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Unraveling History and Fiction: Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth' as Historiographic Metafiction

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Abstract

The paper aims to examine the interaction between history and fiction in the novel *White Teeth* through the perspective of Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction. The research problem is to identify the systematic ways in which history is transformed into fiction through constructed or "lying" truths. The study adopts a qualitative approach, with content analysis used as the primary research tool. The objectives of the research are to explore the impact of history on culture, the manipulation of truth, and the existence of multiple perspectives. Zadie Smith employs a narrative technique that goes beyond mere storytelling; she engages with historiographic metafiction by weaving together history, fiction, and self-reflection to construct a narrative that challenges traditional notions of truth and reality. The novel reflects a complex interplay between history and reality. According to the theoretical framework, subjective elements are used in the narrative, suggesting that reality is constructed rather than fixed. To avoid the imposition of fixed truths shaped by those in power, the subjectivity of reality must be acknowledged.

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Introduction

The title of this article suggests that the novel *White Teeth* (2001) engages with and reflects the historical and cultural context in which it is set, particularly the postcolonial and multicultural dimensions of British society. It examines how historical events and social changes are represented and interpreted within the narrative. The novel's self-awareness as a work of fiction and its use of metafictional techniques are also explored. In the case of *White Teeth*, this paper

investigates how the author plays with narrative structures, characters' awareness of being part of a story, and the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality.

In essence, analysing history and metafiction in *White Teeth* enables readers to understand how Zadie Smith uses the novel as a medium to comment on both the past and the nature of storytelling itself. The novel exemplifies the genre of historiographic metafiction, a concept introduced by Linda Hutcheon to describe works that combine history, narrative,

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and self-reflexivity. Historiographic metafiction is a key technique in postmodern literature, where the boundaries between fact and fiction are deliberately destabilised.

Postmodernism suggests that nothing is entirely original; rather, all texts are shaped by existing narratives and prior knowledge. Writers reinterpret and reshape earlier ideas, presenting them in new forms that appear original to readers. In this sense, literary production can be understood as a process of reconfiguration rather than creation from nothing. While authors may not explicitly acknowledge these influences, their works inevitably carry traces of past narratives, which are transformed and recontextualised. This blending of the old and the new allows history to be presented in ways that remain relevant to contemporary audiences, ensuring a continued connection with the past.

Metafiction further reinforces the idea that meaning is not fixed and that reality is constructed rather than absolute. By merging elements of reality and fiction, it challenges readers to question the nature of truth and representation. When combined with historiography, metafiction becomes a powerful tool that integrates historical discourse with aesthetic expression, allowing writers to reinterpret history through a subjective and creative lens.

In *White Teeth*, the experiences of characters such as Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones during World War II function as historical metaphors that reflect broader societal transformations. These experiences shape their identities and influence their post-war lives, symbolising the lasting impact of historical events. The aftermath of World War II highlights themes of resilience and adaptation in the face of social change, while also demonstrating how history informs cultural identity and generates multiple perspectives.

Born in London in 1975, Zadie Smith draws significantly on her multicultural background, which has deeply influenced her literary work. Throughout her career, she has explored themes of race, identity, and multiculturalism, combining sharp social observation with humour and critical insight. In addition to her fiction, Smith has contributed extensively to literary criticism and non-fiction, engaging with issues related to literature, politics, and contemporary culture.

In the broader social context, Smith's use of historiographic metafiction in *White Teeth* can be interpreted as a commentary on how historical narratives shape both individual and collective identities (Williams, 2023). By blending historical realities with fictional storytelling, she highlights the subjective nature of history and its openness to reinterpretation. This encourages readers to question dominant narratives and to consider alternative perspectives on the past and present.

Literature Review

The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969) by John Fowles is a notable example of historiographic metafiction, a narrative

technique that not only tells a story set in the past but also reflects on the nature of history and the act of storytelling itself. The novel plays with the blending of real historical events and fictional figures, particularly the character Sarah Woodruff. In doing so, it challenges the fixed perception of historical representation and questions the rigidity of historical narratives. Fowles also employs a self-reflexive approach, positioning the reader as an active participant in distinguishing between fiction and history.

