

# THE UNSCRUPULOUSNESS OF POSTMODERN SENSITIVITY IN ON BEAUTY OF ZADIE SMITH

<sup>1</sup>L. Sujitha, <sup>2</sup>Dr. S. Sophia Christina

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar (Full time), Reg. No. 22111274012009, Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor & Assistant professor, Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti

Email: [sujithaangeline@gmail.com](mailto:sujithaangeline@gmail.com).

## Abstract:

Postmodernism has influenced every writer in the contemporary century and Zadie Smith is not an exception in this whirlpool. She is a British author, who has interracial parents. With her first-hand experience of living as a child of mixed parents, she makes use of this opportunity to imprint her identity in literature. She never fails to highlight the plight of being the child of a couple who face interracial marital status. She is acknowledged for her and best award-winning novel, *White Teeth* published in 2000. *On Beauty*, which was published in 2003, is her third novel and she reflects her autobiographical experiences in her fictional characters. As the title of the novel suggests, the idea of beauty is approached from various points of view. This research article attempts to take a closer look at the sensitivity of morality, prevalence of racial and gender-based discrimination and the theme of alienation in the young characters that are rendered through an iconoclastic narrative style of Zadie Smith. Key words: Postmodernism, unscrupulousness, morality, race and gender, alienation.

Twenty-first century has seen a lot of innovations in terms of literary forms despite the challenges of the newness of the genres. Novel is one of the thriving genres that has abundant scope for such kind of experimentation. Postmodernism, as a literary movement, welcomes such kinds of amalgamation of diverse fields and appreciates the outcomes in literature. In spite of the fact that literature approves of such incorporation, Zadie Smith represents racial and gender discrimination of the people of America and London in her novels using the lens of alienation. She also stretches her theme to touch upon the diminishing moral sensibility among the masses. She does this with her wit and mastery over plot.

The authors who belong to postmodernism include international figures like Italo Calvino, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Heller, Paul Asher, Salman Rushdie, Linda Hutcheon. Along with them stands Zadie Smith. She is highlighted as the icon in British Literature whereas researchers like Martina Paulova have written their Diploma Thesis titled, "Zadie Smith: A New Talent of British Literature". Smith's writing style makes the readers become conscious of the prevailing social problems. The novel selected for analysis embeds morality and ethics as its underlying theme without objectifying the characters in a subtle manner. This helps the readers sympathize with the characters before judging them.

In a nutshell, *On Beauty* is a novel that focuses on two families that are from America and London. The Besleys belong to America and the Kippes belong to London. The Besleys include an interracial couple and their three children of colour. Howard Besley is a British

Professor of English and Kiki, his wife, is a black woman, who is working in a hospital. Their eldest son Jerome and daughter Zora are in college and their youngest son Levi is in school. The Kippes are upper class black people privileged to pass off as elites. Monty Kipps is a renowned professor and his wife is a homemaker. The couple have two children namely Michael and Victoria. There remains a conflict of hatred between these two families despite the geographical distance. This difference in attitude is due to their political belief, religious belief, and so on. However, the vices that these families exhibit are also almost the same. The heads of the families are made into pathetic heroes with their tragic flaws. Even then, their tragedy does not disrupt anything significant in the story. The other characters remain indifferent towards their flaws or at least, remain unaffected because of the culture of alienation imposed by the century. The vice that these men commit revolve around the idea of the illusion of beauty. Thus, even if beauty unites the storyline as a lynchpin theme, it does not promise a harmonious ending for every character in the story.

The art of telling stories dates back to oral tradition. Its purpose predates its existence as well. Stories, in any literature for that matter, were told to children for didactic purpose in order to instil moral consciousness in them. Maintaining a high moral standard is also the reason for monasteries to nurture literature since the beginning of written literature. Having said that, the novels of today seem to care less for morality as they are focused on mirroring the reality of situations and characters more than what ought to prevail in reality. Trying to justify the cause over the fault diminishes the purpose and value morality in the society. Children pick up the same attitude from their irresponsible adults in the society and the postmodern novels also seem to be indifferent to the motive of morality that was once incorporated with sincerity in the narratives.

