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***A Multicultural World in Flux:
Geographies of Identity with Zadie Smith***

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Key Words: identity, postcolonialism, gender, multiculturalism,
race, society, art, beauty, hybridity, feminism

-Summing-up-

The present doctoral dissertation has set out to explore the complex interplay between identity construction and postcolonial metropolitan geographies in Zadie Smith's novels *White Teeth*, *On Beauty*, *N-W* and *Swing Time*, as well as in her two essay collections *Changing my Mind* and *Feel Free*. The central argument of this thesis, which we have built in depth in chapters dedicated to each of the chosen titles, is that the identity of contemporary postcolonial subjects is formed at the intersection of several determinants, of which race, gender and class are crucial and recurrent. Smith is a master of fractured and overdetermined identities which are almost always situated in metropolitan spaces that are equally prismatic and multidimensional. The metropolitan cityscape becomes the chaotic and disrupted setting for hybrid individuals, caught up in a painful journey of self-discovery and self-definition. By providing a detailed personal analysis of the four novels and two essay collections we have succeeded in highlighting the evolution of the concepts of hybrid identity and spatial and temporal fragmentation from Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* until her most recent novelistic output, *Swing Time*. Furthermore, we have sought to highlight the essential thematic continuity of the four novels analyzed by discussing topics symbols and motifs centered on the fictional representation of identity, space and time.

The thought of writing a PhD thesis on the novelistic and essayistic output and literary impact of Zadie Smith came to us in the aftermath of reading Audre Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", where the self-entitled black lesbian feminist claims that: "For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is

rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women”¹.

The thoughts expressed here made us instantly recall the numerous pages that Zadie Smith dedicates to female friendship in all of her novels - among the few genuine, stable, lasting and fulfilling human connection she depicts. As a postcolonial writer and a feminist, Smith comes surprisingly close to Lorde’s depiction of female interconnectedness and the need for women to ‘stick together’ in a world that has always tried to socially, culturally, sexually and colonially subjugate and dominate them. In her complex novels, Smith creates powerful, authoritative and memorable female heroines, which are described and dealt with through the interconnected lenses of time, society, culture, aesthetic norms and identity construction. From the volcanic and determined Alsana in *White Teeth*, to the mellow and wise Carlene in *On Beauty*, the emotionally and mentally split Natalie in *North West*, or the beauty-obsessed nameless narrator in *Swing Time*, Smith paints a wide plethora of women and womanhood which she permanently contrasts with the disrupting postcolonial world of racial, social and moral injustice.

“A focus on characters of mixed race, interracial relationships and the wider implications of race within British society are recurrent themes in Smith’s work”², is what Shantel Edwards notes in connection to Smith’s writings, pointing to the obvious connection between aspects of identity creation in her novels and the wider spatial and ideological context of postcolonial British society. The drama inherent in the difficulty of creating or maintaining a stable, coherent, unitary identity is simultaneously the drama of a post-imperial society which has not managed to reconcile its past to its present and future, or its multiculturalism to its lingering racism and prejudice. Just like the identity of the postcolonial hybrid, space and time in Smith’s novels are also disrupted and fragmentary.

What Zadie Smith depicts in her novels and essays is a multicultural world in flux, an ever-changing geography of fluctuating, unstable identities. Few things are certain or reliable in this shifting landscape, apart from brief glimpses of genuine human connection, which most of the time materializes not as romantic love, marriage, or parental affection but as the friendship between two (usually mixed-race) women. Personal and public

¹ Lorde, Audre. “The Masters Tools Will Never Dismantle the Masters House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 2007, p. 111.

