

From the Outside Looking in:

Clashing Perceptions of Racial and Gender Identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, *On Beauty*,
and *Swing Time*



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Abstract

This thesis discusses issues of gender and racial identity in the novels *White Teeth*, *On Beauty*, and *Swing Time* by Zadie Smith. It offers an analysis of female main characters from these novels using intersectionality theory with a focus on Judith Butler's performativity theory and Homi Bhabha's theory on postcolonialism. The focal point of this thesis is the ways in which internal perceptions of gender and racial identity differ from culturally determined perceptions of these topics as perceived in the novels. It is argued in this thesis that culturally determined perceptions of gender and racial identity are often influenced by stereotypes existing in early 21st-century Western society, and that these stereotypes and perceptions can easily be internalised by (young) women. It also argues that this internalisation is not absolute, and can be lessened or even discarded.

Keywords

Identity, gender, race, stereotypes, intersectionality, performativity, hybridity, mimicry, Other

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	5
Chapter 1: Theory and Methodology	9
Chapter 2: <i>White Teeth</i>	13
Chapter 3: <i>On Beauty</i>	19
Chapter 4: <i>Swing Time</i>	25
Conclusion	31
Works Cited	34

Introduction

In her essay collection *Changing My Mind*, Zadie Smith examines the concept of hybridity by imagining "Dream City", a place where there is no such thing as a unified identity. Instead, it is a place where your identity changes based on the people you converse with; for some "you're not black enough" while for the other you are "insufficiently white" (139). In Dream City, "a wise man says 'I' cautiously, because *I* feels like too straight and singular a phoneme to represent the true multiplicity of his experience" (139).

The theme of hybridity has been explored by Smith since her first novel *White Teeth* was published in 2000. The novel was instantly picked up by the press, who praised her for her portrayal of multiculturalism and "the heterogeneity of British urban society around the millennium" (Tancke 27). Smith's novels are influenced by popular culture, which "reveals much about the highly mediated identities of contemporary individuals and how they are shaped and defined in the postmodern era" (Parker 69). *White Teeth*, *On Beauty* and her latest novel *Swing Time* deal with issues prevalent in Western society in the 21st century such as multiculturalism, racism, and unattainable beauty standards.

Researchers such as Laura Moss and books such as *Reading Zadie Smith* have discussed race in Smith's novels. In addition, researchers including Elizabeth Howland and Colleen Fenno have analysed gender identity in these novels. However, the two have not been combined yet and there is next to no research done that compares multiple works by Smith. That is why this thesis answers the following question: in what ways do internal racial and gender identity of female characters in *White Teeth*, *On Beauty*, and *Swing Time* by Zadie Smith clash with the culturally determined perception of racial and gender identity portrayed in these novels? The choice to focus on women only is very consciously made; as Gayatri Spivak states in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", women of colour do not get the chance to speak for themselves; "between patriarchy and imperialism, the woman disappears" (94). The hypothesis for the thesis is that there is a palpable difference between the way in which characters perceive themselves, and the way in which they are perceived by others. I believe this difference mostly stems from prejudices about gender and racial stereotypes. This is made clear in *On Beauty*, when Kiki, describing herself as "a black woman in a headwrap, approaching with a bottle in one hand and a plate of food in the other", looks at herself from the perspective of other people, and sees "a maid in an old movie" (98). This perception is

clearly based on stereotypes in Western society. Furthermore, I assume these stereotypes will influence internal perceptions of gender and race as well.

In order to answer the research question, the thesis combines the close reading of three novels by Zadie Smith and an intersectional framework. Intersectionality theory is a reasonably recent theory and has become a major concept in multiple fields, including literary studies, gender studies, and postcolonial studies. The works of Gayatri Spivak, Colleen Fenno, and Elizabeth Howland, to name but a few, are sound examples of work done using intersectionality. Intersectionality theory stems from Black feminist theorists who did not feel fully represented by either feminist studies or ethnicity studies. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 in an article on legislation and the intersection of race and gender within this field. The idea is expounded on in the article "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis" which she wrote with Sumi Cho and Leslie McCall. In this work it is explained how one can use an intersectional approach in one's own research, and what kind of approaches there are. In my thesis the connection between race and gender is made as well: racial and gender identity cannot be looked at separately, but need to be taken into account together.

Within the umbrella term of intersectionality theory, postcolonial theory is employed to explain the concept of racial identity. In this thesis the focus lies on the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the Other discussed in *The Location of Culture*, a work written by Homi Bhabha. Homi Bhabha is an authority in the field of postcolonial studies. Academics including Philip Tew and Laura Moss have used concepts by Bhabha in their own work. Hybridity refers to the fusion of multiple cultural identities within one person or group of people, while mimicry concerns the way in which the (post)colonial Other tries to be exactly like the oppressor (Bhabha 123, 165). In order to understand gender identity better, the thesis discusses Judith Butler's performativity theory, which can also be used to explain racial identity. Gender performativity theory asserts that gender is a performance, a construct, produced by constantly repeating dominant gender norms in society (Butler, *Bodies* 12). Butler's book *Gender Trouble* explains this theory further and is also used to explain gender performativity in this thesis. Judith Butler is one of the most important gender theorists of the 20th and 21st century, causing ample academics such as Rachel Alsop and Linnell Secomb to adopt this theory and use it in their own fields. The concepts of hybridity and mimicry as well as gender performativity all centre around the idea of identity. As identity is an important concept in my research, these theories are very helpful to explore the subject further.

White Teeth, *On Beauty*, and *Swing Time* by Zadie Smith are used to analyse concepts of racial and gender identity in this thesis. Smith has written more novels, but I believe these three will answer my research question in the best way possible, as at the heart of each of these novels are questions of identity. All novels feature (female) characters struggling with stereotypical perceptions of race and gender, and the way in which the characters internalise or fight these perceptions. The novels are discussed chronologically, starting with *White Teeth* (2000), followed by *On Beauty* (2005), and ending with *Swing Time* (2016).

This thesis is relevant within the field of intersectionality studies. Even though it only takes the intersecting factors of race and gender into account, it is still an addition to a field new on the academic radar. My research will also add to the field of literary studies. Because of the recent emergence of intersectionality studies, not much work has been done on intersectionality within the literary field. There has not been a truly intersectional research on Smith's works, which is why this thesis looks at three of Zadie Smith's novels and discusses them from an intersectional perspective, hereby adding to the fields of intersectionality theory as well as literary studies.

