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Re-Reading Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* through the lens of *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*

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Abstract

Zadie Smith's acclaimed novel *White Teeth* explores the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity in multi-ethnic London. This paper offers a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of the novel, delving into the ways in which Smith's characters grapple with the fragmented nature of the self and the elusive quest for a stable, unified identity. Lacanian psychoanalysis can provide a distinct and insightful understanding of the intergenerational and cultural conflicts depicted in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Therefore, the present study examines how the protagonists navigate the uncanny experience of confronting the inherent split and lack at the core of their being. It also explores how the characters' attempts to construct coherent identities are constantly

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undermined by the intrusion of the reality, the return of the repressed, and the inescapable influence of the symbolic structures that shape their subjectivities.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, White Teeth, Lacanian Reading, The Mirror Stage, Symbolic order

إعادة قراءة أسنان زاديا سميث البيضاء من خلال عدسة التحليل النفسي اللاكاني

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المستخلص

رواية "الأسنان البيضاء" لزاديا سميث تتناول بعمق تعقيدات الهوية والانتماء والتعددية الثقافية في لندن المتعددة الأعراق. يقدم هذا البحث قراءة نفسية تحليلية مبنية على نظرية لاكان، ليتناول كيفية تعامل شخصيات سميث مع تجزئة الذات والسعي المستمر لتحقيق هوية متكاملة وثابتة. التحليل النفسي اللاكاني يوفر منظوراً فريداً وثاقباً للصراعات الثقافية والجيلية التي توضحها سميث في "الأسنان البيضاء".

و هكذا، الدراسة تركز على كيفية مواجهة الشخصيات للتجربة الغريبة في التعرف على الانقسام الداخلي والنقص الجوهرية في كيانهم. كما تستكشف محاولات الشخصيات لبناء هويات متماسكة، والتي يتم تقويضها باستمرار بتدخل الواقع، وعودة المكبوت، والتأثير الذي لا مفر منه للهياكل الرمزية التي تشكل هوياتهم.

الكلمات الدالة: زاديا سميث، الأسنان البيضاء، قراءة لاكانية، مرحلة المرأة، النظام الرمزي

Introduction

A psychological framework known as psychoanalytic theory describes moral actions as the internalization of cultural norms and values through parental recognition, which eventually results in the superego's development and the Oedipal conflict's settlement. According to this view, it's critical to follow one's conscience in order to prevent guilt and prevent the superego from being overly harsh (Žižek, 1992).

Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) and his followers developed Freud's work on the unconscious and sexuality and continue the early psychoanalytic concern with social and personal questioning of self and society. There is a particular focus on language and its limits in Lacan's psychoanalysis and a particular conception of symptoms and diagnosis. Lacan is credited with saying, among other things, that the unconscious is linguistically structured. By this, he implies that the unconscious expressed itself through language and that the unconscious is an ordered network with a structure just as intricate as that of language. Because the reader is a human being with an unconscious mind, he thus puts his psychoanalytical concepts into his own writing as he attempts to clarify them. He also wants the reader to feel the psychoanalytical discourse as they understand the symbolic language structure (Žižek, 1992). An intricate and consequential idea in psychoanalysis, the Lacanian concept of subjectivity encompasses the Mirror Stage (the Imaginary), the Symbolic Stage, and the Real Order.

According to Lacan, the mental register known as the Imaginary encompasses the majority of what is perceived as ordinary or conscious reality. The Imaginary lies on the Symbolic, which structures it and establishes its norms and socio-linguistic boundaries. It is not primarily made up of what would typically be regarded fanciful or fictional, nor is it anything less than necessary to our ordinary mental lives and purpose. That which is fictive and illusory is precisely the core nature of the imaginary. According to Lacan, the imagination is an essential work of fiction that enables the psychoanalytic subject to interact with and live in their environment. Without this collection of fictions, the subject experiences the Real as unsettling or horrifying, devoid of harmony or order. Over all, the Imaginary is made up of illusions that organize the universe and create harmonies, relationships of identity and resemblance between objects and people. The "Mirror Stage," in which the child fixes on their reflection in the mirror as an enclosed totality, is the concept from Lacan that most aptly embodies the Imaginary order. In this resemblance one experiences a crucial but nevertheless fictive sense of similarity between self and Other, where the Other would otherwise remain dreadful in its change and unknowability. The fulfillment that attends the specular image is the satisfaction of experiencing the self as a unified whole, at the same eliminate with which one comes across the Other (Gonçalves, 2012).