² Edwards, Shantel. “Zadie Smith.” *Literary Encyclopedia | Zadie Smith*, 01 Sept. 2017. <https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5065>.

identities are shown to be constantly dependent on past history and family relationships and subject to constant re-evaluation and re-definition. The geography of external spaces and microcosms that comprises the impersonal postmodern metropolis mirrors the internal distortion of the characters and creates a chaotic, image of prejudice, misunderstanding, mis-communication and fragmentation. The postmodern metropolis becomes the backdrop against which the postcolonial individual's anxieties, frustrations, and hopes play out, a heterogeneous cauldron of merciless diversity, which wreaks havoc with the stability of one's roots and sense of belonging. The ones who are the most affected by this are the women in Smith's writings, who, apart from the burden of their racial and cultural hybridity, also have to cope with the inflated expectations of men, children, society and cultural norms. Colonialism may have vanished in geographic terms in Zadie Smith's novels, but it still is an obvious political and cultural reality, assuming distinct forms and, in many cases, working alongside other forms of othering such a patriarchal norms. In the midst of all this disruption, however, one light shines bright (not surprisingly, Smith's latest novel, *Swing Time*, is a subtle metaphorical interplay of lights and shadows): the unbreakable, eternal female spirit, the only element capable of reuniting the manifold contradictions of racial and cultural hybridity.

Mimicry and simulacrum are often taken up in connection with hybridity in Smith's novels - few things are what they seem, seem what they are, or simply 'are', in the true existentialist meaning of the term, in her novels, and that includes racial as well as cultural and social hybrids. Hybridity is not seen as a harmonious merging or even as a fruitful (if at times conflictual) dialogue of difference, but rather as a dividing force which breeds conflict, confusion and chaos, as a painful middle road, an interstitial space of uncertainty and isolation. Not surprisingly, the closing passages in Smith's latest novel, *Swing Time*, which can be viewed as a synthesis of all her previous novelistic efforts, depict an unnamed narrator walking across the middle of a bridge into nothingness, after having lost not only her mother, but also all the rest of her adult life. The state of being caught in the middle, of not having a clear-cut feeling of belonging, and of being permanently 'swung' between two opposites, none of which want to claim you as their own, is the backbone of Zadie Smith's writing. Her characters are too black for the white societies they live in and too white for the black communities they have often left behind but which they secretly miss, leaving them in the painful state of what Leah in *North West* terms a 'coconut': brown on the outside, and white on the inside.

Smith has received an impressive critical reception on an international level, with hundreds of articles, reviews, master's theses, PhD studies and monographies devoted to her published yearly from the US to south-east Asia and continental Europe. In Romania, too, Zadie Smith has received a noteworthy reception. We can note, however, that until this point no complex critical study devoted to Smith's mechanism of narrative identity construction and to her creation of multicultural, displaced postcolonial geographies, has been published in our country - therefore, the self-proclaimed aim of our thesis is to shed light on these and various other related aspects of her fiction by offering an in depth, and highly personal, if not original, analysis of her key novels dealing with multiculturalism, identity and racial displacement: *White Teeth*, *On Beauty*, *N-W*, and *Swing Time*.

The first chapter of the thesis attempts to pin down the evolution of postcolonial theory and literature, from its beginnings in the 1960s until the present day. In doing so we have tried to establish Zadie Smith's place among other high-ranking postcolonial authors such as Sam Selvon, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, V.S. Naipaul, Andrea Levy, Monica Ali, Bernardine Evaristo, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai and Vikram Seth. The first chapter of the thesis seeks to provide a (necessarily brief) overview of the postcolonial phenomenon, both historically and ideologically, and one of its central tenets is that the 'post-' in postcolonialism should not be taken in a temporal sense, but, rather, as an effort to overcome the ideology of imperial colonization. For it is obvious that various forms of colonialism (or what critics usually call 'neocolonialism') still persist in many parts of the world under the form of economic expropriation and political subservience; in addition, there has been an migratory exodus that has seen the colony moving to the former colonizing metropolis, so to say, with the attendant problems of racism and discrimination that continue to plague Western multicultural societies. . The fact that colonialism is no longer a geographical reality does not mean that it does not linger on as cultural and personal trauma. The necessity to 'split oneself', to create and employ two different versions of one's persona, points to the fact that colonialism as a cultural reality is far from having been successfully overcome. We have also sought to situate Smith's writings within the larger context of postcolonial critical practices and fictions.