The thesis starts with a chapter on the theoretical background and methodology of the research. Chapter one discusses intersectionality theory, as well as postcolonial theory and gender theory. Concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and the Other are explained, as well as gender performativity. Chapter two consists of an analysis of Smith's first novel *White Teeth*. Each paragraph discusses a different character. The chapter on *White Teeth* examines Irie Jones, Hortense Bowden, and Joyce Chalfen. Irie is important because she is still a young girl, and struggles with the norms society tries to impose on her. Hortense has already gone through this stage, and is much more comfortable in her own skin. Joyce is seen as the embodiment of the norm, especially by Irie, which makes it interesting to discuss Joyce as well. Chapter three discusses *On Beauty*, in which Zora Belsey, Victoria Kipps, and Kiki Belsey play an important role. Zora Belsey has high hopes for herself intellectually, and she strives to attain her goals, even though gender, competition, and race sometimes impede her. Victoria grapples with the fact that people can only see her as beautiful, and do not, or cannot look beyond that. Kiki is quite confident about her body and mind, but is very much aware of the fact that others might not be. Chapter four focuses on Smith's latest novel *Swing Time*. The thesis analyses the narrator (who is not named), Tracey, and Aimee. The narrator and Tracey are in an ongoing competition with each other, based on the fact that they are the only two black (or more accurately: mixed race) children at their estate. Later in life, their careers and life paths start to differ immensely. Aimee is a white pop star who wants to build a school

in a country in West Africa (not named), but does not actually know how to deal with a culture different from her own. In each chapter, there will be a discussion about how characters see themselves, and how this perception is influenced by culturally dominant norms in society.

Chapter 1: Theory and Methodology

In order to conduct the close readings of *White Teeth*, *On Beauty* and *Swing Time* in the light of gender and racial identity, this thesis uses intersectionality theory. The term was first used by black feminists who recognised that black women did not fully belong to either the feminist movement or the antiracism movement. White, middle class feminists excluded black women from the feminist movement, just as the antiracism movement was primarily concerned with black men and did not see the need to include women in their struggle. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Professor of Law, was the first to coin the term intersectionality in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection between Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" (1989), in which she argues that both the feminist movement as well as the antiracist movement "have treated Black women in ways that deny both the unique compoundedness of their situation and the centrality of their experiences to the larger classes of women and Blacks" (150). This is the reason why Crenshaw stresses the importance of intersection; one cannot separate the multiple identities a person inevitably consists of. Crenshaw co-wrote the article "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis" with Sumi Cho and Leslie McCall in which the term intersectionality is explained, and in addition offers a description on how to use intersectionality theory properly. They illustrate that subjects within a particular social environment are shaped by power structures. When analysing these power structures, "intersectional dynamics in social space and time" can be found (807). This is exactly what intersectionality theory does: it tries to descry the manner in which different identities are interconnected in relation to power structures in a society. Cho, McCall, and Crenshaw provide three ways in which to use intersectionality theory, of which this thesis uses the first intersectional approach as mentioned in the article; namely, it uses intersectionality to analyse a specific situation in society or a specific work, in this case three novels. As McCall states in her article "The Complexity of Intersectionality," intersectionality theory could be seen as "the most important theoretical contribution to women's studies," and at the same time very influential in other fields as well (1771). Considering the focus on racial and gender identity in this thesis, intersectionality theory is deeply important in a discussion of this subject, and is used to explore the themes of racial and gender identity in *White Teeth*, *On Beauty* and *Swing Time*.

To examine the subject of racial identity further, this thesis uses Homi Bhabha's seminal work *The Location of Culture*, written in 1994. This postcolonial work introduces important concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and the (colonial) Other. These concepts are extremely relevant when assuming that "aspects of one's identity are charged with historical meaning" (Parker 79). The manner in which race is constructed in the 21st century is very much influenced by history; more specifically, colonisation. Colonisation has been a major influence on the construction of identity for both coloniser and colonised, for example on the development of the Self/Other dichotomy. As Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, the colonial subject is seen as the Other, which "demands an articulation of forms of difference - racial and sexual" (96). There cannot be a dichotomy without crucial differences created by the dominant group. The process of Othering leads to the practice of colonial mimicry. The Other wants to belong to the dominant group of the Self (colonisers), who possesses all the benefits and privileges of belonging to this group. This longing causes the Other to try and mimic the Self. However, this never fully works; there will always be a difference, however small that difference may be. Bhabha explains this by pointing to the difference between "being English and being Anglicized;" the Anglicized are "almost the same, but not white" (128). The Other wants to live up to an ideal they can never reach, precisely because their binary opponent is in the dominant position. This inability to become a part of the desired group in its turn produces hybridity. According to Bhabha, hybridity is "a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different*" (159). At the heart of hybridity is a question of authority, because the dichotomy between the Self and the Other is no longer applicable.

Since the publication of *The Location of Culture* multiple researchers, such as Laura Moss, have updated Bhabha's concepts to reflect the workings of hybridity since 2000. Moss argues that hybridity has increasingly become part of normal, everyday life, and that hybridity should focus on "balancing integration and diversity" (11). She also states that there is a difference between (at least partially) chosen and forced hybridity, which, she argues, is shown in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (13). Moss states that Clara (black) and Archie (white) haven't chosen to be together, while Clara's grandmother Ambrosia (black) was forced (to a degree) to have a sexual relationship with Durham (white). Thus, Bhabha's original theory has been used and adapted to suit a different field, in this case the literary field.

Besides racial identity, this thesis discusses gender identity as well by using Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, as introduced in her works *Gender Trouble* (1990) and

subsequently in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Performativity implies that gender is an act one performs, instead of being inherent to a certain body. Certain gender roles and norms have been established within society, and are produced by it, making the norms seem natural, thereby reinforcing the belief in a gendered self (Butler, *Gender* 33). In her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" Butler states that gender is like a performance players as well as the audience believe in (520). She also explains that gender is "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts," which illustrates why people believe gender to be a natural thing: it has been done so many times it seems as if nature produced these identities instead of society (519). In *Bodies That Matter* performativity is further discussed. Performativity is essentially a repetition, also called reiteration, of cultural norms prevalent in society. However, these norms are so ingrained within cultures that they seem to be the normal thing to do (12). Performances do not only happen individually though, because "our gendered identities are formed from the performances of ourselves and others towards us" (Alsop et al 98). This means performativity is always a social act, keeping gender norms in place by constantly repeating them (Brady and Schirato 12). A performance can also go wrong, and "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished," which can occur "both obvious and indirect" (Butler, *Performative* 522, 528). The failure of a performance and its retributions is discussed in this thesis as well, because in all three novels main characters fail to perform their gender correctly and are told so by peers, parents, or boyfriends. This punishment and the feeling that it is justified augments the characters' discomfort with their own bodies and identities. These characters struggle with "the search for authenticity which leads to a constant restructuring of self in terms of the surrounding world, its reactions to self, and in what ways these reactions are allowed to affect self" (Howland 50-51). This is exactly what performativity means, and all aspects of the definition are discussed in this thesis.