The Symbolic Order refers to the domain of language, culture, and social standards that influence our perception and interpretation of the world. Lacan defines the Symbolic Order as "the framework of linguistics that structures our experience and shapes our sense of self" (Lacan, 2002, p. 30). Therefore, language is symbolic, and he believes that Freud has neglected to take this into account. It also includes all other social and representational systems that conscious everyday life is based on, in addition to language (Hadi & Asl,

2022). Lacan reverses the relationship between Freud and the unconscious, where Freud views the unconscious as the realm of true, underlying wants that are continuously controlled in day-to-day life by explicit laws and conscious judgment. As Rasheed (2024) claims that the symbolic order deals with construction signs and language and is considered to be the crucial structure that determines and shapes an individual's identity. So according to Lacan, the interconnectedness of the conscious and unconscious is represented by complex systems of association and signs. In Lacan's view, the structures that shape our desires—even those whose fulfillment would go against societal norms—are what lie beneath the surface of consciousness, not so much the things we secretly wish to do but know we cannot.

The Imaginary and the Symbolic work together to form "reality," which Lacan contrasts with the Real. Insofar as they comprise signifier and signified, respectively, and expression and comprehension occur between them, the symbolic and imaginary are easier to describe as clusters of functions and experiences. Thus, in Lacan's thinking, the Real alternates between seemingly distinct meanings, typically signifying materiality or some sort of appropriately unstructured expanse that exists behind the rules and patterns imposed by the Symbolic. It is necessary for The Real to exist outside of common, communicative reality. Nonetheless, it is not quite ineffable in the sense that he describes it and its psychoanalytic ramifications. The Real is linked to the concept of the mother as his later theory increasingly centers on the "Other" and the traumatic beginning that gives rise to desire. Specifically, the Real and the mother are recognized as the location of complete fulfillment throughout infancy: the mother is perceived as inextricably linked to the self, which is structurally equivalent to owning the Real Thing. Thus, the infant's entrance into the socio-linguistic world—that is, into the Symbolic order, which replaces the Real—casts the subsequent lifetime of striving as a fruitless endeavor to reclaim the Real (Lacan, 1998).

Literature Review

This study is divided into two main parts, by which the first part investigates the current body of literature about Lacanian readings of various works, while the subsequent half centers on scrutinizing numerous critical assessments of Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*. The Lacanian theory of psychosexual development has been employed to study a wide array of characters in literature. Weil (1986) used Lacanian theory to examine the depiction of Lily Briscoe in *The Lighthouse*. Weil argues that Lily's attempt to paint the image of Mrs. Ramsay represents her effort to develop a unified and logical sense of identity by connecting with an idealized person. Weil employs the Lacanian Mirror Stage to understand Lily's artistic process, arguing that the child attains self-awareness as a separate entity by identifying with its reflection in the mirror.

However, Perkins (1989) uses Lacanian theory to examine the character of Charles Trask in *Steinbeck's East of Eden*, specifically highlighting his representation as the symbolic father. According to Perkins (1989), Charles' aggressive attitude may be attributed to the absence of a symbolic father figure, which hinders his capacity to form a consistent sense of identity. According to Perkins (1989), Charles' aggressive attitude can be interpreted as asserting his individuality without a symbolic father figure. Lamiaa Rasheed (2024) adapted Lacanian concept of object *a* in her study entitled "The

Representation of the Lacanian Concept of *Objet Petit a* in Brain Yorkey's *Next to Normal*” to explore this concept in the play focusing on the sense of disintegration and non-wholeness felt by the characters who grapple with their desires and identity.

According to Zheng's study (2010), Pecola wants blue eyes to establish a firm identity by aligning herself with an idealized picture. Pecola's need for blue eyes can be comprehended via the lens of the Lacanian mirror stage. This phase is called self-recognition, in which a child recognizes themselves as a separate and independent entity by identifying with their reflection in a mirror.