The second chapter focuses on the geographies of identity, constructions of race and the interplay of tradition and modernity, success and failures in Smith's debut novel *White Teeth*. We sought to show that *White Teeth* is not, in effect, an example of what James Wood

terms “hysterical realism”³, a chaotic mélange of Rushdian influence, but rather a complex and compassionate picture of the struggles of the postcolonial individual, with several layers of ethical considerations underlying the apparent human comedy. If anything, we would call *White Teeth* a sample of compassionate realism - because even when Smith satirizes and ironizes her characters, she never does so with haughtiness and contempt, but rather with a compassionate smile directed at the eternal frailness of human nature.

Chapter three dwells on the importance of interpersonal relations and the role of art in *On Beauty*, offering glimpses of what we termed ‘the divided America’ and its conflicted identities of race, class and gender. We showed how the discussion of racial, social and gender identity relates to and takes up again various themes dealt already with in *White Teeth*, from slightly different, more mature perspectives. We have allotted special interest to how Smith depicts the friendship between two mixed race women as the only stable, continuous and genuine form of human connection. Furthermore, we have analyzed the intricate interplay between ephemeral human beauty and the eternal, unalterable beauty of art, an aspect that Smith revisits in her latest novel, *Swing Time*. At the end, it was clear that in *On Beauty* human connection ranks higher than any other kind of beauty - in this novel, as compared to *Swing Time*, beauty is viewed skeptically and its pursuit at all cost is seen as the source of personal, social, and cultural disruption.

The fourth chapter is devoted to Smith’s return to the territory most familiar to her, the London metropolitan space, and its depiction in *N-W*. We have allotted most our analysis to the complex female characters in the novel, who, in addition to having to battle racial, social, sexual or intellectual prejudice, also carry the burden of their partners’ (and often society’s) unrealistic gender expectations. As usual in Smith’s novels, their enduring friendship is the only point of stability in an otherwise disrupted internal and external universe. We have devoted a great part of our analysis to the compelling character of Keisha / Natalie, through the depiction of which Smith has voiced the prejudice that many mixed-race individuals face within the black communities to which they partly belong, but which often perceive them as sellouts and fakes. The issue of ‘real’ versus ‘fake’ racial and ethnical belonging runs like a red thread through all of Smith’s novel and proves that hybridity is not a pleasant place to be in: rather, it abounds in mis-judgement, prejudice, alienation and self-questioning, just like the fragmented London that Smith depicts. Smith introduces a concept

³ Wood, James. “Human, All Too Inhuman.” *The New Republic*, 24 July 2000,

<https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman>.

in *N-W* that is applicable to all the hybrid characters in her novels, the one of the ‘coconut’: brown on the outside and white on the inside, hybrids in postcolonial societies look black but act white, feel drawn towards their black heritage, but ultimately succumb to the pressures and value systems of the white society they live in.

The fifth chapter aims to analyze the importance of memory and belonging, identity and aesthetic value in Smith’s latest novel, *Swing Time*. We have succeeded here to draw numerous parallels between *On Beauty* and *Swing Time* in terms of their common preoccupations with the juxtaposition of beauty and the arts, and their complex message regarding the interplay of race, gender and society in identity construction. As in *On Beauty*, *Swing Time*’s discourse revolves around the friendship between two women of mixed racial background and their common as well as personal struggles to make it in a world which expects us to put perfectly crafted, coherent and unitary identities on display. The novel is a synthesis of Smith’s fictional effort so far, and offers a much more mature, serious and at times gloomy outlook on aspects such as belonging, racial togetherness, love, or even friendship. As opposed to the friendship between Kiki and Carlene in *On Beauty*, the one between the nameless narrator and Tracey in *Swing Time* is more of a disguised love-hate affair or a concealed enmity. An all-pervading sense of hopelessness runs through the novel, which is an intricate interplay between lights and shadows, luminosity and darkness.