Thus, the theories discussed above are used for the close reading of *White Teeth*, *On Beauty*, and *Swing Time* by Zadie Smith. The thesis analyses the ways in which characters perform their racial and gender identities and the reactions these expressions give rise to. Furthermore, the tremendous importance of Western beauty standards, influencing both gender and racial identity, will be discussed. Characters such as Irie in *White Teeth* and Zora in *On Beauty* particularly struggle with the issue of Western beauty standards, as they feel they do not, and cannot conform to these. Implicit in this struggle is the fact that they feel Other, because of their hybrid and not altogether Western appearances and identities. Moreover, *On Beauty* and *Swing Time* show the competition that can arise between women

and/or girls when they believe other girls perform their femininity more satisfactory. Intersectionality theory is used to analyse the intertwined entities of race and gender shaping the characters' identities, and the ways in which these influence people's perception of the main characters.

Chapter 2: *White Teeth*

When Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* was published in 2000, it received a lot of praise, reasons including "Smith's age, ethnicity and background" (Tancke 27). Remarkable enough, ethnicity and background are important themes in *White Teeth* and for this thesis as well. *White Teeth* centres around two families living in England: the Iqbals and the Joneses. Samad and Alsana Iqbal have twins, named Millat and Magid, and especially Samad has issues with adapting to English culture. That is why he sends one of his sons, Magid, back to his home country of Bangladesh, in the hope that he will come back a more religious, more polite, more Bangladeshi boy. In a strange turn of events, Magid grows into a surprisingly English teenager, while Millat becomes a radicalised Muslim. Archie Jones is married to Clara Bowden, who wanted to break free from her devotedly religious Jamaican mother Hortense, which is why she married an Englishman. They have a daughter named Irie, who feels like she does not belong in Western society and struggles with accepting her identity throughout the novel. Her school organises an after-school activity for her and Millat, which means she has to visit the Chalfen family on a regular basis, to Joyce Chalfen's (the mother of the family) enormous pleasure. In a contest between what the novel calls Chalfenism and Bowdenism Irie tries to navigate and find a place in English multicultural society. The Chalfens are a stereotypical white, middle class, English family who believe themselves to be highly liberal (Howland 46-47), whereas Bowdenism refers to Hortense's way of living, which is profoundly influenced by religion and her Jamaican roots. This chapter focuses on Irie's struggle for an authentic identity, discussing both the influence of Joyce Chalfen and Hortense Bowden on this process.

Even before Irie Jones is born, prejudices about her appearances are circulating. When Alsana Iqbal hears about the pregnancy, she asks her husband what the child will look like, "half blacky-white?" (61). Noticeable too is the conversation about the eye colour of the unborn child. Clara tells Archie there is a possibility the child will have blue eyes, which is what Archie expects will happen from that moment onwards. These examples show how Irie does not live up to the expectations family and friends have of her performance: she is not half black and half white, and her blue eyes changed to brown after two weeks (268). As a small child, Irie is a very opinionated girl and has an answer to everything. During puberty, however, this changes radically. Irie develops the idea that she is "wrong," that she is the Other in English society (268). She believes she is ugly, because she is big (in every place),

she has buck teeth, braces, glasses, an Afro, and dark skin (268). Instead of the "Jamaican hourglass" she perceives herself to be, she wishes her body to look like an English Rose: "a slender, delicate thing not made for the hot suns, a surfboard rippled by the wave" (267). Irie cannot see a reflection of herself in the mirror that is England, and feels like "a stranger in a stranger land" (266). For a brief moment Irie believes that she can see a reflection of herself when discussing Shakespearean sonnets, when Shakespeare speaks of a "dark lady," but her English teacher nips Irie's optimism in the bud by arguing that the dark lady could not possibly be black, "unless she was a slave of some kind" (272). By means of this racist remark Irie is forced back into her shell once again, believing she has no place in English society.

To overcome her feelings of "wrongness," Irie tries to assimilate to and mimic English cultural norms (268). For one, she is dieting constantly to get rid of her hourglass-shaped body, and walks around with a hand on her stomach to cover it up incessantly. Besides this relatively simple way of trying to fit in, she also takes the drastic measure of going to the hairdresser to relax her hair. In her mind, "straight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakeable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair" will help her to fulfil the beauty standards of English society (273). This obsession with hair can be seen as an issue originating from racial as well as gender insecurities. As is stated in the novel, black women spend a lot of money on their hair to try to get it straight (278). Straight hair is more like Western hair, and therefore perceived as better. This is part of the process of mimicry: to stop being regarded as the Other, the Other tries to mimic the dominant group of people in order to feel recognised as equal human beings (Bhabha 122). For black women, the issue of hair is of more concern than for black men. As is described in *White Teeth*, the male section of the hairdresser is "all laughter, all talk, all play," whereas the female section "was a deathly thing" and "a competition in agony" (275). At this particular hairdresser, a part of Irie is considered beautiful for the first time in the novel: the women love her hair, as it is "half-caste" hair, which means her hair is loosely curled. Irie still does not like it, and wants to relax it nonetheless. Because of a miscommunication however, Irie's hair comes out in great chunks, and all her hair has to be cut off. She does get a weave, and Irie feels beautiful. Ironically, she is the only person who considers her hair beautiful now. She goes to Millat's house (her love interest) in the hope of finding him there. He is not in, but his aunt Neena is. She is not exactly subtle in her disgust when she exclaims "what the fuck do you look like!" upon seeing Irie's new hair for the first time (283). Neena teaches Irie a valuable lesson:

'Look: you're a smart cookie, Irie. But you've been taught all kinds of shit. You've got to re-educate yourself. Realize your value, stop the slavish devotion, and get a life, Irie. Get a girl, get a guy, but get a life.' (284)

The scene demonstrates that Neena is aware of gender and racial stereotypes and norms in society, and is actively trying to live her life without putting too much emphasis on them. This little encouragement was just what Irie needed; after the conversation she rips out all her fake hair and is content with her short, authentic Afro hair.

Even though Irie made significant progress in accepting herself regardless of dominant perceptions of beauty, she is still searching for a substantial part of her identity halfway through the novel. One way in which she tries to find it is by associating herself with and obsessing over the Chalfens and their specific way of living (called Chalfenism by themselves). Joyce Chalfen is the maternal head of the family, and takes up the role of nurturing mother quite happily. Joyce calls herself a feminist, which in this case clearly indicates a white feminist: Joyce believes she is very liberal and open towards others, but at the same time makes racist and homophobic remarks. When Irie and Millat first meet her, she tells them they look "very exotic" and asks them where they are from. When they answer "Willesden," Joyce asks them where they are from "*originally*" (319). She does not realize that this question is a racist one, and is confused by Millat's cheeky answer. The Chalfen family do not have any friends, which means their social abilities are not as developed as one would expect from a middle class family. They say whatever they see fit, without complying with social conventions. Even though Marcus (the Chalfen father) tells Irie that she is "a big girl" on seeing her for the first time, Irie "was fascinated, enamoured after five minutes" (317,319). She deems the Chalfen way of living as the normal one, and places it in clear contrast with her own family's way of living. One of the reasons for this contrast is that the Chalfens are overwhelmingly middle class, which Irie has never been in direct contact with before (321). Joyce believes this class difference has everything to do with the cultural background of Irie; Joyce tells Irie and Millat about an experiment she did of which the result, according to her, was that immigrant parents often "just don't appreciate their children sufficiently," and goes on to argue that this result has to do with culture (325). Joyce wants to give Millat and Irie the love she believes they never received.