Finally, Melzer's 1996 study which is titled as “Hegemony, Agency, and the Production of Identity: The Lacanian Subject in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*,” employed Lacanian theory to examine the depiction of Dana Franklin in *Kindred*. Melzer highlights the dilemma Dana experiences as she is forced to confront the discrepancy between her understanding of herself and how others perceive her. Melzer suggests that Dana's attempts to assert her authority within an unequal context reflect the Lacanian notion of the symbolic order, wherein societal norms and conventions shape an individual's self-perception.

As for the second part of this section, scholars, such as Katerina Sabjtova, elucidated in her thesis *Identity in Zadie Smith's White Teeth* the portrayal and identification of Muslim immigrants residing in the United Kingdom, as well as the transformation of their beliefs in response to British culture. While Suzana Abrahamsson in her essay *Happy Multicultural Land*, examines the representation of multiculturalism in Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*. Abrahamsson says that Smith presents multiculturalism not as a theoretical idea but as a concrete existence by depicting the encounters of her characters. The essay also highlights the problems experienced by specific immigrants, notably in terms of their sense of identity.

On the other hand, Taryn Beukema (2008) looked at how men negotiate their identities. By delving into the multi-faceted ways Britain's colonial past might impact an individual's sense of identity. The main character, Smith, according to Beukema (2008), investigates the male contact between migrants and Englishmen. Smith explores how nationality and cultural background affect conventional ideas of manhood, and how different ways of seeing oneself distort and disrupt masculinity in thought and deed. With an emphasis on historical and travel-related aspects, the work mainly investigates how one's heritage and the process of developing a masculine identity in the postcolonial period are significant.

A Lacanian reading of *White Teeth*

White Teeth has been a critical and commercial success since its 2000s publication, topping various bestseller lists in Britain and sparking debates among reviewers. Racism, multiculturalism, hybridity, and migration have been the main topics in this work. *White Teeth* features a multicultural cast of characters from all over the world, in which the story centers on British with the protagonist Archie Jones and his Muslim and Bengali companion Samad Iqbal, who he served alongside during WWII. Archie weds Clara, a Jamaican lady who is almost 30 years younger. A little girl named Irie was born to Archie and Clara, and at the same time, outside parties orchestrate Samad's marriage. Millat and

Magid, his identical twin sons, are born to Alsana, who is originally from Bangladesh and is Irie's age. In addition to these two culturally diverse families, there is also the Chalfen family, of mixed Jewish and Catholic descent, who want to be known as scholars. Consequently, Characters in *White Teeth* encounter challenges in reaching mutual understanding due to their distinct backgrounds and differing perspectives.

Jacques Lacan defines the Mirror stage as the cognitive process through which a child constructs their self-identity by perceiving their reflection in a mirror. It marks the initial differentiation between oneself and others. The novel portrays a clear desire among the protagonists to seek out someone who can serve as their reflection or source of admiration. This could be first seen in a conversation between Samad and Archie, Samad says "You must live life with the full knowledge that your actions will remain. We are creatures of consequence" (Smith, 2003, p.126). The phrase illustrates the influence of an action on the outcome of life, similar to the recognition of oneself during the mirror stage. Upon reflection, the protagonists in the novel discover that their dreams present a superior vision of themselves compared to their actual world. Stories are modified to enhance their appeal and provide solace and encouragement and Samad draws upon the legendary tale of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande and the period when he and Archie fought together in Bulgaria during World War II.

Archie experienced his mirror stage in the past when she lived his life to the fullest. However, it is merely symbolic since she understands the narrative and the actualities of war and he recognizes it as a method of rebuilding. Additionally, Archie had previous experience as a track cyclist, leading him to participate in the Olympics in London in 1948. Archie and Samad identify with these events and saw Mangal Pande as a reflection of themselves during a crucial developmental time:

Samad looked at the picture of Mangal Pande on the wall with its golden frame, its glass pane, its distinguished and ferocious face. Samad wanted Archie to feel the weight of history, of what it meant to be carrying a name, a legacy. He wanted him to know that there was a responsibility in bearing the lineage of a great man (Smith, 2003, p.98)

