

Questioning the Sense of Belongingness and Black Identity in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*

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Abstract

The present paper will succinctly study how contemporary Zadie Smith questions the notion of belongingness in her fiction *Swing Time* by interweaving the narrative through the language of dance and music. It attempts to explore Zadie Smith's re-examination of the presence-absence of black talents in popular entertainment through the allusion to movies like *Swing Time* and *Ali Baba Goes to Town*. The novel provides a voice to the unnamed narrator whose ambivalent self, a product of a black mother and a white father, is in quest of the origins and culture of the authentic 'blackness'. Smith utilizes dance and music as a medium through which the narrator re-explores her surroundings, especially regarding the originality and representation of black artists in popular entertainment such as movies. The paper intends to study the shaping of the narrator's ambivalent notion of identity and how she navigates with it in her social functioning which will open a discourse on the contemporary notion of evolving social identity and its relation to belongingness in a pluralistic society where multiracial existence is still a problematic issue.

Keywords: Ambivalent Self; Belongingness; Blackness; Identity.

Introduction

In the contemporary globalized world and with the rapid development of a pluralistic society, the sense of the ambivalent self is constantly in flux. The institutions from whose vantage point the ambivalent self is configured are being re-defined and re-examined. With the transnational movement of people, identity needs to be replaced with a more liberating and dynamic definition responding to the changing social interactions. The complexity of identity is more intensified with migration which ensnares people in between cultures and within multiple cultures. Globalization

and the transnational movement of people in diverse nations have fastened mass displacement that results in the rapid rise of multi-ethnic societies where individuals must negotiate their positionality regarding race, nation, gender, class and identity. When the 'self' itself is defined from many orientations through tangible and intangible relations, the concept of identity needs to be reaffirmed. Pervasive in this notion of identity is the intersectionality of race and ethnicity which are the referent points of how a person is identified in a larger social context. The sense of belongingness comes with the notion of identity further established by allegiance to a particular community or ethnic group.

While discussing the different orientations of identity, Bhikhu Parekh, in his work *A New Politics of Identity: Political Principles for an Independent World*, gives three interrelated dimensions of identity – the personal, the social and the human or universal. According to Parekh these three identities are “inseparable and flow into each other” (28). The dialectic of identity is inclusive of these interrelated forms of identity which defines an individual in terms of his uniqueness, his membership to an organization or institution and as human being which flow inseparably into each other to form a sense of belongingness and affiliation to a society claiming one’s participation in the world. Furthering his argument, Bhikhu Parekh elaborates on our identity as individuals which “includes our values and commitments as well as those individuals and communities with whom or which we identify” (29). Zadie Smith’s *Swing Time* (2016) questions the racial identity which invariably flows while interacting with the dominant race. The sense of belongingness comes out of one’s allegiance to a particular race or community. An ambivalent self infiltrates when the identity of an individual fails to identify with these three dimensions. From such a perspective, the question of a sense of belongingness which articulates one’s identity will be the context of analyzing Zadie Smith’s novel *Swing Time* (2016) and we will also discuss the struggle for recognition of black identity and the differential treatment they faced in the field of performing arts and dominant British society.

As a writer, Zadie Smith is aware of her positionality pertaining to her belongingness to her mixed race. In 2008, she delivered a lecture – “Speaking in Tongues” - at the New York Public Library. In her speech, she exemplified Barak Obama as a prominent figure in connection with people of conflicting backgrounds and histories. She elucidates the solitariness of those ‘mixed race’ – of being black and at the same time white, with an assumption of ‘double consciousness’. Smith is quite aware that her position comes under racial discourse. Nonetheless, she considers it as

not a conscious choice but rather a 'state of being'. Such an understanding of the so-called 'mixed race' is present in most of her fictional characters and in this regard, the unnamed narrator of *Swing Time*. To formulate the discourse on Smith's work, the question of what the collective identity 'blackness' implies needs to be first addressed.