Irie aspires to be like the Chalfens, even though they make racist remarks such as the ones mentioned above and they even belittle her. In some way, this shows the change she has gone through. Whereas at the beginning of the novel she took every insult and remark at

heart, she is now strong enough to endure them. For example, on one of the visits she pays to the Chalfens, Marcus calls her a "big brown goddess." The only reaction he receives from Irie, is "Marcus, chill out, man..." (329). Immediately after this, Marcus starts talking about Irie's weight. Joyce speaks for Irie saying Irie is very conscious about her weight, but Irie replies in the negative. She has moved on from desiring an English-looking body to desiring a family that conforms to English cultural norms. In terms of her development this means her focus is no longer on her own identity as such, but on her family's identity. The problems regarding her own identity are far from over, however. Irie notices that the more she performs Chalfenism, and the more she is successful at school, the more Joyce's interest in her seems to wane (334). As a result, she realises her performance of a "normal" English girl is of no use, but at the same time she cannot cope with the reality of her own family. She hits another identity crisis, and makes the choice of living with her grandmother Hortense for some time.

Throughout the novel, Hortense Bowden is described as a very strong, stubborn, religious woman. Even though she speaks in a slightly different (more posh) manner whenever she talks to white women or pastors (40), she also believes she is not in the least inferior to them. She tells Mr Topps, the religious ex-boyfriend of her daughter Clara, that "sometime I tink I could be one of dem dat teach, you know? Even though I am a woman..." (389). Hortense tries to instigate the same kind of self-confidence in Irie. She informs Irie that the women of her family have always been forced to be educated by others, whereas Hortense states that "dat would be *my* job! I'd make my own laws an' I wouldn't be wanting anybody else's opinions" (409). She tells Irie she is strong-willed in a positive way, which is new to Irie.

Irie is very intrigued by Hortense's way of living. Hortense performs her gender regardless of societal norms: she is big and has Afro hair but does not care about that at all. This means she is also not interested (for the most part) in mimicking English beauty norms and trying to get rid of her position as the Other. She is content with her own identity. Furthermore she is extremely religious, and interprets the Bible in ways perceived as absurd by Irie (396). Her mother Clara is afraid Irie will be indoctrinated by Hortense's faith (she is a staunch Jehovah's Witness), but Irie is a steadfast atheist and is not influenced by her grandmother's religion at all. Irie recognises the importance of her stay at Hortense's for her own identity, and states she is "as curious as everyone else to see what kind of Irie would emerge" (399). While the Chalfens made Irie believe she did not belong, Hortense's stories about Jamaican culture do make Irie feel as if she belongs. Jamaica becomes Irie's new obsession: she does not care about England and its norms and practices anymore, but is

completely engrossed by her Jamaican roots. Her grandmother even promises her they will go to Jamaica together when the world ends in seven year's time (according to calculations done by Jehovah's Witnesses). Hortense is the person in the novel who ensures Irie is at peace with her Jamaican background. Whereas the Chalfens made her feel her Jamaican heritage was of lesser importance and of lesser social status than her English heritage, Hortense teaches Irie that her Jamaican ancestry is equally as important.

In conclusion, Irie begins to accept that she has a hybrid identity towards the end of the novel. Both her English and her Jamaican ancestry are important to her as a human being. She has dismantled "the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside" (Bhabha 165). She is both self and other, and creates a whole new identity because of this. It is in clear contrast with her behaviour at the beginning of the novel. In order to feel accepted, Irie has tried to perform her race and gender in ways that are socially accepted. She does not want to be one of the "BIG-ASS BITCHEZ" one of her classmates believes her to be, just because she is black (272). At this moment her classmates (as does her teacher) have prejudices about Irie because of her skin colour, and in order to refute these prejudices Irie wants to be as Western as possible, and does this by changing her performance. She does not speak up in class, or anywhere for that matter, anymore. Additionally, because of the gender and racial norms she notices in the media, she feels as if the Western woman (or as she calls it, English Rose) is slender and white, both of which she is not. To hide her stomach, she places a hand on top of it at all times. Furthermore, she attempts to make herself look more English by trying to relax her hair, thus making it straight, long, and flickable, like Western hair. Even though "the practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice," this does not mean that there is no room for divergence at all (Butler *Bodies* 231). Irie undergoes a significant change when she recognises that the femininity she has been trying to perform is in clear contrast with her body and character: she does not care about the looks of her hair anymore, and keeps it short and natural. She is also more self-confident and stops walking around with one hand on her stomach. She does not experience herself as the Other any longer, does not try to mimic Western beauty standards, and fully embraces and performs her hybridity. At this point, she "reflects the everyday nature of hybridity in the present" (Moss 13). She even declares that she is looking forward to "when roots don't matter anymore because they can't because they mustn't because they're too long and they're too tortuous and they're just buried too damn deep" (527). As a last result of her transformation, Irie even starts to speak up again. This is apparent when she has an angry outburst on the bus. She tells her family (as well as the Iqbal family) that some families are "normal" and do not live in the

past. They do not have "this huge battle between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be" (515). Irie has finally learned how to feel comfortable with her own identity, regardless of what society might think of her. Irie's struggles with her gender and racial identity are at the heart of *White Teeth*, which is also the case in *On Beauty* and *Swing Time*.

Chapter 3: *On Beauty*

Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty*, which focuses on two families immersed in academic life in the United States, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2005. As the last chapter stated, Smith was very much placed into the spotlights by her debut novel *White Teeth*. There has been profound "fascination with Smith's appearance, even within the literary world," which is why it is striking one of the main themes in *On Beauty* focuses on beauty ideals (Fenno 179). The narrative follows the Kipps and the Belsey family, whose respective patriarchs Monty and Howard have been in an academic feud for years. Monty's family values are based around the Christian faith and are very conservative, while Howard's family is raised to be liberal and analytic. As the title of the novel suggests, beauty plays an important role throughout the narrative. Beauty in the novel refers to art and life in general, as well as to individual people. Cultural norms dictate what is counted as beautiful, which can be easily internalised and can damage one's feelings about the worth of one's identity (Fenno 180). This happens to Zora Belsey (daughter of Howard and Kiki) as well as to Victoria Kipps (daughter of Monty and Carlene). They are both, in distinctive manners, highly influenced by the way society imposes norms on girls and women. Kiki, on the other hand, is very much aware of these norms, and is also conscious of the additional problems black women face. As a result, she tries not to conform to these restrictive ideals (Fenno 183). Thus, this chapter will discuss the ways in which Kiki's identity is fully developed and grounded in her own beliefs, whereas Victoria's and Zora's identity is greatly affected by Western beauty standards concerning gender and race.