This quote illustrates Samad's internal struggle to embrace his multicultural identity and his desire for acknowledgement of his heritage and personal identity. He saw himself in this photo as a sign of pride and burden, directly linked to Samad's actions and relationship with Archie. However, they are being misled; they cling to the past and are on the verge of overlooking the fundamental aspects of life. Archie consistently supports Samad in all situations and serves as the necessary opposing force he needs, "Samad arrives, clasps Archie's right hand in his own and feels the coldness of his friend's fingers, feels the great debt he owes him... 'I will not forget this Archibald,' he is saying, 'I won't forget what you do for me tonight, my friend.'" (Smith, 2003, p. 208). However, their duties differed throughout the Second World War and at the start of their acquaintance:

Archie went very red, unsure which item. Samad was referring to. His hand wavered across the box of wires and bits and bobs. Samad discreetly coughed as

Archie's little finger strayed towards the correct item. It was awkward, an Indian telling an Englishman what to do (Smith, 2003, p. 93)

Both Samad and Archie are aware of their respective positions as the colonizer and the domestic; they understand how they are expected to behave. Nevertheless, this dynamic evolves forming a unique and meaningful bond between them. Samad instills trust in Archie, an individual who embodies a nation and a society in which he feels unwelcome; "when you know a man that long, and you've fought alongside him, then it's your mission to make him happy if he is not" (Smith, 2003, p. 50). As the more intellectually inclined individual, Samad has a goal of helping Archie overcome her lack of communication skills to engage in discussions and contemplate topics that he would not have otherwise encountered.

A similar situation arises in the Chalfen household involving Joshua, the child of Marcus and Joyce. He was formerly an educated young man who attended the same school as Millat and Irie. He enjoys playing board games with his pals at school. Nevertheless, his demeanor transforms with his enrollment in FATE, an acronym for Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation. "Joshua leaned into the mirror and saw a stranger. He had no idea who he was supposed to be. FATE gave him a sense of purpose, but was it really him? Or was it just another image he was trying to fit into?" (Smith, 2003, p.192). This statement supports the proposition of the mirror stage, which describes the moment when an individual begins to understand the disparity between their inner self and the exterior image they project to the world. Joshua also begins using marijuana and transforms into a fervent advocate for animal welfare, and holds beliefs that are entirely contrary to those of his father. Marcus is a genetic engineer involved in a Future Mouse project, however in this study, he utilizes a mouse that exhibits the growth of tumors at predetermined intervals. FATE is a group that advocates for animal rights and opposes the harming and killing of animals. Joshua actively participates in protests against his father's beliefs and actions in his line of work. He believes that the only way to align with FATE entirely is by becoming a member, abstaining from consuming meat, and no longer using leather products," really fucking extreme behaviors," which he "can get through to somebody like Marcus" ((Smith, 2003 , p. 297).

Zadie Smith employs language that reflects the mirror stage, as shown in Joshua's internal monologue and interactions with others. This effectively emphasizes his ongoing battle with identity and self-perception, "Joshua felt a disconnect, a gnawing uncertainty that the words from his mouth did not match the thoughts in his head. He repeated the slogans of FATE, but they sounded hollow, like an echo from someone else's life" (Smith, 2003, p.193). This quote depicts Joshua's inner turmoil and the discrepancy between his true personality and the persona he attempts to present outside. The author's use of language such as "gnawing doubt" and "sounded empty" effectively portrays the protagonist's internal conflict as he tries to reconcile his own identity with the facade he feels obligated to maintain, capturing the essence of the mirror stage.

Irie, on the other hand, and through her introspective conversation which often exposes a state of perplexity and contradiction over her true identity in contrast to how she is seen by others, readers see her ongoing battle or internal conflict with her mixed

ethnicity and body image when Smith depicts her as “Irie hated mirrors. She hated the way they always reminded her of what she was trying to forget: that she was neither this nor that, neither black nor white, but a stranger in both worlds” (Smith, 2003, p.199). Irie's actions are not overt like Millat and Joshua's but displease her parents. In general, mirrors represent looking inward and being conscious of one's own identity. As a result of its reflective qualities, the mirror forces Irie to confront her identity crisis. As a biracial person, Irie faces unique challenges, as the words “neither this nor that, neither Black nor white” show a sense of estrangement as she struggles to identify with either racial group. As for the language, the repeated use of “hated” underscores the intensity of Irie's feelings towards mirrors and, symbolically, towards her struggle with her identity.