Michelle M. Wright in *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* agrees on the inability to find an all-encompassing definition of blackness in Black studies on identity. Furthermore, the argument of blackness as "an economic and political argument first used to justify the Atlantic slave trade" (2) and not grounded on a scientific foundation is a well-known argument. Nonetheless, blackness as a category still exists thus, a need to understand what constitutes blackness. One can agree with Wright that blackness is "a collective identity that intersects with many other collective identities that in turn intersect with one another" (3). However, such a simplistic understanding further questioned why blackness is set as distinct from other collective identities. This is addressed by Wright as the need is to focus on:

...the phenomenology of Blackness – that is, *when* and *where* it is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what locations, both figurative and literal. Blackness cannot be located on the body because of the diversity of bodies that claim Blackness as an identity. Blackness, then, is largely a matter of perception... (3)

Smith's depiction of an array of characters from varied communities, especially the black, living in a multiracial space like London opens a discourse on identity which is of contemporary relevance. In *Swing Time*, through the stories of the unnamed narrator and Tracey, Smith depicts the conflicting late modern anxiety of contemporary London, which is a result of the increasing ethnic and class heterogeneity. The 1980s London in which the girls grew up and exposure to old Hollywood musicals in their childhood stage are significant in the formulation of their sense of belongingness. The title of the novel is a reference to the Hollywood film *Swing Time* (1936). By alluding to this movie and another *Ali Baba Goes to Town* (1937), Smith brings into focus the Hollywood musicals of the 1930s and problematizes the representation of race in performing arts, which is supposed to be a liberating space. From such a position, this paper is an attempt to study how Smith establishes the sense of black solidarity and questions the notion of belongingness in an increasingly heterogeneous society where the self is an evolving entity.

Allusions to Performing Arts in *Swing Time*: An Articulation of the Notion of Belongingness, Race, and Black Identity: -

Roland Barthes in his essay "Death of the Author" (1977) states, "... a text is made from multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader...." Smith's allusion to movies like *Swing Time* and *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, in the narrative, enables an intertextual reading of the novel. Intertextuality can be considered a double lens that allows the text to be studied through the intertextual references provided by the author and, at the same time, the text is observed through the prior knowledge, position and experience of the reader. As such, the text exists in a multitude of meanings and interpretations. Accordingly, *Swing Time's* allusions to certain Hollywood musicals, which are a significant part of the narrator's childhood, can be studied from the dimension of social recognition or eraser of racial identity and its impact.

Recognizing the representation of race and ethnicity in popular culture, advertising, films and performing arts is pertinent to dissect how this array of representations affects the identity formation of an individual in society. The revelation of words and representations ingrained in such art forms will facilitate in unraveling the racial prejudice prevalent in the dominant discourse. As *Swing Time* is a reference to the Hollywood musical of the same name, it establishes the significance of dance, music and films in forming a racial identity with its dominant representation by the whites. The performing art form has been a substantial part of the unnamed narrator's life in the novel. The narrator is not much of a dancer but has a gift for singing, though she never seriously pursued it. Nevertheless, she remains associated with the entertainment circle. In her adolescence, she considered that music had the power to overcome the racial divide. She believes that a dancer has the transcending ability. This is somewhat ironic considering how racial prejudice and colour are deeply rooted in these art forms through its popular imageries which she fails to recognize.

In the prologue to the novel, the unnamed narrator is introduced as a young adult returning to London. She is fired from her job as a personal assistant to the Australian pop star Aimee, her once-childhood idol. In London, she comes across the screening of the film *Swing Time*. The movie *Swing Time* (1936) is quite significant to her, as she used to be obsessed with it during her childhood. This movie starred Fred Astaire, the Amer-

ican dancer, choreographer, actor, singer, and television presenter. The most momentous part of the musical is the solo dance number, "Bojangles of Harlem," where Astaire dances with two of his shadows following his moves. This part is considered a homage to the African-American tap dancer Bill Robinson. Nostalgic about her childhood fascination, the narrator wants to show Astaire's dance scene to her friend Lamin, who is from Senegal. However, when she watches the film as an adult, she feels ashamed of even showing it to her friend, as she realizes that Fred Astaire is in blackface, alluding to the rooted racism in Hollywood. Smith also referred to another film - the 1937 musical *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, where Hollywood star Eddie Cantor is in blackface, thereby, heightening the issue of racism and discrimination against coloured people prevalent in Hollywood musicals.