Zadie Smith magnifies the lapse of morality in this novel. She prefers to reflect realism over moral and societal expectation. A family is expected to survive till the death of one of the spouses. Marriage vows made in churches does imply this one condition. The novel, however, records two families and the husbands of both the household are infidel to their wives. Their moral bankruptcy is not focused from morality's perspective. Rather, these men are put on the spot of victimhood and so, they are made to escape guilt, remorse and punishment. This is justified from alienation's perspective as well.

Howard is a man who has been married to Kiki for thirty long years. Their interracial marriage found its foundation on love against discrimination and abuse of all costs. By the end of thirty years, Howard finds Kiki's appearance bizarre. She has put on weight and looks like any black woman. Her face is still young and beautiful. His extra marital affairs, on close reading, proves to be only sensual. He admits his beastly instinct overpowering him during such times despite his meek resistance. His three-week affair with Claire, his life long friend and colleague mars his trust as a spouse and reputation as a professor. His brief affair with Victoria Kipps is also a sad and unfortunate episode wherein he is trapped in the emotional threats and blackmails of his rival's daughter. This eventually breaks his marriage and family and he eventually understands the powerful presence of Kiki in his life the moment she leaves the house. His realization is observed in the following lines: "...you're my life, Keeks.

You have been and you will be and you are. I don't know how you want me to say it. You're for me – you are me. We've always known that – and there's no way out now anyway. I love you. You're for me" (Smith 398). In all this, his guilt remains for a minute but his expectation to be forgiven remains till the novel closes. The smile that appears on the face of the Besley couple promises the blossoming of their second adolescence.

Monty Kipps is an elite black professor. He is also shown as an infidel in his marriage despite having a lovely wife in Carlene. This woman sacrifices her life for the Kipps household and loses hers to cancer. She keeps her disease a secret even to her family members and dies with no remorse at all. Monty, on the other hand, has an affair with Chantelle Williams, his student. She is taken advantage of by Monty as she belongs to a poor black family. Chantelle appears in Carlene's funeral and in his house on several occasions all through the novel. It's never made to look suspicious as she is blamed by Monty to hang over his house seeking some kind of help from him to battle her poverty and racial discrimination. Monty's inability to help his own people from poverty and making use of their vulnerability should be seen as a crime and a lapse in his morality. Yet, this is not assessed so in the novel. His arrogance towards Chantelle is highlighted for reference: "she wants to continue taking a Wellington class for which she does not pay and for which she is entirely unqualified. She wants this because she is black and poor." (Smith 365).

Whether it is white or black, the problem lies not only in race, but in the mentality of the person and the way society sensitizes an issue. In order to depict realism in her stories, Zadie Smith reflects on reality with all its crudeness forgetting to bring back moral sensitivity in her characters. In trying to retain realism, she makes Kiki and Carlene the victims of situations. These women have no hold or realization of what is happening around them with their lives thus, they feel trapped with their alienated selves. The physical transformation of Kiki due to three child births and Carlene's rapid loss of weight due to cancer are seen as the reasons why their husbands lose interest in them. Had the men respected their wife's true selves over their mere physical appearances, they would not have fallen for the desire of their flesh. Howard loses his wife after realizing that he can love no one except her. Monty loses his wife to death because of not noticing her sickness, which evidently had symptoms at its onset. These losses are not to be replaced or filled and they are the result of lapse of a person's moral sensibility, which is reflected as the portrayal of realism in the novel.

Postmodern novels bear an atypical structure of a story. They deal with the stories of an ordinary man in his ordinary setting and lifestyle. This novel of Zadie Smith falls under postmodernism not only in its theme, but also in its depiction of characters. Her characters are less heroic and meek to make mistakes, hard-hearted to feel remorse and guilt for their faults and make timely restitution to set things right in life. This story embraces randomness rather than order in narration. It jumps back and forth in time breaking the tradition of linear narration. Almost all the characters seem to carry equal weightage. In that sense, this is a novel that has no heroes. The idea of beauty serves as the hero instead. At the same time, there is no villain in the story. Violation of marriage and moral lapse appear as a kind of a villain instead.

The characters are analyzed based on their nature and situation. Howard Besley and Monty Kipps are caught in the web of extra marital affairs. Howard's irresistible desire to indulge in sex is seen as his attempt to overpower his inferiority complex that he faces in his work place. His wish to convince his conscience of his potential backfires destroying his familial relationship. Kipps misuses his power to exploit the underprivileged students of his own race. In Kipps' case, it is both class and gender that contributed to the victimization of Chantelle Williams.

