



BROKEN BONDS AND FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES: A STUDY OF CHILD TRAUMA AND PARENTAL ATTACHMENT IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

Abirami C

Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of English, Vellalar College for Women(Autonomous), Thindal, Erode – 638012

Dr. S. Sumathi

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Vellalar College for Women(Autonomous), Thindal, Erode – 638012

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the intricate connection between parental attachment and the psychological trauma experienced by children in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Based on John Bowlby's Attachment Theory and its later interpretations by Jeremy Holmes, Kundu and Tutoo, and Mussen, this paper discusses how the absence of emotional bonding between parents and children leads to behavioral and emotional instability. Through the novel's characters such as Smith, it portrays the generational impact of broken attachments and negligent parenting. The paper reveals that the absence of parental care produces anxiety, identity conflict, and emotional alienation, while secure attachment fosters stability and self-confidence. Ultimately, Smith's depiction of fractured family structures reflects the psychological cost of displacement and modern multicultural existence, emphasizing that love, empathy, and care are vital for both personal and societal well-being.

KEYWORDS : John Bowlby, Emotional Bonding, Parent-Child Relationship, *White Teeth*, Attachment Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* offers a vivid portrayal of London's multicultural landscape, where issues of race, class, migration, and identity converge. Beneath its humor and cultural complexity, the novel also serves as a profound psychological study of parent-child relationships and the effects of broken attachments. Many of Smith's characters like Hortense, Clara, Irie, Magid, and Millat are shown to suffer from emotional neglect and insecure bonding, leading to various forms of trauma, confusion, and rebellion. The narrative interweaves generational conflicts and cultural displacement with the intimate psychological wounds of the family.

John Bowlby's Attachment Theory provides a powerful lens for understanding these emotional ruptures. Bowlby's research, developed through his work at the Tavistock Clinic in the mid-twentieth century, emphasized that a child's emotional health depends on a secure relationship with a primary caregiver. In *White Teeth*, the repeated patterns of parental negligence, separation, and misunderstanding dramatize Bowlby's theories, revealing how the lack of emotional support destabilizes identity and perpetuates trauma across generations.

Theoretical Framework: Bowlby's Attachment Theory

John Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst, proposed that the emotional bonds formed between a child and a caregiver profoundly influence the individual's psychological development. In *Attachment and Loss*, Bowlby defined attachment as a primary motivational system, asserting that proximity to a loved one provides security and comfort, while separation induces distress and anxiety (Holmes 63). He argued that early emotional deprivation leads to long-term behavioral and emotional disorders, including depression, aggression, and delinquency. Jeremy Holmes, in *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory*, summarizes that Bowlby's contribution lies in connecting psychoanalytic insights with empirical observation: "Children deprived of maternal care, especially if raised in institutions from under the age of seven, may be seriously affected in their physical, intellectual, emotional and social development" (Holmes 39). Similarly, Kundu and Tutoo emphasize that child study is essential because it "draws upon many disciplines in an attempt to understand physical, mental, emotional, and social development" (Kundu and Tutoo 21). Attachment theory identifies two fundamental types of bonding - secure and insecure. A secure attachment fosters confidence, resilience, and emotional balance, while insecure attachment produces

anxiety, avoidance, or dependency. These patterns, formed in early childhood, persist into adulthood and determine how individuals perceive relationships and self-worth. Smith's *White Teeth* vividly dramatizes these psychological dynamics through her multigenerational immigrant families.

Trauma of Children and Parental Attachment in *White Teeth*

The novel begins with the story of Hortense Bowden, whose trauma originates even before her birth. Her mother, Ambrosia, a poor Jamaican woman, is sexually assaulted by Captain Charlie Durham, a white Englishman. The violence of this act and the absence of paternal care shape Hortense's worldview. She grows up in a context of racial subjugation and emotional deprivation, developing a deep mistrust of men and of whiteness itself. As Smith writes, Hortense's faith becomes a substitute for affection. She strictly adheres to the religious teachings embraced by Ambrosia, which ultimately isolates her from others. Bowlby observes that individuals raised in "unhappy or disrupted homes are more likely to have illegitimate children, become teenage mothers, and form unstable relationships" (Holmes 51). Hortense's rigidity and inability to nurture emotional intimacy with her daughter Clara illustrate the transgenerational repetition of emotional trauma. Her moral strictness is a defense mechanism against her own early wounds, reproducing the same emotional coldness she once suffered. Clara, Hortense's daughter, inherits her mother's fractured emotional world. The religious fanaticism that guided Hortense's life becomes oppressive for Clara, who experiences it as a denial of love. The forced imposition of belief creates resentment, leading Clara to sever ties with her mother and seek freedom through her marriage to Archie Jones. Yet this relationship, too, is devoid of emotional depth. Clara becomes a mother without truly embracing motherhood, perpetuating the same emotional distance she experienced as a child. According to Bowlby, "the child who experiences rejection or neglect from parents tends to develop anxiety and emotional instability" (Bowlby 62). Clara's indifference toward Irie mirrors this dynamic; she offers material stability but not emotional warmth. Her inability to connect with her own mother prevents her from forming a secure bond with her daughter, demonstrating how unhealed trauma becomes cyclical.