In both movies, tap dance as a performing art is given significant attention while addressing the issues of racism and marginalisation of black talents. As various scholars pointed out, the history of tap dance is rooted in race. Tap dance results from blending Irish folk dance and African slave dance. Kyle Van Frank in "Blended Cultures: The Story of Tap Dancing America" states that the genesis of tap dance began in the 1650s during the colonization of America by the European and with the mixing of the mass migrant Irish servants and African Slaves, mainly from the West Africa, in the Caribbean colonies. Frank quotes historian Margaret Fuhrer who says that:

After the Stono Insurrection laws prohibited black slaves from using drums in the mid-eighteenth century, they transferred their intricate West African drumming rhythms to their bodies, specifically their feet. (1050)

Tap dance, as such, is a performance of resistance. The Hollywood musicals of the 1930s and 1940s while popularizing it, erased the contribution of black artists. Here, Kant observed that:

Astaire did not develop his style on his own. His style is known for coming from high exposure to African American buck dancing and shuffling on the Vaudeville and Broadway stages of the 1910s and 1920s. However, few know the names of such performers as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the Nicholas brothers, or Jeni LeGon, from whom artists like Astaire took inspiration. These African American performers fade into the pages of history books, unlike names such as Gene Kelly, Ginger Rogers, and Donald O'Connor. The white performers of the first half of the twentieth century rep-

resent a phase of cultural appropriation which left the credit for tap dance not in the hands of innovate artists of color, but rather in the hands of dynamic on-screen performers, predominantly white. (1051)

Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, an African-American tap dancer, is a prominent figure during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. For such an eminent figure, Astaire’s homage seems more of a masquerade than an actual tribute. If it was to acknowledge Robinson’s contribution then, Astaire need not have done blackface which is a stereotypical presentation of black and rather racist. Even in the movie - *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, black talent such as Jeni LeGon is given an insignificant stereotypical role. Even in the novel’s narrative, the unnamed narrator recalled the stoned conversation between her and her then boyfriend Rakim in which the origin of tap dance was discussed. Her romanticization of the origin of tap dance was harshly mocked by Rakim’s statement, “oh massa, I’s so happy on this here slave ship I be dancing for joy” (290). Smith problematizes the ingrained racism in the society, easily visible in Hollywood musicals, which are readily consumed by the masses. By marginalizing the contributions of talented Black women like Jeni LeGon and Nina Simone in Hollywood, the recognition of difference in the multiracial white society is exposed.

Through the narrative of the unnamed narrator and her childhood best friend Tracey, Smith also problematizes the notion of belongingness. Belongingness is a significant part of human existence. Generally, a sense of belonging is the idea of being part of a social group that starts from the family and extends to the community. In “Revisiting the “The Breakfast Club”: Testing Different Theoretical Models of Belongingness and Acceptance (and Social Self-Representation)”, Saga Pardede et al. consolidate the wide-ranging existing notion of belongingness as:

...a sense of “identity-proximity” (e.g., Kohut, 1971, 1977; Kohut et al., 1984), a sense of “emotion sharing” (e.g., Lee and Robbins, 1995), a sense of “supportive-proximity” (e.g., Hill, 1987; Lazarus, 1991; Kelly and Barsade, 2001; Pickett et al., 2004), a sense of “Similarities of *Self* and Others” (e.g., Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1999), and a sense of “environmental-satisfaction” (e.g., Bronfenbrenner’s, 1979). (2)

In *Swing Time*, the girls grew up in the neighbouring government project housing estates of North-West London and were of black and white lineage. Both were introduced to each other in a community dance class at

age seven in the year 1982. At such an early age the narrator establishes her connection with Tracey, at their very first meeting, as, "Our shade of brown was exactly the same – as if one piece of tan material had been cut to make us both..." (9). In this case, the sense of similarity and collective consciousness based on one's skin tone establishes a sense of solidarity and then friendship among these two young girls. This became the first step outside their family, for their social identity association.

