

**Revisiting Multiculturalism in Zadie Smith's Selected Essays**

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**Abstract**

Cultural diversity has long been present in the societies. In modern times, societies remain culturally diverse, with most nation states having a mixture of people from different races, linguistic backgrounds, religious affiliations and so forth. Contemporary sociologists, political theorists and philosophers have defined the term multiculturalism as a phenomenon of the coexistence of different cultures in the same geographical space. In view of this, multiculturalism refers to the coexistence of different cultures. It is a society in which there exist numerous distinct ethnic and cultural groups seen to be politically relevant. However, past few decades are marked by the rising demand of cultural homogenisation (on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, religion etc.). Therefore, the aim of the present research paper is to deal with the multidimensional voice of multiculturalism in the context of Zadie Smith's essay collection *Feel Free: Essays*. Smith, an English novelist and essayist, gives a powerful critique of illusionary singular identities and cultural vandalism in her essays.

**Key words:** Multiculturalism, Cultural Vandalism, Political Consciousness, Singular Identity

The people who ask me about the 'failure of multiculturalism' mean to suggest that not only has a political ideology failed but that human beings themselves have changed and are now fundamentally incapable of living peacefully together despite their many differences. (*Feel Free* 41)

Herein, Zadie Smith ponders over the state of modern culture and political consciousness working tirelessly to homogenise societies and states. Along with political ideologies, the common man also plays a crucial role to squeeze the ethno-cultural diversities in the present-day world. The past few decades are marked by the rising demand of cultural homogenisation

on the basis of singular identities. Therefore, Smith powerfully advocates the idea of polyphonic societies and cultures where diverse population with a medley of voices and points of view lives together in harmony. In view of this, the present research paper intends to analyse the voice of multiculturalism in Zadie Smith's essay collection in the context of the relevance of polyphonic and heterogeneous groups in contemporary world and the basic challenge to cultural diversity and plurality. It primarily delineates the myriad intersections of literary, cultural and political orientations in a society as also how these intersections play a major role in the formation of national identity, public institutions and state.

Zadie Smith, an eminent British author, appeared on literary scene at the turn of century with the publication of her debut novel *White Teeth* in 2000. This was followed by four novels, namely, *The Autograph Man* (2002), *On Beauty* (2005), *NW* (2012), *Swing Time* (2016) and one short-story collection, *Grand Union: Stories* (2009). Smith has written three collection of essays entitled *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (2009), *Feel Free: Essays* (2018) and *Intimations* (2020). She is currently tenured professor in the Creative Writing faculty of New York University. The selected essay collection *Feel Free: Essays* (2018) for the purpose of study in the present research paper has been written by Smith during the time span of eight years from 2009 to 2017. Smith has borrowed the title from her husband Nick Laird who has also published a collection of poems under the same name. The title 'Feel Free' appropriately reminds of freedom which the author believes is lost. She claims that a modern being should be free from the closed singular identities which have been formed on the basis of race, gender, religion, nation, class, language and ethnicity. As an essential voice of harmonious pluralistic world, Smith dreams of a multicultural space for all people on earth.

Topically wide-ranging, but highly contemporary in voice (social, political and cultural awareness) the selected collection is divided into five parts. The essays collected in the text disseminate the issues, anxieties and desires that characterize the early twenty-first century. It deals with the themes like climate change, privatisation, rising demand of racially homogeneous societies and states, racial and biracial identities, cultural vandalism, connection between dancing and writing, the nature of joy and the confusions of personhood in the age of social media. Smith further elaborates the neo-liberal economic and political deformations in England ranging from the demolition of public library for the construction of

private luxury flats to Brexit (withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union). Moreover, multiculturalism has always remained central concern of her essays. Precisely, she brings to the fore various aspects of modern culture and political setup in order to give fresh insights to the prevalent cultural discourse.

Smith as an essayist offers a critique of various recent events occurring in contemporary culture and politics. Moreover, the idea of multiculturalism predominates in many of her essays. The issues of identity (racial identity, linguistic identity, religious identity, gender identity, cultural identity and social media identity), individual and collective existential crisis, concept of borders and fences (both concrete and mental) and mass migration are closely associated with the concept of multiculturalism in her thought provoking nonfiction. The essayist ruminates over this broad ranging association in a subtle way. Additionally, the presence of autobiographical element in her essays contributes to the level of elaborating the idea of multiculturalism as a humanitarian way of life for a common individual. She becomes nostalgic over her childhood spent in the multicultural rural England,

Of course, as a child I did not realize that the life I was living was considered in any way provisional or experimental by others: I thought it was just life. And when I wrote a novel about the London I grew up in, I further did not realize that by describing an environment in which people from different places lived relatively peaceably side by side, I was ‘championing’ a situation that was in fact on trial and whose conditions could suddenly be revoked.  
(*Feel Free* 36)