Irie Jones, the daughter of Clara and Archie, represents the novel's most poignant depiction of emotional confusion. Growing up in a racially mixed and culturally hybrid family, Irie struggles with both her physical appearance and her sense of belonging. Smith writes, "At fifteen, Irie Jones looked

very big. The girl had weight; big hips, big thighs, big teeth" (Smith 265). Irie's insecurity about her body and racial identity is compounded by the absence of affectionate parenting. Neither Clara nor Archie provides her with emotional validation, leaving her vulnerable to external influences. Irie's infatuation with Millat Iqbal, a charismatic but emotionally unstable boy becomes a symptom of her longing for attachment. Her physical involvement with him, followed by emotional rejection, deepens her internal void. Irie's later pursuit of education and independence can be read as an unconscious attempt to construct the stability she never received at home. Her journey toward self-knowledge symbolizes the struggle of postcolonial children to reconcile personal identity with fractured familial and cultural histories.

The twin brothers Magid and Millat Iqbal epitomize the destructive consequences of parental separation and divided cultural identity. Their father, Samad Iqbal, obsessed with religion and colonial memory, sends Magid to Bangladesh in the hope of preserving their Muslim heritage. This act, intended as moral instruction, becomes an emotional betrayal. Magid and Millat grow up apart, embodying opposing identities where Magid the rationalist, Millat the rebel. Both, however, suffer from the same lack of affection and coherence. Bowlby asserts that "separation from the mother-figure during early childhood can result in delinquency or neurosis" (Bowlby 71). Magid's detachment and intellectual arrogance mask an inner void, while Millat's aggression and indulgence in smoking, drugs, and gang life stem from emotional abandonment. Smith describes him as "a rude boy, a badman, at the age of twelve—the BADDEST" (Smith 218). Holmes further explains that aggression is "a major component of the initial response to threatened separation" (Bowlby 108). Millat's defiance thus becomes an unconscious protest against parental neglect and cultural confusion. The twins' trauma culminates in their involvement in extremist movements and moral conflict, illustrating how insecure attachment can lead to social alienation. Their mother, Alsana, though caring in her own way, is overshadowed by Samad's patriarchal control, leaving both children emotionally unsupported. Smith uses the Iqbal family to dramatize how parental decisions, shaped by ideology rather than empathy, perpetuate instability and rebellion in the next generation.

Joshua Chalfen: A Model of Secure Attachment and Stability

In contrast to the fragmented families of the Bowdens and Iqbals, Joshua Chalfen represents the rare instance of secure attachment in *White Teeth*. Raised by Marcus and Joyce Chalfen in an intellectually stimulating and emotionally responsive household, Joshua benefits from the consistency and care his peers lack. His parents "challenged anyone to show her a happier family, a more Chalfenist family than theirs" (Smith 314). Joshua's empathy and moral clarity, contrasted with Millat's aggression and Irie's confusion, illustrate the long-term benefits of positive parenting. He demonstrates that emotional availability and encouragement cultivate resilience, ethical awareness, and self-esteem. In this sense, Joshua's character serves as both a literary and psychological counterpoint to the pervasive insecurity in the novel.

CONCLUSION

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* portrays the modern multicultural family not only as a site of cultural hybridity but also as a terrain of psychological struggle. Through the lens of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory, the novel reveals how early emotional deprivation shapes identity, behavior, and social relationships. Hortense's inherited trauma, Clara's detachment, Irie's longing, and the Iqbal twins' rebellion all stem from the failure of parental care. Only Joshua Chalfen, nurtured within a secure familial environment, achieves a sense of balance and purpose. Smith's narrative underscores

that parental love and emotional stability are foundational to moral and psychological development. Insecure attachments - born of migration, religious rigidity, or generational misunderstanding produce not only personal anguish but also social fragmentation. By integrating Bowlby's psychological insights with her depiction of postcolonial families, Smith exposes the deep emotional costs of displacement and neglect. *White Teeth* thus becomes both a literary exploration and a psychological case study of how fractured bonds shape fragmented selves, urging readers to recognize the healing power of empathy, care, and connection.

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