Kiki is a literate woman, who is working in a hospital. She is blinded by trust and love that she holds towards her husband. This pushes her to her own misery when she discovers her husband's infidelity. The moment she finds out the woman with whom he made out to be Claire, she feels helpless and loses her composure to pull things through for her family. As Howard pushes his chances with Victoria, Kiki pushes him out of her life. She is victimized because of loving Howard without doubt and this is repeated again in the life of Carlene. That is why they identify sisterhood in their friendship without themselves realizing it. Their husbands value them less and exploit their sacrifice and love in marriage. Carlene has nothing else to dote on except her family. Despite that, she is a forgotten member in the house of Kipps. Thus, these women share victimhood in marriage while their husbands were violating marriage behind their backs. Aqlia Nur Fahma observes the source of the struggle of these women in her article as, "Black women still receive two burdens that always go hand in hand: women and black" (186).

Not only women, men also suffer when they are black. Carl is a talented guy in reciting his own poetry. He is denied education due to his poverty and race. These factors hinder his progress in life and fetter him in his unfortunate situation. Zora's efforts to get him an entry into her college is quite successful but it turns out to be ill fated, loaded with insults all the more in the end. Carl's talent does not help him in any means. Both Zora and Victoria aim to exploit him based on his weaker background. Thus, he is left neglected, lonely, and lost as the novel closes. Nobody seems to investigate his absence except for Zora, who is guilty of her arrogant behaviour towards him. Thus, Carl experiences alienation and chooses isolation as his door of escape.

Similar to Carl, the other young male characters experience alienation. Jerome and Levi of the Besley family and Michael of the Kipps family seem to be undisturbed by whatever happens in the novel. Their lives also fail to create ripples in the lives of others all through, except for the theft of the painting that closes the story with suspense and thrill. In postmodernism, alienation is the concept of losing one's identity trying to get accepted in a larger society or community. Trying to imitate fashion and campus culture, Victoria and Zora battle alienation in their own ways.

On trying to find the balance between truth and beauty in the life of the Smith's characters, researcher Anna observes their moral sensitivity in her article titled, "The Ethical Laboratory of Beauty in Zadie Smith's Novel On Beauty". She uses "beauty-good-truth triad" (3) to carry out her study. She concludes that revealing truth brightens the aspect of beauty in relationships. She traces the way in which Howard and Kiki start appreciating beauty once

truth is revealed to the fullest with no deceit and hypocrisy. The novel indeed ends with a hope of accepting each other through forgiveness.

This closer inspection reveals the fact that the postmodern era is unscrupulous in its moral sensitivity. As a coloured writer in Britain, Smith's hardships serve as an inspiration to reflect on race and gender politics represented in this select novel, *On Beauty*. Thus, this earnest portrayal enables this novel to be categorized under postmodernism, which gives second rate importance to morality and ethics and highlights alienation to be the reason behind all misfortunes. Despite that, it builds life with carpe diem philosophy. This research article thus affirms E. M. Forster's view that present glory diminishes the scars of the past.

#### Works Cited:

Basci, Meryem Senem. "The Problem of Identity and Cultural Belonging on Zadie Smith's Multicultural Novel: *On Beauty* (2005)." Istanbul University, 2017. Accessed on 26 Nov. 2022.

Fahma, Aqlia Nur and et al. "Racial Problems in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*." *Leksema: Jurnal Basha Dan Sastra*. Vol. 6, No. 2, July-December 2021, Doi: 10.22515/ljbs.v6i2.4276. Accessed on 26 Nov. 2022.

Glab, Anna. "The Ethical Laboratory of Beauty in Zadie Smith's Novel *On Beauty*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*. September 2016. Accessed on 26 Nov. 2022.

Kokate, Shreeyash Avinash. "Zadie Smith's 'On Beauty': A Novel on Racism, Discrimination and Exploitation." *JETIR*, Vol. 7, Issue 10, ISBN: 2349-5162. Accessed on 26 Nov. 2022.

Paulova, Martina. "Zadie Smith: A New Talent of British Literature." Diploma thesis, guided by Mgr. Lucie Pordrouzkova, PhD, Department of English Language and Literature, Masaryk University, Brno 2007.

Smith, Zadie. *On Beauty*. Penguin books. 2005.