Kiki Belsey is a black, middle-aged mother of three, who is very much aware of the power structures in 21st-century Western society. Claire, a colleague of Howard and also his mistress for a short period of time, notices this awareness as well: Kiki was "proof that a new kind of woman had come into the world as promised" (227). This "new woman" is not obsessed with starving herself, maybe even cutting herself, or reading magazines that clearly show misogynistic signs (226). Kiki Belsey owns her identity as a woman, specifically a black woman. This understanding of her identity is made extremely clear by the market scene, in which she wants to buy some jewellery at a black man's stall:

She had only this brief glimpse of him, but Kiki suspected already that this would be one of those familiar exchanges in which her enormous spellbinding

bosom would play a subtle (or not so subtle, depending on the person) silent third role in the conversation. Women bent away from it out of politeness; men - more comfortably for Kiki - sometimes remarked on it in order to get on and over it, as it were. (47)

Not only does Kiki notice the gender differences in regards to her breasts, she also notices that a big bosom gives off different signals depending on whether a woman is white or black. For white women, big breasts mostly refers to sexuality, but for her, a black woman, it could mean "sassy, sisterly, predatory, motherly, threatening, comforting" (47). She ends this line of thought by declaring that her body has formed her personality, which is why she accepts it the way it is. Even though Kiki refuses to let cultural norms about beauty take over her life, her awareness of them prompts her to perform her gender and race, "based on these expectations of appearance" (Fenno 194). Kiki plays with people's perceptions of her as a black woman, for example when she moves "her head from side to side in a manner she understood white people enjoyed" (52). Nonetheless, Kiki does not appreciate and play with every perception people have of a black woman; when she is having her dinner party, she walks around with a headwrap and some food and drinks in her hands, which makes her believe other people will look at her as "a maid in an old movie" (98). This kind of perception does make Kiki feel uncomfortable and aware of her identity.

Kiki's awareness of her own body and the stereotypes clinging to these perceptions have made her a feminist: throughout the novel she condemns the way in which the academic men of Wellington interact with their wives and other women. She has an angry outburst when Erskine (a friend of Howard) speaks badly about his wife, and states that "all these men ever do is talk about their wives with contempt" (284). She is not only aware of the problems faced by her own generation, but also of those faced by the generation of her daughter. However hard she tries to ban all sorts of media and makeup from her house, her daughter Zora is still enormously influenced by cultural norms. The "hatred of women and their bodies" was everywhere, and "there was no way to control it" (197,198). So, even though Kiki is a valuable example of someone valuing her own body and broadening the beauty standards so they fit her own body, the younger generation, including Zora, try to fulfil "a standard of beauty according to other's perceptions" (Fenno 195). This is one of the reasons why Zora and Victoria are important for this thesis.

Zora Belsey is the only daughter of Howard and Kiki, and starts her first year of university at the beginning of *On Beauty*. Zora is an extremely smart woman, an overachiever,

and idolises the academic lifestyle. On her first day of class, she realises she does not feel different from the way she was before going to university, which unsettles her. As a result, "she did what girls generally do when they don't feel the part: she dressed it instead" (129). Despite the effort she put into her outfit, she believes she does not look good when trying to look at herself from an outsider's perspective. Because of the same reason, Zora takes to swimming every day. She counts herself as one of the "misshapen people" who are "not fit enough for the gym" (130). These are the first solid insights in Zora's psyche the novel offers, and they are very self-deprecating. Zora is influenced by Western beauty standards to such a great extent that she is constantly trying to change the way she looks in an attempt to adhere to the beauty ideal, which can be seen as a mimicking of Western beauty norms. The performance of gender she tries to show is a failed one; it does not work for her the way she wants it to. As Fenno argues in her article "*Zadie Smith On Beauty, Youth, and Aging*," *On Beauty* shows the struggles women face when trying to fulfil the role of an ideal woman, and the failure that is unavoidable (183). Just like Irie in *White Teeth*, Zora feels as if her body is not the way it should be, and tries to solve this problem in the same way as Irie does: by eating less and trying to change her appearance.

In essence, Zora and Victoria (also called Vee) represent two sides of the same coin. Whereas Vee represents the woman closest to the ideal, Zora is the one aspiring to be the ideal. However, both have problems with their respective places in society and do not feel comfortable with their assigned positions at all. Upon meeting Victoria for the first time, there is "the instantaneous recognition (on both sides) of her physical superiority" (112). From this moment on, Zora does not like Victoria at all. She believes Victoria to be her rival, because Vee embodies everything Zora aspires to be. Zora tries to increase her self-confidence by dragging Victoria down in front of Zora's brother Jerome. She tells him Victoria is "purely decorative," and "just a typical pretty-girl, power-game playing, deeply shallow human being" (240). In response, Jerome tells Zora that Vee is not that vain at all, and that she is still not sure about her looks. He adds that "it's a powerful thing, you know, to look like that" (241). Zora does not want to hear any of this and sticks to her own ill-informed opinion. Zora's reaction to Vee shows how ingrained cultural stereotypes are; if a woman is pretty and interesting to boys, there is no possibility that she is a nice person with just as much content as the next woman. By debasing Vee Zora actually shows her own deeply insecure attitude towards herself and her identity. When waiting for friends, she actively thinks about putting on her face, which she only does when being in company. When she is alone, "it didn't seem to her that she had a face at all," even though her classmates have formed opinions about her

identity (209). So, both she and her classmates form opinions about people based on the way they look, even though these perceptions can never form a full picture. Towards the end of the novel, Zora is done with beauty standards dictating her life, and "for the first time in months, she got dressed without attention to anything," expressing her pleasure in being able to do multiple extra activities in the time she saved (420).

Whereas Zora is striving hard to become the ideal woman, Victoria is already as close as she can get to that ideal. The first remark other characters make when talking about Victoria, is a remark regarding her beauty. She is referred to as a goddess on multiple occasions, and her body is described in detail, especially by men. These men also like the fact that she is smart in addition to being beautiful; Howard argues that "Jerome wouldn't be able to stand a stupid girl, not even one his gorgeous" (124). Somewhat further on in the novel, Vee asks a question in Howard's class, and Howard can feel the entire class is relieved the question is a practical one, because "the class as a whole could not abide prettiness *and* cleverness" (157). Howard and Jerome believe intelligence is an important quality in a woman, but Victoria's peers do not like it when one person is intelligent as well as pretty; that would mean Vee is even more ideal. When Howard and Victoria have sexual intercourse, he gives Vee a number of different identities:

His erection was blatant, but first she coolly drank the rest of his wine, pressing down on him as Lolita did on Humbert, as if he were just a chair she happened to sit on. No doubt she had read *Lolita*. And then her arm went round the back of his neck and Lolita turned into a temptress (maybe she had learned from Mrs Robinson too), lasciviously sucking his ear, and then from temptress she moved to affectionate high-school girlfriend, sweetly kissing the corner of his mouth. (315)

He does not look at Victoria as if she is a real person with an own identity. In his mind, Vee is a concept (334). Because she fits into the cultural beauty standards so perfectly, people (men as well as women) put her on a pedestal and only see her in the light of her own beauty. In the novel, Victoria initially plays the part that is assigned to her. She enjoys the attention her beauty gives her, and acts accordingly. Howard does realise this is all a performance. He notices that Vee "was *off-duty* somehow when she laughed" (344). This is the real Victoria, someone who is not pretending to be the person people believe her to be based on her body, but being the person she actually is.