The girls' friendship is centered around their passion for dance and music. Their childhood, which was in the 80s, was an era of MTV, music videos, Hollywood musicals, etc. This is reflected in the narrative by reference to Michael Jackson and Tracey's supposedly fictional narrative of her absent father as a background dancer of Jackson who goes on tour with him. The figure of Aimee, who was their childhood pop idol, is based on 'the queen of pop' Madonna. The consumption of such popular entertainment led to the discovery of the 1937 Hollywood musical *Ali Baba Goes to Town*. The unnamed narrator was surprised to see a woman of colour – Jeni LeGon – that she even made Tracey watch the film. Jeni LeGon, real name Jennie Bell, was one of the First African-American women in tap dance to have a solo career in the 1930s Hollywood. Her story narrates the tragic tale of Black talent being disregarded and made to play minor insignificant stereotypical roles in Hollywood films. But, to the unnamed narrator and Tracey, she was their idol, a rare non-white face, a young woman of colour who could dance splendidly. It was the unnamed narrator who came across LeGon in the movie and introduced it to Tracey. For the unnamed narrator who admired Tracey's talent in dance, she saw a similarity between LeGon and Tracey. Their reactions were:

...I saw her lips part in surprise, as mine had done the first time I watched it, and then I knew that she could see what I saw. Oh, the nose was different – this girl's nose was normal and flat – and there was, in her eyes, no hint of Tracey's brand of cruelty. (191)

LeGon's presence in the movie, though overlooked by many, significantly influences the young girls and establishes a sense of solidarity among them. For both the girls, she was their dream. For the unnamed narrator she was this transcendental being that a dancer represents – "But to me a dancer was a man from nowhere, without parents or siblings, without a nation or people, without obligations of any kind, and this was exactly the quality I loved" (24)- as for Tracey, she was the representative of 'black music' and her inspiration. Tracey, given her complicated background, was much aware of the limitation of race as the make-believe tragic sto-

ry they used to write at the unnamed narrator's house as a part of their playtime suggested. These stories centered on a prima ballerina who hid her identity of being a 'half-caste' and always had a tragic ending. The unnamed narrator is aware that such a story will not be approved by her strong-willed intellectual activist of a mother, who while proclaiming to fight for the community seems to overlook Tracey's family circumstances. Tracey's story reflects her own life and understanding of being a 'mixed' race which the unnamed narrator can vaguely understand given her sheltered upbringing. Regardless of how they position themselves, people of mixed parentage have to recognize that they are black and their mixed identities often pose problematic in their sense of belongingness to a particular race.

As the girls enrolled in different schools – the unnamed narrator in Willesden and Tracey in Neasden – their world opened to the more heterogeneous notion of race and the power dynamics within it. The unnamed narrator perceives, "Of the black half at least a third were 'half-caste', a minority nation within a nation," (34) her notion of identity which is derived from her understanding of the sense of belongingness is complicated more she comprehends her position as a 'mixed race'.