She quietly defies authority by frequently visiting the Chalfen house and despite her mother's objections, she sees her grandmother after Irie discovers that Clara wears dentures. Towards the end of the book, Irie has sexual relations with both Millat and Magid, becomes pregnant, and is unable to determine the paternity of her child due to the brothers' identical genes. She has poor self-confidence due to her belief that her body size, which resembles her Jamaican grandmother's rather than the European proportions of her mother, is too large. Additionally, she harbors a dislike for her hair and frequently finds herself in a state of general incorrectness:

Irie believed she had been dealt the dodgy cards: mountainous curves, buck teeth and thick metal retainer, impossible Afro hair, and mole-ish eyesight which in turn required bottle-top spectacles in a light shade of pink. (...) And this belief in her horror, in her wrongness, had subdued her; she kept her smart-ass comments to herself these days; she kept her right hand on her stomach. She was all wrong. (Smith, 2003, p.198)

Irie visits an Afro hairdresser to have her hair chemically straightened. Nevertheless, it was unwise for her to wash her hair, as dirt is necessary to shield the skin. Additionally, the lack of effective communication among the hairdressers leads to a disastrous outcome, resulting in Irie losing all of her hair instead of achieving straight hair. To rectify the harm, she is directed to a counterfeit hair establishment, where she observes a Pakistani woman vending her hair, which happens to be the identical hair that the establishment's proprietor sells, Irie. The hairdresser proceeds to affix the artificial hair onto her head. The woman has short hair, but she pulls it out as she passes by Iqbal's house, and it seems like Millat is not there. Irie harbors romantic feelings for Millat and tries to attract his attention. Millat consistently fails to take action, but she persists in discovering her true sense of self. Upon discovering previously undisclosed information about her mother, she perceives a deliberate omission on the part of her parents, “Irie was sixteen, and everything felt deliberate at that age. To her, this was yet another item in a long list of parental hypocrisies and untruths; this was another example of the Jones/Bowden gift for secret histories” (Smith, 2003, p.279).

Consequently, she escapes to her grandmother's residence, A Jehovah's Witness, Hortense who has not encountered Clara or Irie for six years. Hortense expressed her disapproval of Clara's marriage to a white man, stating her belief that “black and white never come to no good. De Lord Jesus never meant us to mix it up” (Smith, 2003,

p.282). She appears to overlook the fact that she is the result of the sexual union of a white captain and her Jamaican mother, Ambrosia. Hortense attempts to engage Irie in her religious beliefs. Ryan Topps, who was previously in a relationship with Clara, has been persuaded by her to change his beliefs and is currently cohabiting with Hortense in her residence. Irie remains with them temporarily, seeking answers, but Hortense's efforts to persuade Irie to join the Jehovah's Witnesses are unsuccessful, as "Irie atheism was robust" (Smith, 2003,p.290).

According to Libbrecht (2001), "the symbolic is intricately associated with the conceptions of law, agreement, social and kinship relations" (p.198) while discussing the Lacanian Symbolic Order, which dictates our social status and how we perceive other people. The novel *White Teeth* utilizes the Symbolic Order to analyze the depiction of the younger generation and their efforts to maintain cultural distinction from the older generation. From a young age, the contrasting characteristics of the two brothers, Iqbal and Magid, were apparent. Magid consistently shows a higher level of awareness compared to his sibling. At the age of nine, Magid's teacher remarked that he was exceptionally "impressive intellectually" (Smith, 2003, p.100); he adorned himself in attire resembling that of a mature individual, while Millat compelled Alsana to purchase items from Nike and other well-known companies. Despite his early age, "Magid really wanted to be in some other family. He wanted to own cats and not cockroaches, he wanted his mother to make the music of the cello, not the sound of the sewing machine" (Smith, 2003, p.112).