Although it seems as if Victoria is quite comfortable with her role, the novel does show a breaking point in which she is completely honest for the first time (presumably):

'I know you think,' she said, each word tear-inflected, making her hard to understand, 'that you...*know* me. You *don't* know me. This,' she said and touched her face, her breasts, her hips, 'that's what you know. But you don't know *me*. And you were the one who wanted *this* - that's all anybody ever...' (390)

In this moment, it is clear that there is much more to Victoria Kipps than meets the eye. The fact that she is beautiful does not mean that her entire identity is based around this feature, she has other qualities as well, and during the discussion with Howard she realises this. So, Victoria struggles with the perceptions of beauty people have as much as Zora does, only in different ways. Both feel oppressed by the need to be beautiful, Zora because she is not perceived as beautiful and feels worthless because of this lack, and Vee precisely because people regard her as beautiful, and believes she should behave according to the stereotypes belonging to the identity of a beautiful woman.

On Beauty shows what it is like to be a woman, specifically a black woman, in the beginning of the 21st century. The novel affirms the difference between an older woman, Kiki, and the younger generation consisting of Victoria and Zora. Kiki has learned how to feel comfortable in her own skin, even though she is extremely aware of the cultural norms and beauty ideals existing in the society around her. She knows that being fat, middle-aged, and black are all factors that are not necessarily part of the Western beauty ideals, but she is self-confident enough to disregard these norms and feel beautiful in her own way. The novel also emphasises the ways in which (especially) young women feel the need to conform to beauty standards. Zora tries her best to look good by changing her clothing style and eating less. Victoria, on the other hand, already has the ideal body, but has to cope with the stereotypes clinging to the position of being a beautiful woman. Each three of these women perform their gender and racial identity in their own way. However self-assured Kiki may be, she sometimes performs the stereotypes linked to a black woman, because she knows white people like it. Nonetheless, she is very much aware of this being a fake performance, and separates it from her own identity. Likewise she is decidedly conscious of the strain put on women to fulfil the ideal of the perfect woman, and even though she tried her hardest to protect her daughter from these influences, Zora is obsessed with the way she looks and the way other people see her. To try to fit in, Zora "prepared a face" whenever she meets people,

despite the fact that she is not sure of her own face or identity at all. Vee also takes up a role, namely that of the beautiful girl who dates excessively and is terribly self-confident. In this way, she tries to uphold the view other people have of her. Towards the end of the novel, both Vee and Zora realise that they have been fooling themselves. Vee expresses this by telling Howard she is more than just her body, while Zora does not care about her looks anymore and realises she saves much time because of this. Zora and Irie are similar in this way; both stop obsessing over their body and accept the body they have. Vee stops fulfilling other people's wishes about her personality as well. All three of them end up feeling better in their own skin and acknowledge the fact that they are seen as different. This shows the ways in which gender and racial identity are discussed in *On Beauty*.

Chapter 4 Swing Time

The last novel that is discussed in this thesis is Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*, which was well-received by the press when it was published in 2016 (Selasi). It follows an unnamed female main character, who looks back on her life and the events that shaped it. The protagonist grew up on an English estate with her best friend Tracey, who was not only her best friend, but also her greatest rival. When they grow older, their differences become more pronounced and lead to an estrangement. After the protagonist's university years, she is offered the position of assistant to world-famous singer Aimee, which she accepts. Her work leads her to Africa, where she becomes more aware of her own identity. This novel is constructed in a different manner from *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*, because of its use of flashbacks and its lack of an omniscient narrator. This means that the main character's perspective is the only one that is shown. Even though there is a difference in perspective, the main themes regarding identity apparent in *White Teeth* and *On Beauty* are also reflected in *Swing Time*, which shows the importance and continuity of these themes in Zadie Smith's novels.

As *Swing Time* is differently structured, this chapter will be so as well. Because the reader is only able to analyse the main character's thoughts, it is harder to discuss other people's perceptions of her. However, the main character is very much aware of gender and racial norms in society. This is mostly a result of her mother's influence, who, as is declared at the beginning of the novel, "was a feminist" (9). Later on in the novel, the main character states that "long before it became her career my mother had a political mind," which "even as a child I noticed" (49). Even though the main character recognises her mother's awareness of and political action on this topic, this does not mean she has the same opinion, or is involved in the same way: there are more people in her life who influence her. The fact that gender performance is a social act (Alsop et al 98) can be observed very strongly when analysing the main character, who bases her gender and racial performance on the people she is surrounded by. In the prologue she states that it is true "that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own" (4). This is most noticeably so with regards to her childhood friend Tracey, her university boyfriend Rakim, and her employer Aimee. It is also apparent in the way she executes her work.

The relationship between the main character and Tracey is a truly complicated one. From the moment the two meet, the main character analyses both similarities and differences between them:

Our shade of brown was exactly the same - as if one piece of tan material had been cut to make us both - and our freckles gathered in the same areas, we were of the same height. But my face was ponderous and melancholy, with a long, serious nose, and my eyes turned down, as did my mouth. Tracey's face was perky and round, she looked like a darker Shirley Temple, except her nose was as problematic as mine, I could see that much at once, a ridiculous nose - it went straight up in the air like a little piglet.

(9)

This quote shows how the main character observes Tracey and herself in detail; she analyses the similarities, the differences, and she even comments on Tracey's nose. As a result, there is an instant rivalry between the two based on looks. The same can be seen in *On Beauty*, in which Zora is extremely envious of Victoria. Just as in *On Beauty*, one of the girls idolises the other. In *On Beauty* this was Zora idolising Victoria; in *Swing Time*, the main character idolises Tracey. She argues that Tracey "was perfection, I was besotted" (15). In the sentence before, however, she states that compliments brought out Tracey's smugness. This sequence of sentences shows the complicated relationship between the two of them: the main character idolises Tracey, but at the same time needs to pinpoint every little mistake in Tracey's appearances or behaviour. Also reminiscent of *On Beauty* is the fact that these two girls are in fact two sides of the same coin. They both live on an estate without getting any benefits (which Tracey's mother hates, while the main character's mother is proud of it) and they both love to dance. Tracey lives with her mother, while the main character ends up living with her father. Tracey prides herself on her light brown skin, while the main character spends every spare minute in the sunshine, wishing for a darker skin. Tracey is the more open, attention-seeking, self-confident girl, whereas the main character is shy, intelligent, and indecisive. These elements of their personalities and lives all show a specific kind of parallel, which the main character cannot seem but notice herself.