Finally, the sixth chapter is devoted to Smith’s two essay collections *Changing My Mind* and the more recent *Feel Free*. We have decided to dwell also on Smith’s essayistic output because we believe that in the case of writers who are also noteworthy public intellectuals who express their thoughts and opinions regularly in essays, public lectures or interviews, it is of paramount importance to analyze their literary activity in close relation to their essayistic output. It would, for example, be inconceivable to analyze Salman Rushdie’s novels without referring to his essays, as a great part of the ideology behind the former is expressed in the latter. This is also the case with Zadie Smith.

Throughout our entire thesis we sought to show how Zadie Smith presents human interconnectedness, and especially female interconnectedness, as one of the main axes along which a coherent sense of identity can be constructed. In the words of Audre Lord: “Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive be and the active being”⁴. Zadie Smith, too, advocates a state of ‘active being’ in her novels and

⁴ Lorde, Audre. “The Masters Tools Will Never Dismantle the Masters House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and*

essays, a state in which not only women, but also hybrids, social outcasts, and those still struggling to find their place in the world can do so in a framework of unbridled creativity. “...You will have to take liberties, you will have to feel free to write as you like...even if it is irresponsible”, Zadie Smith famously noted. We have attempted in our analysis of her novelistic and essayistic output to prove that this is precisely what Smith has masterfully done: to voice the truth ruthlessly and unapologetically, to become a spokeswoman for unlimited creative freedom, not only insofar as the writing of fiction is concerned, but also with regard to identity construction. The fluidity and mobility of her ideas (masterfully admitted to by the writer herself in her collection of essays *Changing My Mind*) mirrors the ever-changing, ever-evolving outside world with its shifting, elusive geographies of identity.

The hermeneutic method we used is mainly analytic in nature, with a complex focus on direct textual analysis of her novels and essays. Our aim was not only to discuss widely accepted critical perspectives on Zadie Smith’s writings, but also to offer a highly personalized approach. The extensive critical apparatus reflected in this thesis’ bibliography was the backbone in the formation of our own critical judgments, but it has also allowed for our own voice to be heard. The present thesis does not claim to be an exhaustive study by any means - further studies can and hopefully will be devoted in the near future to Smith’s accomplishments as a novelist and essayist, or to her outstanding contribution to postmodern feminist literature. The present study is first and foremost an honest attempt to prove that, more than anything else, Zadie Smith’s merit as a fiction and non-fiction writer is to have shed light on the trials and tribulations of the postcolonial hybrid’s process of identity construction.

Our attempt in writing the present thesis was not only to pin down Zadie Smith’s undeniable literary merits, evinced not only by the literary prizes awarded to her and the impressive criticism her work has received (scientific articles, magazine articles, PhD theses, master’s theses, etc.), but also to make a contribution to the body of literary studies dedicated to her produced in Romania. In spite of the fact that some of her novels were translated into Romanian (*White Teeth*, *On Beauty* and *NW - Swing Time* is scheduled to appear in Romanian translation later this year, 2019, in Mariana Piroteală’s translation)⁵ and some critical studies focusing on her work have been published, no complex, in-depth

Speeches. Crossing Press, 2007, p. 1.

⁵ Piroteală, Mariana. “Zadie Smith. Avănpremieră.” *Scena 9*, 26 Apr. 2019, <https://www.scena9.ro/article/zadie-smith-swing-time>.

analysis of the way in which Smith constructs geographies of identity against the backdrop of the postcolonial metropolitan geography has been published in our country up to this moment.

Undeniably, trying to explore the wide plethora of identity construction especially in Smith's case, where identity is intertwined with race, ethnicity, gender, social class, postcolonial trauma, memory, space and time, is not an easy task. Nonetheless, the present thesis is one of the first Romanian attempts at capturing some of the essence of what it means to be human, brown, black, white, female, male, an immigrant, and / or an outcast in Smith's literary and essayistic universe. We hope that the present dissertation will be taken as a starting point for other Romanian researchers to dwell more on these and other equally important issues that characterize Zadie Smith's work.

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