unresolved tension. While diversity is visible on the surface, the city repeatedly fails to provide emotional or social stability for its postcolonial subjects. Throughout the novel, multiculturalism in London is shown as a condition of proximity rather than connection. The statement “this has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white” (Smith, 2000, p. 326) reflects how diversity exists without necessarily creating unity. Although different cultures live side by side, they remain separated in terms of belonging and recognition.

This sense of exclusion is also reflected in how characters are positioned within the city. Millat, for example, is repeatedly described as an outsider despite being born in Britain, as seen in the phrase “a Paki no matter where he came from” (Smith, 2000, p. 234). This shows that the city does not fully accept individuals beyond their racial identity. Similarly, Irie’s desire to “merge with the masses” (Smith, 2000, p. 229) suggests that belonging requires conformity rather than genuine inclusion. Her attempts to change her appearance, particularly her hair, further reflect how dominant cultural standards shape her sense of self and reinforce her feeling of not fully belonging. The city also operates as a space of surveillance, particularly for racialized characters. Millat’s presence in public spaces is often associated with suspicion and judgment, indicating that he is constantly observed and categorized. His involvement in KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation) can also be understood as a response to this environment, where identity is shaped through exclusion and the need for recognition.

Symbolic exclusion further reinforces London’s failure as a third space. Even characters who attempt to assimilate do not gain full acceptance. Magid’s effort to become “more English than the English” shows that adopting dominant cultural values does not guarantee belonging. Instead, it highlights the limits of assimilation within a society that continues to define identity through difference. London also emerges as a liminal space that never reaches resolution. It allows interaction and cultural mixing, yet it does not provide stability. Characters remain positioned between cultures without achieving a clear sense of identity or belonging. These findings answer the second research question by showing that London enables cultural interaction while simultaneously constraining identity formation. Through these examples, the city is represented not as a harmonious multicultural space but as a site of ongoing tension, where belonging remains limited and unstable. Ultimately, the findings suggest a causal link between the spatial limitations of

London and the psychological fragmentation of the characters, as the city's failure to provide a stable third space exacerbates internal conflict.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how postcolonial identity is represented and negotiated in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* through the framework of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory. The findings demonstrate that identity in the novel is not stable or fully resolved but is continuously constructed through processes of ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and ongoing negotiation within social and historical constraints. These processes are revealed not only through narrative events but also through discursive elements such as word choice, symbolism, and tone, which reinforce the complexity of identity formation. In response to the first research question, the analysis shows that the characters embody different yet interconnected forms of identity struggle. Samad's ambivalence reflects his inability to reconcile past and present, while Irie's hybridity reveals the emotional impact of in-betweenness and the desire for belonging. Millat's resistance emerges from experiences of exclusion and racial labeling, and Magid's mimicry highlights the limitations of assimilation and the instability of constructed identity. Together, these findings demonstrate that hybridity in the novel does not function as a harmonious condition but rather as a site of tension, contradiction, and uneven recognition.

In relation to the second research question, the study finds that London functions as a postcolonial space that both enables and constrains identity formation. Although the city presents itself as multicultural, it fails to provide genuine inclusion, as reflected in recurring patterns of exclusion, surveillance, and symbolic marginalization. The representation of London as "a century of strangers" emphasizes that diversity does not necessarily produce belonging but instead reinforces distance and fragmentation. As a result, the third space in *White Teeth* does not operate as a site of resolution but as an ongoing process marked by instability and limitation.

This study provides a critical intervention by debunking the celebratory myth of hybridity, demonstrating that in a postcolonial metropolis, hybridity often functions as a site of significant symbolic and psychological cost. By applying a theory-driven textual analysis, this study shows that postcolonial identity is shaped not only by structural conditions but also by discursive representations that intensify experiences of tension and non-belonging. However, this study is limited to a single literary text and relies primarily on Bhabha's theoretical framework. Future research could expand this analysis by incorporating comparative texts or alternative theoretical perspectives to further explore the complexities of postcolonial identity. In conclusion, *White Teeth* challenges the notion of multicultural harmony by presenting postcolonial identity as an ongoing and

unresolved process shaped by tension, negotiation, and the persistent struggle for belonging.

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Lexica: Literature, Education, Culture, and Applied Linguistics

Vol 1, No 3, May 2026

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