Tracey has a highly overbearing personality, and the main character obeys Tracey's every whim. Tracey only has to shrug, and that "could end any topic" (120). Tracey dictates the games that they play, and even in school she is the one person that decides whether something is perceived as cool or not. The main character's mother believes Tracey to be a bad influence, and there are certain occasions in which this can be said to be true. For example, when both the main character and Tracey are invited to their friend Lily's birthday, they are the only black girls there, and "at once Tracey became hostile" (76). She makes rude

remarks about the entire party, including the film they are watching. The party ends disastrously when Lily's mother walks in on Tracey and the main character performing a highly sexual dance in lingerie stolen from Lily's mother.

The older the girls get, the more different they become. The major differences start when Tracey's puberty begins: Tracey goes through puberty much earlier than the rest of the class, and uses her new assets to her advantage. All the girls of the class ostracise her, because they feel they are "nice girls" who do not want anything to do with Tracey (168). Tracey begins to avoid the main character increasingly, and "by some obscure pre-teen logic, I decided my body was to blame" (189). The main character thinks the difference in body-development must have caused Tracey not to be interested in her anymore. So not only is the main character under the influence of Tracey herself, she is also influenced by the perceived difference between a pre-puberty body and a post-puberty body. A post-puberty body is perceived to be more feminine, because it includes certain features, such as hips and breasts, that are part of the female gender ideal. The protagonist wants to belong to this gender norm as well, which is why she believes her body should look different (Butler, *Bodies* 231).

When Tracey is accepted to stage school, the main character is unsure about her future without Tracey by her side, as she is headed to a usual secondary school. She feels like "a body without a distinct outline" and believes she "made no impression" on her new classmates (213). To the main character, Tracey's life is still perfect, especially now that she can follow her dream of becoming a dancer. Because the main character does not know what to do with her identity, she "became a Goth - it was where people who had nowhere else to go ended up" (215). Thus, it could be argued that the main character does not have a real identity without Tracey by her side, and chooses a subculture so she has a feeling of belonging and identity. The performance of this identity is a failed one, though. The main character desperately tries to be a rebellious teenager, but both her father and her mother see through this behaviour and know it is not an authentic part of her identity. Part of her new lifestyle as a Goth is criticising everyone, and the person she criticises most is Tracey, because she feels let down by her. An important scene is when Tracey is brought to the hospital by the protagonist and her mother, because Tracey ate a speedball. Tracey starts verbally abusing them, which leads to the main character feeling like a woman for the first time:

On the way out I caught a reflection of myself in the long mirror on the wall of a disabled toilet that happened to have, at that moment, its door flung wide open. I saw my drab black uniform and absurd dusted face - of course, I'd seen it all before, but not

under that stark hospital lighting, and now it was no longer the face of a girl, now a woman stared back. (234)

This scene is extremely important for the development of the main character, as she now realises she is more mature than Tracey is, which enables her to give up her life as a Goth and be more comfortable with her authentic identity.

During her time at university, the main character has a relationship with a very politically-minded man named Rakim. As is the case with Tracey, Rakim is extremely self-confident and has a strong hold over the main character. He argues that "all the male sons of Africa are Gods," and he is one of them (288). Even though the main character knows in retrospect that this thought and the behaviour ensuing from it should have warned her, she "followed him devotedly" (289). Even when he tells her she is divided within, she simply agrees with him and asserts that "nothing was easier for me to grasp than the idea that I was born half right and half wrong, yes, as long as I did not think of my actual father and the love I bore him" (289). In this case, the "half wrong" part of her relates to her father, because he is white, and the "half right" argument is associated with her black mother. She disagrees with Rakim, but still feels the need to act as if she does not. In this instance, she does not want to acknowledge the fact that she is a hybrid, because he dislikes it. Rakim's behaviour shows a reversal of Bhabha's theory of Otherness: instead of perceiving the protagonist's black heritage to be Other, he believes her white father's heritage is Other. He also disagrees with the main character studying media, and shows much contempt for the subject as well as any remark the main character proffers. However rude Rakim is to her, her "instinct was always to find fault in myself" (290). Similar to his outspoken opinions about race, Rakim's attitudes towards women are quite unreserved. He believes the main character's femininity is of "the wrong kind," because she is not the woman he wants her to be. The main character explains why she is wrong in Rakim's opinion:

I did not grow plants or cook food, never spoke of babies or domestic matters, and competed with Rakim when and where I should have been supportive. Romance was beyond me: it required a form of personal mystery I couldn't manufacture and disliked in others. I couldn't pretend that my legs do not grow hair or that my body does not excrete a variety of foul substances or that my feet aren't flat as pancakes. (290-291)

The main character outwardly agrees with Rakim, but is not apologetic to herself, as can be seen in the quote. In this scene it is clear that the main character is aware of gender stereotypes, and that she is not going to perform them. Rakim relates these "faults" back to her racial identity: it is all the fault of her father's blood, "running through me like a poison" (291). He makes the main character believe her white ancestry is wrong, and all her faults result from this fact. The protagonist ends her relationship with Rakim after watching a film with him, in which the main message is the "essential indestructibility of women" and men's desire to keep this knowledge from them (291). The main character finally realises that she does not need him, that her identity is not divided in a good half and a bad half, and that she can be the indestructible woman she wants to be.

Another person that has influenced the main character extensively is Aimee and her charity work in an unnamed country in West Africa. Aimee can be added to the list of people who have an overbearing, outgoing, and naive personality, which the main character is obliged to obey, because she is the assistant to this pop star. Aimee (who is white) worked hard to get at the top, and believes that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger," which, in her opinion, also applies to people such as "Jews, gays, women, blacks - the bloody Irish" (113). Even though the main character does not verbally react to this statement, she does wince when she imagines her mother's reaction to this statement (113). Aimee represents one of the "good people of means," using her money to help eliminate poverty and build a school for girls in Africa (127). However, the main character is quite critical of this behaviour, which shows her engagement with race. Aimee is extremely naive and ill-informed about the African country she is going to build the school in. Additionally, she feels superior to them: when she first arrives in Africa, she does not want to go to the village anymore, and just stays in a hotel. When the main character arrives in the village, around a hundred children are waiting outside, and have been for six hours, in order to perform a dance for Aimee. Aimee also ridicules a list of items that need to be presented to the chief of the village. These instances show, as Bhabha pointed out, how identity is constructed: there is a clear distinction between "us" and "them," which forces one to choose one or the other (64-66). Because of the main character's skin colour, she is not perceived as white by Aimee's delegation, but at the same time she is not a part of the African community, who see her "as a sort of child, someone to be treated and presented with reality by degrees" (177). This means they identify her as a tourist, who is oblivious to local customs and hardship, just like the rest of Aimee's group. The African teachers make her feel as if "I was in the world by mere accident, having given no thought at all to what I represented" (180). So, her time with Aimee and especially

the time spent in Africa make the main character seriously think about her position in the world as a Western, black, young woman.

