

Multiculturalism and Hybridity in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*

Badri Prasad Pokharel (Nepal)

ABSTRACT

*The 21st century started with rampant events in the developed countries like Europe and America with the bloody wars in the countries like Iraq, Afganistan, Syria, and Burma, creating the problems of immigrants. The traumatic events of the World War II are still afresh in people's minds. The impacts of such events make people flee their homeland in search of refuge where they keep their family secured. This ultimately makes the new shelter a jumble of people with distinct culture, chores, mores, and other social rhetoric. Later, such people remain in the periphery of lost identity, and hence would be looking for identity in the multicultural society. Here, in the novel *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith shows people from various cultural backgrounds, who are in search of their right place in a multicultural society.*

KEYWORDS: Multiculturalism, hybridity, racism, identity, ethnicity, immigration

Date of Submission: 22 January 2018

Date of Acceptance: 06 February 2018

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, multiculturalism being connected with ethnicity, race, language or culture has become a multifaceted discourse for those who write books and other pieces of writings. Firstly, in the 1960s in Switzerland and later in Canada, the term has been described in the process of mixing Francophone and Anglophone population. Later, it carried more than one meaning. It rather describes the coexistence of multiple cultural societies with different and specific traditions, institutional systems, values and attitudes under one jurisdiction. Amalgamating the areas with two or more different cultures and migrated people from various jurisdictions can help create multicultural aspects. In this article, I have tried to imbibe these multicultural aspects in a British novelist, Zadie Smith's much acclaimed novel *On Beauty* which with accompanying multicultural characters and situations has a distinct feature of cosmopolitan society.

THE CONCEPT OF MULTICULTURALISM

The aim of multiculturalism is to provide a friendly environment for the development of education, culture and traditions and is based on a mutual respect and tolerance of particular nations and ethnicities. The ideology behind multiculturalism is that all cultures share similar values and are equal; therefore, they create such an environment suitable for mutual and meaningful enrichment. Multiculturalism, used synonymously with diversity and tolerance mostly in Europe and America for the last few decades, is a term introduced in the political bureaucratic society. It was first introduced in 1973 by the government led by Gough Whitlam (Knight, 2008, p.106); later it was embarked as a policy by the successive government and the refugees from Labanon and other South-East Asia welcomed it. In many parts of the world it has become an integral part to legitimize the people from across the

world as an official political ideology honoring the cultural and permanence of ethnic group. At the same time, it has been taken as an “oppositional position claiming the immigrants' and ethnic minorities' rights to cultural autonomy” (Alund & Schierup, 1991, p. 2). Beginning with an opportunity for employment, the immigrants enhanced the medium of multicultural phenomena.

Following this view, a critic argues that as every element, it has its own theme and phenomena in the composition of each ethnic group which may have its natural composition, its temper and culture. Besides, its theme, melody and harmony as well as dissonances and discords make the symphony of civilization. To clarify this idea of subscribing to the contemporary versions of a multicultural society, Aleksandra Alund & Carl-Ulrik Schierup (1991) delineates further:

Not everyone, however, subscribes to contemporary versions of a multicultural utopia, even though they may agree that freedom of cultural expression is an essential precondition for a democratic society. Far from an overall harmonious orchestration of mankind, a number of contemporary studies of the relationship between multicultural theory and practice seem to reflect 'culture' as having become a central 'ideological battleground' articulating the deep and increasingly complex structurally grounded disjunctures and conflicts characteristic of modern capitalist society. Seen from this perspective, 'multiculturalism' signifies a social condition in which, together with the politicization of the cultural, a general culturalization of the political language has taken place. (p. 4)

Hence, the aim of dominating one particular part remains inherently in other; that later is coined as cultured manner of living in the cosmopolitan society in many parts of the world as a particular constitution of modern society.