In the introduction of the text *Rethinking 'Mixed Race'*, editors David Parker and Miri Song from their research observe that:

people of 'mixed race' often have distinctive experiences of their parents and family life, unique patterns of identity formation, and are subject to exceptional forms of discrimination that cannot be addressed within existing conceptions of 'race'. (7)

Even as an adult, the narrator's sense of belongingness is always questioned as she lives as a shadow figure with no rooted orientation. Hurtado and Carter in the article "Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino College students' sense of belonging", consider 'the sense of belonging' as, "the psychological feeling of belonging or connectedness to a social, spatial, cultural, professional, or other type of group or a community" (70). The notion of belonging goes together with understanding and formulation of identities. Hence, the narrator and her friend's conscious search for a sort of linkage, a familiarity, in Hollywood musicals that represent their race can be approached as the establishment of solidarity and a formulation of belongingness which ultimately becomes the source of social identity markers. In her adulthood, the unnamed narrator becomes a personal assistant for the celebrity Ai-

mee. She travels the globe and assists Aimee's publicized charity project in Gambia. In Gambia, her notion of belongingness and blackness is challenged as she is made aware of the fact that the people there consider her white, while in London she is grouped as black. As such, her sense of identity which is socially or culturally derived is always in dispute.

The label 'black' as Stuart Hall points out was traditionally used as an umbrella term of shared common experiences of racism and discrimination among diverse historical, linguistics and ethnic identities. So, there arises a question that when the unnamed narrator is identified as black, does it carry such cultural connotation or, does her 'blackness' tend towards Du Bois' notion of being 'black' as a 'double-consciousness' which is a socio-cultural construct and a more complex feeling of "two-ness" with a desire for a "true self". Smith herself has addressed this notion as a 'state of being'. Through the narrative of the unnamed narrator, Smith problematizes the confounding state of identity and cultural belongingness, which traces back to the unnamed narrator's childhood, when she was provided limited space to negotiate her own 'mixedness'. Even her mother pointed out her ambivalent nature without a root:

People come from somewhere, they have roots – you've let this woman pull yours right out of the ground. You don't live anywhere, you don't have anything, you're constantly on a plane. (155)

The narrator herself acknowledges this, as introduced in the prologue to the novel, which in the chronological time frame of the narrative is the present and the narrator is an adult. An epiphanic moment was revealed to the narrator while watching the dance movement of Fred Astaire in the movie *Swing Time*:

A truth was being revealed to me: that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own. I experienced myself as a kind of shadow. (4)

This further solidifies the ambiguous nature of the unnamed narrator whose sense of belongingness is always disputed as a result of the increasingly deconstructed notion of history, community, identity and origin in the modern multicultural state.

Through such discourse and also by alluding to Hollywood musicals such as *Swing Time* and *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, Zadie Smith brings into promi-

nence the genesis of tap dance, the erasure of black talent and the cultural appropriation which were overlooked at that time. Blackface in Hollywood was commonly in practice in the 19th century and even the young unnamed narrator overlooked it. It reflects the rooted racism which is accepted by the then-society. This acceptance is integral to the marginalization of black talent in Hollywood as compared to their white counterparts. Consequently, the narrator's attempts to search for black talent in films during her childhood were a way of ascertaining how black people were getting recognition for their contributions. Even if the characters were playing minor roles or background characters, the narrator was searching for recognition of her racial identity through those movies. The novel is a bildungsroman where the protagonist is always searching for belongingness, whether cultural or social. As a child, she considers the language of dance as neutral without any cultural baggage. Deplorably, its representation in Hollywood musicals reveals racial segregation and ingrained racism in it.

Conclusion:

In *Swing Time*, Zadie Smith through the language of dance and music brings into focus the current discourse on identity and belongingness. The experiences of the unnamed narrator problematized the notion of belongingness which results in the loss of the orientation of the self and hence the inability to form an identity. The notion of belongingness which the unnamed narrator in her childhood experiences was interrupted by the societal condition in which the politics of race is played upon. For Smith, the quest for belongingness is to question this very notion and open up varied social discourses, as the self is always in 'a state of being' in an increasingly pluralistic society. Thus, for Smith her characters, in this case, the unnamed narrator is always presented as an ambiguous, fragmented being. Always on a journey of self-discovery and is hardly presented as a complete whole.

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