The post World War Second scenarios—racism, holocaust, ethnic cleansing—have popularised this term. In the wake of neo-imperial western tendencies of nationalism and identity politics, the cultural homogenisation is emerging as a constant threat to multicultural societies. On the one hand, many socio-political and economic forces such as globalisation, liberalism, privatisation and democracy claim to promote the idea of multicultural or pluralistic societies; on the other hand there are many nation-state ideologies which have been proven a threat and danger to create an ethnical diverse environment. They show their full faith in establishing a state or society on the basis of singular identities. Smith defines the

situation appropriately “Racial homogeneity is no guarantor of peace, any more than racial heterogeneity is fated to fail” (*Feel Free* 37). All this leads to chaos in the contemporary world. Many sinister forces of hatred promote violence and terrorism all across the globe. Smith as a champion of multiculturalism intends to form “a descent and tolerant society” (*Feel Free* 40). Though, out of despair, she herself calls her essays “the product of the bygone world”, yet this collection gives many optimistic and reassuring insights into upcoming chaotic world. In the similar sense, the well-known critic and social theorist Ashis Nandy says that if our cultures are different our first instinct is not to say that we are different but all humans are the same. Thus, it leads to integration without assimilation.

Societies with cultural diversity have existed since ages. In modern times, societies and states are culturally diverse, having a mixture of people and citizens from different races, linguistic backgrounds, religious affiliations and so forth. Contemporary political theorists, sociologists and philosophers have simply defined the term multiculturalism as the harmonious coexistence of different cultures in same geographical area. It is a place where exist numerous distinct ethnic and cultural groups seen to be politically relevant. However, past few decades are marked by the rising demand of cultural homogenisation (on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, religion etc.) and cultural vandalism as a threat to multiculturalism. As Smith rightly points out, in her essay “Brother from Another Mother”, “There is no point to reason with people who can’t appreciate the differences in others” (*Feel Free* 82). She supports the idea of brotherhood among the global chaotic atmosphere.

The notion of multiculturalism has become important in contemporary times to promote peace all across the world. Multiculturalism is a celebration of the existence of each unique identity among culturally diverse groups formed on the basis of ethnic, religious and national differences. It promotes racial and ethnic harmony and cross-culture understanding and discourages hatred, discrimination and violence. Therefore, the focus on multiculturalism is seen as a counterforce to a number of political and social problems like war, terrorism, ethnic conflicts and communalism. Ali Rattansi defines the term in *Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction*,

It has involved the creation of structures in which the incorporation of immigrants and ethnic minorities occurs fairly and with the recognition that

the desire of immigrants and minorities to retain aspects of their cultures is reasonable, and that cultural diversity is itself desirable and benefits the nation in variety of ways. (59)

Smith's essays are critique to the inherent ideals of an exclusive and singular 'British' identity and the widely varying issues that have arisen from colonisation. Smith raises questions about the hypocritical statements by proud Londoners speaking of "their multicultural, outward-looking city" which are all together different from the reality. Though Britain has embedded multiple cultures and communities in itself, yet there have been created walls of hatred and differences. The reality of world is marked by fences, borders, and differences among modern beings (Londoners). Smith rightly says,

Wealthy London, whether red or blue, has always been able to pick and choose the nature of its multicultural and cross-class relations, to lecture the rest of the country on its narrow-mindedness while simultaneously fencing off its own discreet advantages. (*Feel Free* 31)

In her essay titled *Fences: A Brexit Diary*, Smith explores the phenomenon of physical and imagined borders in multicultural communities. She takes an old British school as a symbol in her mind. She says,

I valued this little school especially, symbolically, as a mixed institution in which the children of the relatively rich and the poor, the children of Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Protestants, Catholics, atheists, Marxists and the kind of people who are religious about Pilates, are all educated together in the same rooms, play together in the same playground, speaks about their faiths—or lack of them—to each other, while I walk by and often look in, and thus receive a vital symbolic reassurance that the world of my own childhood has not yet completely disappeared. (*Feel Free* 22)

Alexander C. Dienner and Joshua Hagen challenge the general perception of borders as passive lines on a map, exposing them instead to be integral forces in the political, social, economic and environmental processes that shape our lives.

The Brexit withdrawal agreement of the United Kingdom of Great Britain is one of the major acts against the ideals of multiculturalism. Smith considers Brexit vote a coffin on diversity. Along with the description of physical borders created at many places in England to stop intercultural activities, the essayist explains the mental walls created among people. She also elucidates how the modern states have put on stake the ideals of brotherhood, secularism and peace just to establish the empires of singular communities. In this way, she says,

. . . I noticed the fence. For this Victorian school, which, for a hundred years, has found cast-iron railings sufficient to mark its periphery, had now added what looked like tall bamboo slats between the bars, as well as six feet of plant life climbing these slats, blocking the view of the playground from the street and therefore of the children as they played. (*Feel Free* 21)

In the end, we can say that Smith's essays scrutinise various facets of modern culture: the significant role of art and language in shaping cultural and political consciousness; reappraisal of the pre-existing phenomenon of race, class, gender and ethnically marginalised identities; complex and questionable associations between economic forces of global capitalism and politically and politically influenced power structures. Thus, the present research paper recognizes all the dimensions of the voice multiculturalism.

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