



THE DILEMMA OF CULTURAL IDENTITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE NOVEL *WHITE TEETH* BY ZADIE SMITH

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ABSTRACT



This paper proposes to offer an insight into the key issues of cultural identity and hybridity in light of the position and problems of the British Asians in Great Britain judged against the Hungarian minorities such as the Slovene Diaspora, endeavoring to categorize the treatment of the dilemma of cultural identity from age and gender perspectives through one of the landmark novels of contemporary British Asian fiction, *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith. It has been found that even though immigrants have analogous difficulties in settling and adjusting in their new countries, there may be differences in their situations and conditions.

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The dilemma of cultural identity and hybridity are the most significant issues in today's multicultural countries, including Hungary as well as the United Kingdom. Immigration has led to the conception of multi-ethnic societies and cultural diversities leading to the predicaments of discrimination, assimilation, social and demographic modifications which in turn has not only affected the society itself but also the lives of the diverse ethnic groups and individuals alike.

The major ethnic groups in Hungary have been present for many centuries due to which they have faced an extensive course of assimilation and have tried to locate the right balance between taking up a new culture and at the same time preserving their own roots. However, it was only in the past few decades, primarily after the change of administrations in 1989, that marginal groups recognized the significance of the reinforcement of their old traditions and national language when they were provided with the possibilities to open bilingual schools to uncover cultural and political associations or to represent themselves in the parliament. Today the leading minority groups in Hungary are the Romans and the Germans, while other ethnic groups take in the Slovaks, the Croats, the Romanians, the Ukrainians, the Serbs and the Slovenes.

In the 1960s, a greater part of the Slovenes moved from the neighbouring villages to Vas Country, which was their economic and cultural centre until 1990s, during which they assimilated and the use of their mother tongue was reserved to their homes only. M Kozar notes that, "assimilation is an integrative procedure within the family and generations and is not socially and culturally equable, therefore, resulting in hybridity and the dilemma of cultural identity." The assimilation of the first generation is not at all complete, they are always in an in-between state where they have already left their culture behind but at the same time have not incorporated the new culture yet. On the other hand, the second generation is inclined to aspire for total assimilation by breaking away from their roots and traditions.

A comparable effort of cultural assimilation can be observed in the case of British Asians as well, though they vary to a great extent from the

Hungarian Slovenes in terms of their demographic number, the time and grounds of immigration and the degree of intolerance, they have encountered even racial maltreatment. As the subjects of the Empire for periods of various lengths, the immigrants that left Asia for Britain, primarily in the post-World War II and the decolonization period of the 1950s and 1960s, were well acquainted with British cultural prototype. Nevertheless, they were strained to face a new mode of adjusting, this time without defending their feeling at home, befuddled by the divergent nature of British culture and their own, suffering from the dilemma of cultural identity. For South Asians the foremost rationale for migration were education and economic interest or in quest of political exile, but apart from of the causes they all had to face the identical destitution of settling, adjusting or assimilating into an ever more intimidating atmosphere.

As cultural identity is not only made up of nationality and ethnicity but also of gender, religion and history, South Asian immigrants were to face diverse cultural shocks when arriving in Britain and an extreme cultural clash when they continued their lives in their conventional ways instead of speedily and entirely taking over the 'new British way.' Accordingly, these immigrants attempted to protect and transmit their culture to their children, who were thus surrounded by and trained to live according to two often different cultural and social sets of traditions and expectations. It is this cultural clash that may convert into a grave dilemma of cultural identity. In-betweenness is an unvarying feeling of dislocation and identity dilemma, a feeling that exemplifies first generation immigrants the most. As for the second generation, on the other hand, a less strong attachment with the home country and culture and the natural approval of the 'new' world around them tends to result in another state of cultural existence called hybridity.

While the first generation of British Asian writers such as Nirad Chaudhuri and V.S. Naipaul documented their experience of migration and the transformation in Britain in their writings, by the 1980s a second generation of British Asians materialized on the literary scene, writers who were born in Britain and experienced segregation and



racism from native Britons. The 1990s also presented a chance for the female immigrants writers such as Atima Srivastava and Meera Syal to notify their individual stories of the immigrant experience and the dilemma of cultural identity from a gender perspective, while at the beginning of the 21st century, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), unquestionably illustrated that the immigrant writers have a firm and prominent place in British literature at the new millennium in spite of their exact location, gender or sexual orientation.

Although Zadie Smith is not of Asian origin, the handling of the South Asian diaspora in her debut novel earned her a place among the outstanding British Asian writers as a cultural translator of new British communities and multi-racial situations. *White Teeth* is the grumbling and humorous story of multicultural London narrated through the friendship of Englishman Archie Jones and Bengali immigrant Samad Iqbal, and their families – characters who are connected by the dilemma of cultural identity caused by in-betweenness and hybridization, experiences of being the 'other' and being incapable to get away with the history. The first and the second generation of characters have dissimilar experiences with and approaches to this situation, yet they all undergo in-betweenness and need to find out the way to get past this feeling. Willesden Green, being optimistically portrayed by Smith as a melting pot, facilitates the characters deal with or even struggle with the in-betweenness and acknowledge their place in multicultural Britain as normal.

The characters of this novel are immigrants, just like the Solvenes in Hungary. Although they come from different cultures, have dissimilar values and their own individual stories of immigration and assimilation, they are analogous in their experiences and going through the extended process of trying to find or reaffirm their identities. All the same, their gender and age decide the way they come to terms with their 'otherness'. In addition, discovering their position in the new home is further complicated with prospects of joblessness or being employed as workers regardless of their higher level of education or experience. In this novel, Samad has a low-paid job and proves to be powerless to reconcile between the conflicting set of values of East and West. To resolve

his identity crisis, he attempts to uphold his Muslim male authority on his wife and children but ultimately he fails to do so, which strengthens his feeling of in-betweenness and forces him to rethink his identity; by acknowledging his faults, he can come to terms with identity dilemma and accept his destiny.

There are two foremost sorts of second generation immigrants: the 'rejecter', Magid, who decides on for assimilation to evade the conflict and the 'traditionalist', Millat, who returns to his roots in terms of religion and political standpoint. Magid takes up English identity and manners intuitively, although being sent back to Bangladesh to obtain a traditional rearing where as Millat is the representative of a budding young militant generation whose representation involves misdeeds, aggression and drug abuse, cultural conflict and dilemma and ultimately religious fundamentalism as the means of coming to terms with identity dilemma.

As far as the gender perspectives of the dilemma of cultural identity is concerned, it has been noted that while probing for their identity, first generation immigrant women all go through a course of considerable liberation and westernization as well. Even if living in isolated communities they firstly defend their female roles in an arranged marriage and take up their ultimate duties of housework and raising children, their restricted contact with the external world does not save them from the dilemma of identity, questioning their female lowliness and the right of the tradition of subservient wife. Gradually, Alsana of *White Teeth* gains knowledge to take extra power over her life, initially by 'silent mutiny', then by asserting her voice and finally making her own decisions. Nevertheless, the transformation in her identity is delicate and measured, she finds the right balance between traditions and feminism, to develop into a tough, self-determining woman, who is competent enough to live without fear, both with regards to traditions and at the same time welcoming reforms.

Therefore, it may be concluded that in spite of the location, ethnic origin, age or gender, immigrants in the world including those of Europe, have to deal with and treat the dilemma of cultural identity throughout their lives. Nonetheless, the handling of this dilemma fluctuates according to age



and gender, as every generation, every man and woman, every individual, immigrant or native alike, have their own conducts of comprehending their fluid, hybrid identities.

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