In conclusion, the main character has had issues with forming her own identity since she was a girl. When she was young, she wanted to lead the life her best friend Tracey led. Because they were so alike, a distinct battle of rivalry existed between the two, leading to an estrangement in their teenage years. Even though the main character is often under Tracey's spell, she does have an own opinion, even though she usually keeps it to herself. This is also the case when differences arise concerning race and gender. An example of this is the main character's attempt to get darker skin, even though Tracey wants to be as light as possible. This difference originates in the fact that Tracey's (black) father has mostly left the family, which leaves Tracey's (white) mother to speak ill of men, and especially black men. The main character's mother, on the other hand, is very politically-minded and tries to instil in her daughter a feeling of pride for her black heritage. The protagonist's first boyfriend Rakim tries to do the same, but degrades her white heritage, which is difficult for her because she loves her (white) father. Rakim also produces an endless stream of denigrating and misogynistic remarks, which eventually leads to the end of their relationship. The main character cannot perform the role of the perfect girlfriend and woman Rakim wants her to be, even though that makes her feel as if she is a "wrong kind of woman." At the end of the scene, she knows there is no such thing as a wrong kind of woman, as Judith Butler also argues in *Gender Trouble*: normative rules determine how to express one's gender, but this is not set in stone (186). The main character realises this and moves on. Her time in Africa shows her insights into her own ignorance about Africa and the people living there. She also notices the good intentions of Aimee, even though she is very critical of the execution of these intentions. Caught up between these two worlds, the protagonist rethinks her position in the Western world. Because her story is told in flashbacks, it is easy to perceive the changes she has gone through and the progress she has made, which helps the reader to see her as the woman she has become. Thus, the influence of gender and race on identity are essential to *Swing Time*.

Conclusion

When analysing *White Teeth*, *On Beauty*, and *Swing Time*, it becomes clear that all these novels discuss issues of identity. Whatever the plot, identity and the ways in which it is constructed are crucial to the storyline. In *White Teeth*, Irie struggles with her hybridity, which Homi Bhabha states to be "the migrant culture of the 'in-between', the minority position" (321). This position makes her feel as if she does not belong in early 21st-century Western society. Beauty ideals centre around the "English Rose," who is supposed to be white, thin, and in possession of long, straight hair. Irie does not possess even one of these attributes, which ensures she does not feel comfortable in her own skin. Following Bhabha's theory of the Self/Other, she aspires to be like the Chalfens (Self), who she believes are the epitome of Englishness. However, she neglects her Jamaican (Other) roots in this pursuit, which she realises the moment she starts living with her grandmother Hortense. Hortense increases Irie's feelings of self-worth by showing her the value of her Jamaican heritage, which leads Irie to embrace her hybridity and identity towards the end of the novel.

On Beauty shows similar struggles in the characters of Zora and Victoria. Noticeable is that in both novels the young generation has the most problems with living up to beauty standards and expectations. Zora is comparable to Irie in this aspect, as she too tries to mould herself in such a way that she fits into the strict beauty confinements made by society. However hard she tries to perform her gender satisfactorily, these performances fail and are preposterous (Fenno 186). Victoria represents the ideal Zora aims to achieve, but at the same time shows what the need and pressure to always be beautiful feels like. Kiki is presented as the opposite to these girls: she is fully aware of the gender and racial stereotypes existing in 21st-century Western society, and plays with these perceptions. She is comfortable with her identity and body and tries to instil the same thoughts in her daughter's mind, even though this does not have much effect. Nonetheless, both Zora and Victoria are more comfortable with their identities at the end of the novel, as Zora does not care about her makeup and looks anymore, and Victoria is honest for the first time and tells Howard she is more than just her body.

Swing Time also discusses the need to belong and the search for an identity. Similar to the characters in *White Teeth* and *On Beauty* the main character of *Swing Time* is very much influenced by her peers, which in her case means her best friend Tracey, and later on her first boyfriend Rakim and her employer Aimee. At the beginning of the novel she even states that

she did not really have a distinct identity; she let herself be influenced by other people to such an extent she did not have an identity of her own. As was the case in *On Beauty*, this novel centres around two girls' rivalry and competition as well. The main character is always comparing her own life to that of Tracey, and believes Tracey leads the better life, even when Tracey's life is falling apart. When the main character becomes a university student, Tracey's hold on her has become somewhat less pronounced, but Rakim replaces Tracey's overbearing personality. He imposes his views on the main character, especially views regarding race and gender. He is adamant in his belief that a black heritage is better than a white heritage, and does not appreciate Bhabha's concept of hybridity. Even though the main character does not agree, she does not dare to tell him so until she finally has had enough and ends her relationship with him. While working for Aimee after graduating, she truly starts thinking about her place in the Western world as a young, black, British woman. This awareness originates from the impression of otherness she gets when working in West Africa: she does not truly belong to Aimee's group, because she is black, but she also does not belong to the African community, as she is not black enough and ignorant about local customs and habits.

Combining evidence from *White Teeth*, *On Beauty*, and *Swing Time* leads to the argument that there is a vast difference between inner and outer perceptions of identity. Perceptions from other people are often heavily influenced by stereotypes prevalent in a certain society. As Judith Butler argues in her work, there is a certain standard regarding gender norms people try to live up to. However, most of the performances fail to attain this standard, as it is extremely difficult to live up to an ideal (*Bodies* 231). The characters' uneasiness regarding their gender identity is always intersected with their racial identity: they often feel as if they are the Other in Western society, because they are seen (and see themselves) as different (Bhabha 96). This "multidimensionality of Black women's experience" leads the characters to feel uncomfortable with their racial and gender identity, as they do not fit into these stereotypes and do not want to (Crenshaw 139). They attempt to belong by copying either general beauty standards or by competing with other girls, even though they all realise they put up a fake performance. As a result, the characters do internalise outer perceptions of them, but they learn how to overcome these internalisations and to form their identities in such a way that they feel comfortable with it, regardless of societal stereotypes or perceptions.

Because questions of identity and belonging can be found in all three novels, it can be said that these are important themes in the majority of Zadie Smith's novels. Even though this thesis focuses on women and their gender and racial identity, the novels can also be used to

analyse masculinity and racial identity: the male characters in the novels are influenced by gender and racial stereotypes as well, albeit in a different manner.

In conclusion, Zadie Smith's novels *White Teeth*, *On Beauty*, and *Swing Time* create awareness of gender and racial stereotypes prevailing in 21st-century Western society. The novels show how these stereotypes and ideals can influence people's thoughts about others, but also about themselves. Towards the end of each novel, the characters have come to terms with their hybrid identities, and feel more at ease in their own bodies. The characters have come to realise, just like Zadie Smith herself in her essay collection *Changing My Mind*, that "between those two voices there exists no contradiction and no equivocation, but rather a proper and decent human harmony" (150). Smith's novels are a way of ascertaining the validity of a hybrid identity, even if that means one does not conform to the gender and racial ideals in a given society.

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