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"Searching for the Self: A Study of the Character of Irie Jones in *White Teeth*"

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Abstract- The novel *White Teeth* is a contribution to the debates on immigration, race, identity, and gender. This paper tries to attempt a study of the character of Irie Jones with a focus on how her feelings of displacement are negotiated in post-war Britain. She lacks that sense of belongingness because of the cultural and political climate in England. The paper will try to focus on the struggle of Irie in terms of gender and also because of her identity of second-generation immigrants. The paper also attempts a study of the present identity formation o f Irie through her past, where memory plays a significant role.

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"Searching for the Self: A Study of the Character of Irie Jones in *White Teeth*"

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Abstract- The novel *White Teeth* is a contribution to the debates on immigration, race, identity, and gender. This paper tries to attempt a study of the character of Irie Jones with a focus on how her feelings of displacement are negotiated in post-war Britain. She lacks that sense of belongingness because of the cultural and political climate in England. The paper will try to focus on the struggle of Irie in terms of gender and also because of her identity of second-generation immigrants. The paper also attempts a study of the present identity formation of Irie through her past, where memory plays a significant role.

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I. Introduction

Zadie Smith is one of the most celebrated young authors of Great Britain. Her novel *White Teeth* deals with the lives of immigrants in the multicultural society of London. All the characters are very much aware of their postcolonial identities, and the novel is all about the consequences of colonialism. The character of Irie represents the struggle of the second-generation immigrants. In a way, Irie represents the struggle of a woman searching for her authentic self. The paper attempts a study on how Irie identifies herself in a multicultural world and the nature of her struggle. Irie tried to assimilate into the London society, but when she failed, she starts searching her parent's root. She seems like if she can discover her parent's root, she will be able to know her self as well. Autobiographical elements are also reflected in this novel. Being the daughter of a Black woman and a White man, Smith's mixed ethnic identity and the multicultural environment in which she lives also plays a significant role in her works. In the novel, the first generation characters confront difficulties in assimilating into British society at the same time to preserve their cultural values. They continuously feel a sense of "rootlessness" as they are not able to replant themselves in the society of London. On the other hand, the second generation characters are not able to connect themselves strongly to London society though they were born there. This is how these characters are also affected by their parent's uprootedness. The novel reflects how the characters are in constant search of their identity.

Irie is the daughter of Clara and Archie Jones. Throughout the text, the character of Irie Jones suffers because of her cultural rootlessness. Irie do not at all look like Western and so she spends a lot of time over her appearance. She feels herself odd among her friends in London, and somehow, she feels insecure because of her mixed-race in the White-dominated London city. She tried to look more exotic, more white, and western. Irie moves on to find out the history and past of her parent's identity because she thinks that if she can find out their identity, she will get to know her self. After struggling with her racial identity, Irie finds an answer in her grandmother. Irie grew up spending her childhood with Magid and Millat, the twins of Samad Iqbal, who, in fact, is the friend of Archie Jones. Irie, instead of getting her mother's figure, she got her grandmother's Jamaican frame. In Chapter 11, Irie is described as a fifteen-year girl who saw an ad "Lose weight to earn money." She is attracted to Millat, and she desires to lose weight.

Throughout the novel, British society plays a very significant role in Irie's understanding of her self. Hortense unsuccessfully tries converting her into a Jehovah's witness. She also got so many historical inaccuracies during her secondary school. Finally, living with her grandmother, she unsuccessfully attempts to educate herself on the history of her family. Her lack of cultural knowledge and her understanding of her family background leads to her self guided education. She is conscious of her mixed-race, and this leads to her inability to identify and interact with her classmates. Irie is not able to see herself in the London society in a similar way as that of her friends because of her sense of alienation and her ignorance of her cultural heritage. Irie always struggles to find her authentic self. In the novel, this struggle begins with Hortense Bowden, Irie's grandmother, who continues with Clara Bowden, mother of Irie, and it even traces through Irie's own life. The novel begins with Clara ends with Hortense and Irie in between.

Hortense of 1972 moved to England from Jamaica with her daughter after her husband has been already there in the country for fourteen years. Hortense does not approve of her daughter's love for Ryan Topps, and she is a woman who stands firmly on her own beliefs. Hortense is only described in terms of physical appearance. Despite of the gender stereotypes, Hortense sticks to her faith, and she plays only her role in the society. By explaining how English education has never been able to subjugate Bowden women, she offers some hope to Irie Jones. At this point in time, Irie

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gets some strength to believe that she will be able to maintain her authentic identity in a society of diversity.

Clara, on the other hand, is depicted as a character who is in contrast to her mother, Hortense Bowden. At the age of nineteen, she marries Archie Jones, an English man and at their weeding, she wears a long woolen dress with a set of false teeth. She abandons her roots and her mother's belief as well. Clara is such a character who embraces English education and who wants to be perfectly beautiful with straight white teeth. Archie, her husband, also sees her as perfectly independent this way. She, in a way, fails to find out her authentic self like that of her mother and daughter.

When Clara becomes pregnant, Archie convinces himself that his child will be born with blue eyes. This is the beginning where the readers get a clue to analyze the character of Irie from the gender perspective. Gender norm is imposed upon Irie even before she born because her father expects her to born with blue eyes. She fails to go according to the expectation of her father because she is described as having "big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth" (221). Instead of getting her mother's thin figure, she got the body structure like that of her grandmother Hortense. Because she is different, she wants herself to be accepted by all others surrounding her. She wants to be accepted in the Western world, where everyone prefers thinness and whiteness. Irie's focus was primarily on her body because she wants to be more of England so that she gets more attracted to Millat. She concentrates more on her hair and the color of her skin because it matters in English society.

Irie focuses more on her hair, and she visited a salon to make her hair straight. There Irie introduces herself as "Half Jamaican, Half English," and the stylist commented her as "Half-caste." This remark also throws light on the multicultural society of London, and at the same time, it also reflects that skin color and hair texture matters in England. The stylist had to use ammonia to make Irie's hair straight that causes her to burn. This leads the stylist to comment, "Life hurts....Beauty hurts." This comment reflects that women, especially the non-white women, have to experience double pain staying in the multicultural society of London. But unfortunately, Irie's hair falls out that leads her to buy hair and to fix it again. Her lesbian friend, after this incident, tried to make Irie understand that more than her hair or body, her mind and history are more important. Irie tried to accept the way she is and recognizes that she failed to become as white as possible. This is how England also helped Irie to search for her true self.

Irie is caught in between the narrative of the past and the desire to be free from the roots. She wants to construct herself in her way, but which is highly not possible. Irie was not able to see herself in England in the way she is. Her sense of alienation leads to her low sense of self-esteem. But, towards the end of the novel, it is because of England again that she finds her true self.

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