Even in the established nation-state set up on a principle of coherent composition between culture and the principalities of a nation defined as particular groups, multiculturalism can have some or more chances of cultural differences. Later it can bring to the dissolution of the organized form of this nation-state. For many, the idea of forming nationalism manifests the hierarchical differences between “us” and “them”; the same idea consequently grows up into the existences of cultural differences which ultimately clarify as differences among “cultures as closed units” (Knight, 2008, p. 107). In the same way, for the last few decades, the political discourse has been in the conflict with the demands of identity and recognition of particular cultural and ethnic principalities. This may seem to be coming from some groups of citizens, cultural and ethnic minorities. Kristy Knight (2008) further elaborates her idea like this, “the interest in the issues of multiculturalism has increased both on scholar and public level. On one hand there are liberal theories promoting multiculturalism as a model of defense of cultural rights having its source in the universal right of an individual” (p.107). From this viewpoint, multiculturalism aims to promote the recognition of cultural and ethnic plurality; besides, this plurality is intended as a plurality of cultures which can easily be understood as a means of closed units in those pluralities.

Here, the concept of multiculturalism is analyzed to endorse the existing differences and to perpetuate the existing cultural stereotypes in Smith’s *On Beauty* by using culture as a means to delineate the social and political inequalities. The idea of cultural relativism can also be seen to be demonstrating that for many decades the state has ignored the form of culture as a system of multiple relations and meanings even crossing the boundaries of the nation-states. It still casts relativism that cultural differences in an organized society that co-exist side by side.

As far as British multiculturalism is concerned it is said to have pressured under various Muslims, Hindu, and Jews threats. The British academia of different political backgrounds has signaled some signs of retreat in integration and social cohesion. Naser

Meer & Tariq Modood (2009), while showing diversity-related politics, reiterates, “One response to these developments, from defenders of diversity-related politics, has comprised a discursive reorientation of British multiculturalism to focus upon an anti-essentialist ‘multiculture’ that can transcend the alleged hitherto reification of British multiculturalism” (p. 473). They foresee an alternative appraisal of British multiculturalism.

They further mention that in Britain multiculturalism has been believed widely to be responsible to promote the domestic terrorism, which is inalienably prior to have been creaking under the Muslim and Jew fundamentalism. It is after 2001 and 2004 urban riots in London that the successive governments and no-right wing criticism of multiculturalism have got some trace in the notice of public views. Still, in seeking the solution of the upheaval, some intellectuals have coalesced with their rejection. Some fundamental resources to enhance the issues can first be an integration and social cohesion perspective which seeks to include minorities through a process of greater assimilation to major norms and customs. The second is an alternative, explicitly secular multiculture or conviviality approach that welcomes the fact of difference and stresses lifestyle and consumption based behavioral identities. They are anti-essentialists in orientation and invalidate group identities in particular. The last is a political multiculturalism that can incorporate the priorities of the positions while also being inclusive of groupings (p. 474). Having recognized as an approach, which has stood in the way of successive integration, the rhetoric of British multiculturalism has been perceived positively even in retreat.

Questions regarding ethnicity, multiculturalism, hybridity, social assimilation, and stratification along with the issues related to racism and discrimination are normally found in Smith’s novels. They gradually make her different from her contemporary writers. Her characters are from different cultural backgrounds within one family generation. Viewing this idea, Natasha Warikoo (2009) points out, “Smith emphasizes the power of unpredictability, which may take our lives and characters into never-foreseen directions and therefore opens a wider scale of choices and opportunities” (p. 54). People in her works seek an opportunity to clarify identity and seem proud to have achieved the status.

RE-CONSTRUCTING HYBRIDITY

Having paid a sincere tribute to E. M. Forster’s novel *Howard’s End*, Smith has brought an aspect of multicultural society along with many issues which are related to contemporary academic world. Presenting the characters’ multicultural background, she is able to create a tension as well as a feeling of uncertain identity, which subsequently resembles her own multicultural background (her mother was from Jamaica whereas her father was English). The novel has mainly focused on two families which are inherently different in the way to their lifestyle and political ideologies besides their bi-racial or mixed racial marriages.