Similarly, *The White Hotel* (1981) by D. M. Thomas and *Time's Arrow* (1991) by Martin Amis utilise metafictional techniques informed by historiography. *The White Hotel* reconfigures traditional approaches to writing history by reconstructing past events, focusing on the life and tragic fate of Lisa Erdman during the Babi Yar massacre of 1941. *Time's Arrow*, on the other hand, revisits the Holocaust through an unconventional narrative structure, presenting the life of a Nazi doctor, Odilo Unverdorben, in reverse chronological order. Both works challenge conventional historical narratives and offer alternative perspectives on representing the past.

Feminist and postcolonial literature further demonstrates the blending of fiction and history through works such as *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983) by Salman Rushdie, as well as *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) by Jeanette Winterson. These texts blur the boundaries between reality and fiction while questioning the authority of historical truth. Winterson, in particular, critiques patriarchal discourse by destabilising the assumed objectivity of history. Rushdie's works integrate the histories of India and Pakistan, illustrating how personal and national histories intersect within postcolonial contexts.

Historiography can be understood as a signifying system that not only represents the past but also constructs it, transforming events into "historical facts." As Umberto Eco (1980) suggests, every story has, in some form, already been told. His novel *The Name of the Rose* exemplifies how literature often reinterprets existing narratives, reinforcing the idea that originality is frequently a reconfiguration of earlier texts.

The neo-slave narrative further exemplifies historiographic metafiction by revisiting the history of slavery and foregrounding African diasporic experiences. Writers such as Caryl Phillips, in *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993), employ postmodern techniques such as pastiche to reconstruct historical experiences. Similarly, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams explore the lived realities of enslaved individuals, particularly women, thereby reclaiming suppressed histories and contributing to historical reinterpretation.

In the context of *White Teeth*, critics emphasise themes of hybridity, identity, and multiculturalism. McLeod (2004: 161) argues that the novel presents a version of London in which traditional postcolonial conflicts are less dominant, focusing

instead on everyday multicultural experiences. Laura Moss (2003: 15) highlights the novel's portrayal of hybridity, describing it as a depiction of a diverse community shaped by the legacy of multicultural Britain. The second generation of characters, in particular, reflects the complexities of identity, as they navigate between inherited cultural traditions and contemporary British society, often experiencing a sense of alienation.

Similarly, Paul Jay (2010: 169) interprets the novel as representing a "post-postcolonial world," where identities are shaped by both colonial histories and contemporary globalisation. The novel critiques colonial legacies and enduring power structures, raising questions about inequality and cultural dynamics. Fernández (2009a: 148) further argues that the text moves beyond binary notions of belonging, exploring the fluidity of British identity within a multicultural framework. This sense of belonging and non-belonging contributes to the dynamic and evolving identities of the characters.

As Matthew Paproth (2008: 15) notes, Smith demonstrates a complex and often fragmented relationship between past and present, as characters engage with history from multiple perspectives. Set against the backdrop of post-World War II Britain, the novel spans several decades and reflects significant social and cultural transformations. The Iqbal family represents the immigrant experience, negotiating cultural preservation and adaptation, while the Jones family embodies the lingering effects of colonialism and racial history. These narratives illustrate how historical events continue to shape individual identities and social relationships.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach will be employed in this study, and content analysis will be used as the primary research method. The text of *White Teeth* will serve as the research sample, with particular focus on the characters of Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal. The theoretical framework of Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction will be applied.

One of the key features of historiographic metafiction, as outlined by Hutcheon, is reflexivity. Such texts are characterised by self-awareness and often incorporate explicit references to historical events, figures, or texts within the narrative. This study will examine how these elements highlight the constructed nature of historical representation and encourage readers to interrogate the role of narrative conventions and ideological biases in shaping history.

Furthermore, the study will analyse the intertextuality inherent in historiographic metafiction. These texts frequently engage with other historical and literary works, both explicitly and implicitly, drawing on existing narratives to enrich their own storytelling. Through these intertextual references, the research will explore how multiple layers of meaning are

created and how history is mediated through diverse textual sources.

In addition, the study will investigate the playfulness and ambiguity characteristic of historiographic metafiction. By presenting multiple perspectives, conflicting accounts, and unreliable narration, such texts challenge fixed notions of historical truth and authority. This research will therefore examine how these narrative strategies invite readers to actively engage with the text and reconsider their assumptions about the past.