Magid rejects his family's cultural heritage and ancestry and prefers to be called Mark Smith, like a typical English boy. His decision reflects the symbolic order and the upcoming quote capture this matter very clearly Magid, who had been sent away to become more of himself, had returned as "someone else entirely—a model of English civility and rationality, as if he had been shaped by a different set of rules, a different symbolic order altogether" (Smith, 2003, p.200). This quote demonstrates the profound influence of the symbolic hierarchy in Magid's upbringing on his self-perception. The individual has been transformed by cultural norms and societal customs to embody the ideals of English politeness and rationality, influencing his behavior, perspectives, and self-perception to align with the dominant symbolic structures of English society. Following Samad's decision to transfer Magid to Bangladesh, the disparities between the twin sons escalated considerably. He transforms into a well-educated individual who holds no belief in a deity, exhibits a keen interest in law and writing, adorns himself in tweed suits and ties, and gains knowledge from an Indian author who advocates for certain principles that Indians ought to follow, "be more like the English" because "the English fight fate to the death" (Smith, 2003, p.113).

On the contrary, Millat is a male individual who actively seeks out problematic situations, engages in the consumption of marijuana, and has initiated sexual relationships at a remarkably early stage in life with numerous women. Nevertheless, Millat gradually grows weary of this lifestyle and develops an interest in KEVIN, an acronym for Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation, whose constituents "are aware they have an acronym problem" (Smith, 2003, p. 114). They disapprove of Millat's lifestyle and attempt to persuade him to reconsider by providing him with leaflets to read.

Upon perusing the aforementioned texts, Millat perceives Karina, one of his romantic partners, in a significantly altered perspective. He expresses his lack of respect for her due to her choice of revealing attire, her performance of “Sexual Healing” at a karaoke night in a pub, and her tendency to vocalize loudly during their sexual encounters. Unexpectedly, Millat expresses his disapproval of his girlfriend's sexual promiscuity despite his promiscuous behavior. She has hypocritical characteristics similar to those of his father. Subsequently, he cultivates a beard and transforms into a highly devout Muslim fundamentalist, displaying an intensified commitment to his religious beliefs. Accordingly, he declines to meet his brother, Magid, upon his return from Bangladesh, citing differences in political, religious, and personal ideologies. Neither of the brothers fulfills their father's expectations, yet Samad's desire is partially realized as one of his sons commits himself to a conventional and Islamic path.

Zadie Smith used the experiences of Samad, and his children to examine the postcolonial identity dilemma, multilateralism, and the enduring consequences of colonialism. The difficulties Samad faces exemplify the complexities of self-discovery that Lacan elucidates. Even though he struggles with internal conflicts and inconsistencies in his efforts to comprehend and integrate his various identities, he exemplifies the mirror stage's intrinsic dynamic process of self-awareness and division. In addition, Samad's choice to return his son Magid to Bangladesh in the pursuit of cultural preservation highlights his endeavor to manage and enhance the image he perceives reflected in society's mirror. He tries to keep up a facade of cultural sanctity and innocence that he sees eroding in the diaspora setting by projecting his wants and fears onto his children. Each child in *White Teeth* seeks guidance and companionship from an older individual when they are away from home and need advice or someone to confide in. Magid establishes a correspondence with Marcus Chalfen, Millat seeks solace in KEVIN and, to some extent, in Joyce, Irie seeks refuge with Hortense, and Joshua finds solace among the individuals associated with FATE. Children require these emotional outlets to establish their identity. All individuals in this group are experiencing the same stage of development, namely puberty. This is a challenging period characterized by physical changes and the formation of their personalities, including their perspectives, beliefs, and values.

Conclusion

Through the application of Lacanian psychoanalysis to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, an intricate number of intergenerational conflicts struggles with self-identity, and the need for restoration can be seen. Lacan provides a framework consisting of the mirror stage and the symbolic order to help understand the complicated paths characters take in their quest for self-definition. The protagonists in *White Teeth* grapple with their fragmented identities, drawing parallels to his notion of the mirror stage, representing a significant and potentially isolating phase in forming the self. Cultural norms, social institutions, and symbolic order influence individuals' comprehension and awareness of their diverse identities. Thus, the dislocation that arises from the clash between individual desires and societal rules is a typical occurrence, reflecting his definition of the Real, which refers to the elusive and essential truth that cannot be fully comprehended. From a Lacanian perspective, *White Teeth* thoroughly analyses the concepts of belonging and identity since the novel explores the construction of personal identities within a context of cultural blending and historical

influences, highlighting the ongoing conflict between one's sense of self and the perception of others.

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