In the Belsey family, Howard is a working class Londoner who loves art and academia which ultimately contrasts his working class background and devoted to liberal left-wing political wing. Smith (2005) points out about him in this way, “When placed next to men of his own age and class, he has two great advantages: hair and weight. Both have changed little. The hair in particular is extremely full and healthy” (p. 19). His wife Kiki, “a little woman whom I could fit in my pocket” (p. 206), is a black American with the Jamaican origin who works at a hospital and their three children – Jerome, Zora and Levi.

Hybridity as a multicultural aspect can be seen in the Belsey’s children with the medley of two origins along with different attitudes and values. Each of the children faces the rising obstacles of disjointed identities following different ways either choosing one parent as the dominant one or neither of the parents. Taking as an example, Jerome, the eldest son in the family, is seen in some kinds of war in the issue of choosing university, internship and girlfriend with his father putting his mother in his favor. His father is frowned at his religious

conviction which he frequently shares even to make his father irritate. Unlike Jerome, his sister, Zora is always by the side of her father. She looks at intellectual and respected academic being motivated by her father. The youngest member of the family is Levi from whom the struggle of true identity can be visible. He neither looks up his mother nor father; rather searches for a role model outside the family. He is seen rebelling against his parents and shows his initiation for a strike in Megastore where he works. Consequently, he is found revolving around some people like Carl Thomas who identify themselves with black street culture and hip-hop. Levi finds himself much closer to them than with any other people. He strongly participates in a movement to support Haiti against the exploitation imposed by America.

Unlike the Besley family, the Kippses consist of various people. Sir Monty Kipps, a black British man of Caribbean origin, has tenure at a university. His ultra-conservativeness pervades throughout his professional work for his reactionary politics, and views on homosexuality, the role of women or affirmative action. Monty's wife Carlene is of British-Caribbean origin. The Kipps children Victoria and Michael resembling the traits of their father seem determined individuals "having impersonal and shallow mood in relationship with other" (Warikoo, 2009, p. 54). Having traits of various backgrounds, each of them has something different from each other that are odd.

Besides, Carl Thomas, a young black man, is one of those people who stand for racism or segregation and feel to have social disadvantages only due to the African-American origin, but still have certain affirmative action by securing a good position at the university. He belongs to black street culture and shortly personifies as a role model for Levi for his true blackness. With the personal features of Carl, Smith is able to articulate the problems of contemporary multicultural society, which has been noticed to be creating social stratification that seems impossible to overcome. Ultimately, the presence of Clare Malcolm, a white petite poet and a lecturer, is rather a matter of gratification as she is liable to overcome those stratified social gaps prevailing in the cosmopolitan societies. Impersonalizing the novelist's traits in the role of Clare, Natasha Warikoo (2009) further elucidates, "By presenting Clare's character, Smith probably attempted to reflect on her own perspective in terms of hoping for better future, and Clare's character may function as a representative of the contemporary society and by setting such example show the direction the society should take" (p. 56). So, Clare can be seen as one character which is aware of the social gap and strives to make a difference by her own words and actions in the novel.

Creating an academic environment, Smith is able to employ a multicultural aspect affecting all her characters. The families face similar social and cultural problems along with multicultural dimension which every cosmopolitan society is facing at present time. Presenting all events in a closed community resembling a "small world" (Lodge, 2012, p. 23) which comprises Massachusetts, the New England area, a fictional town Wellington supposedly near Boston. The Belsey family's head Howard is from the Great Britain and lives with his family in an old Victorian house which was inherited from his wife Kiki's mother. In the context of locations presented in the novel, David Lodge (2012) cites,

On the one hand the localization serves as a containment strategy, whereby theory's account of the novel can be branded as merely academic, and superseded as fiction "graduates" to more serious concern. Yet, in a deeper sense, the campus in these works becomes a staging ground for reflection on the genre's form, value, and historical development. (p. 24)

The setting has also played an important role for exemplifying the diversity of situation.