Significance of the Research

This research will contribute to existing knowledge by providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between history and fiction. It will serve as a valuable resource for studies in realism and anti-realism and will offer a useful reference for future researchers. Additionally, the study will contribute to broader discussions on narrative construction and the interpretation of historical truth.

Analysis and Discussion

White Teeth illustrates the multifaceted ways in which culture shapes and transforms individual perspectives. It presents themes of tension, adaptation, negotiation, and identity transformation as characters navigate their cultural heritage within a multicultural society.

Samad Miah Iqbal is portrayed as a complex character through whom issues of cultural identity, tradition, and generational conflict are explored. As a Bangladeshi immigrant in post-war Britain, Samad struggles to reconcile his traditional values with the changing social environment. His role as a father further reflects this tension, particularly in his relationships with his sons, Millat and Magid, highlighting the challenges of transmitting cultural values across generations.

Millat and Magid embody contrasting responses to cultural identity. Millat, raised in London, is influenced by its multicultural and liberal environment, leading him to rebel against his cultural and religious roots. In contrast, Magid, who is sent to Bangladesh for a traditional upbringing, develops a stronger adherence to religion and cultural values. These contrasting trajectories demonstrate how environment, parental expectations, and social influences shape identity formation.

Samad's decisions, including sending Magid to Bangladesh, ultimately result in outcomes contrary to his expectations, highlighting the unpredictability of cultural transmission. Similarly, Alsana challenges Samad's rigid views, rejecting his interpretation of religion and asserting her own perspective, thereby reflecting shifting gender and cultural dynamics.

Samad's character is also marked by historical consciousness and irony. His reference to his ancestor, Mangal Pande, reflects his desire to connect with a heroic past. However, differing interpretations of Pande among characters

demonstrate that history is not fixed but subject to multiple perspectives. This reinforces the idea that historical truth is constructed rather than absolute.

Archie Jones, on the other hand, represents the everyday British experience in a post-war context. His character reflects resilience, adaptability, and the evolving nature of identity within a multicultural society. His relationship with Clara and his friendship with Samad further illustrates the complexities of cultural interaction and social change.

The friendship between Archie and Samad, forged during World War II, symbolises shared experiences yet diverging identities. Their post-war struggles and actions, including their encounter with Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret, reveal how individuals construct and manipulate narratives to cope with feelings of inadequacy and disillusionment. Archie's concealment of the truth in this episode further highlights the theme of narrative construction and the instability of truth.

Overall, the novel presents multiple interpretations of events through different characters, each shaped by personal experience and bias. This multiplicity of perspectives aligns with historiographic metafiction, emphasising that history is not singular or objective but is instead fragmented and open to interpretation.

Conclusion

The paper aims to inspect the systematic relationship between fiction and history in *White Teeth* by applying the theory of Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction. This theory says that history is manipulated; it is a "lying truth," and cultural factors shape it. Samad Iqbal's portrayal of his grandfather, as well as Samad and Archie's war experiences, are examples of the manipulation of truths. Mangal Pande, who is the ancestor of Samad, is always idealized by him. He considers him his hero, while others think he was a failure.

In the 1945 war, Samad and Archie met for the first time and became friends. When the war ended, they both felt useless and murdered Dr. Perret, which again turned into a lie because Archie did not kill him, as disclosed at the end of the novel. Both characters attempted suicide because of this feeling of uselessness. Samad's views on culture and religion turned out to be different from reality. Magid, whom he wanted to be religious, turned out to be secular and rational, and Millat, who was supposed to be radical, turned out to be religious. This implies that reality is subjective and it shatters fixed truths.

Moreover, there are multiple perspectives in the story, and each character has a different perspective about Archie and Samad. In this way, one gets to know that history is subjective. In both history and literature, the acknowledgement of diverse perspectives is crucial. There is no single or objective truth in history. The interconnectedness of different time periods suggests that the past continuously reverberates in the present. This influence contributes to the cultural impact of history on contemporary societies. It also aligns with challenging fixed

truths and embracing the idea that reality is subjective and constructed.

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