The role of Kiki Belsey is strong and independent and she has to face her own husband's infidelity. It significantly demonstrates that her husband chose a white woman over her and reveals her insecurity about having different skin color. Later, she articulates

this issue comparing the environment where she lives with the sea which functions as an interesting example. Here, Smith (2005) writes,

Everywhere we go, I'm alone in this...this sea of white. I barely know any black folk any more, Howie. My whole life is white. I don't see any black folk unless they be cleaning under my feet in the fucking café in your fucking college. Or pushing a fucking hospital bed through a corridor. I staked my whole life for you. (p. 206)

From Kiki's perspective, it is clear that there are differences even if all races are considered to be equal. It can be implied that there are two kinds of lives – the white one Kiki lives with her husband, the artificial one and the other life – the really genuinely Kiki's, the black one which she gave up for him. Smith addresses the issue of isolation presenting Howard's working place Wellington College which is predominantly white and Kiki's working place, hospital which is also surrounded by white. For her, more contact with her people was mediated through Carl whom she refers to a brother. Her words establish a connection which is based on the fact of shared skin-color pointing out the feeling of isolation.

The Black Studies has drawn attention towards racism, which becomes home to Monty Kipps and is inclined to advocate against an affirmative action. It houses a character Erskine Jegede who helps Clare Malcolm keep Carl under the protective wings of Wellington. He is noticed to oppose Kipps' vision and remain in the middle between Howard's liberalism and Monty's conservatism. The department as no-man's-land keeps on going in its own direction. Erskine as a felicitator helps people get jobs. Smith (2005) further describes him,

[...] Erskine, in his capacity as Assistant Director of the Black Studies Department, simply gave them a job. He created a job where before there had been only floor space. Chief Librarian of the African-American Music Library had been one such invented post. Hip-Hop Archivist was a natural progression. (p. 372)

With the help of this character, Smith undermines the seriousness and value of Black Studies within Wellington which ultimately lets one value the rules being bended. Multicultural dimension as mentioned above has been understood as an instrument to let the reader perceive the hidden conflict and obsession in people's minds. People are delineated to expose many things, but are in the condition that they elucidate their thirst with the actions.

CONCLUSION

With the help of the novel, Smith has drawn the context of contemporary Anglo-American post-colonial environment to bring into the themes and various elements of multiculturalism, which are found to be related to the novelist's individual perspective based on her own experience. Though set on a satirical layer, the novelist has used rampantly paradoxes and coincidence to put forward the sequence of various characters and the way they live their lives.

In short, the novel has not only identified the multicultural elements, but also the influence of post colonial dimension. It is remarkably important to notice how the novelist has tackled the seemingly tricky task such as to incorporate the reality of multicultural society of the 21st century into a traditional genre.

REFERENCES

- Alund, Aleksandaa & Schieaup, Caal-Ulaik. (1991). *Paradoxes of Multiculturalism*. Brookfield: Avebury.
- Knight, Kristy. (2008). What is multiculturalism. *Griffith Working Papers in Pragmatics and International Communication*, 1(2), 106-118.
- Lodge, David. (2012). *Changing places*. London: Penguin Books.

- Meer, Naser & Modood, Tariq. (2009). The multicultural state we're in: Muslims 'multiculture' and the 'civic re-balancing' of British multiculturalism. *Political Studies*, 57(7), 473-497.
- Smith, Zadie. (2005). *On Beauty*. London: Penguin Books.
- Warikoo, Natasha. (2009). Reviewing *On Beauty*. *Sociological Forum*. 24(2), 51-61.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Badri Prasad Pokharel is a doctoral scholar to study on conflict literature in Nepal from the Buddhist perspective at Lumbini Buddhist University in Nepal. By profession, he is a Lecturer of English at Bhaktapur Campus in the Kathmandu Valley. Previously, he has also worked at Research Division of Tribhuvan University for a long time. He has published research articles in various journals nationally and internationally.