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The Development of Biracial Identities in Zadie Smith's Novel *Swing Time* and in the UK Today

BA thesis

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the development of biracial identities in Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* and compare it to studies into and personal stories on the topic in the United Kingdom. The thesis leans on sociological and psychological studies on biracial identity development, comparing them to the fictional experiences of the two main characters. The thesis consists of an introduction, literature review, analysis and conclusion. Introduction fives a short overview of the topic and thesis; the literature review explores studies done on the topic as well as literature and real-life experiences. The analysis compares segments of the novel to studies and real-life experiences discussed in the literature review. An overview of the findings is given in the conclusion. By analysing the journey of the two main characters in the novel, this thesis delves into how they manage to find themselves, their place in society and how they shape their biracial identity. This comparison and close reading reveal the similarities and differences between real-world dynamics and literary depiction. The influence of family, community, and cultural attitudes on identity development, along with the intersections of race, class, and gender, are important areas of attention. The thesis emphasises the continuous process of identity development within a multicultural society, arguing that *Swing Time* not only reflects but also critiques and enhances our knowledge of mixed-race identity.

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Introduction

This thesis aims to analyse the development of biracial or mixed-race identities of young people in Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* to see how it relates to what is known about biracial identities in the UK today. Although mixed-race people are not a new phenomenon, the discussions of their identity are relatively recent. Mixed-race households form around 10 per cent of the population of Britain (Office for National Statistics 2022) and are a significant part of the whole of Britain.

This thesis uses terms such as *mixed-race*, which is defined as a person who has two or more different ethnic or racial backgrounds from their parents (Cambridge Dictionary), and *biracial*, which is defined as someone of two ethnic or racial backgrounds (Cambridge Dictionary), as synonyms, though mixed race is broader in its meaning. For instance, when the mother is Asian and the father is African American, their children are biracial or mixed-race. If one of the parents is already biracial, the children would be mixed-race or multiracial. As the characters in the novel are biracial, this study focuses primarily on biracial people.

Zadie Smith's seventh novel, *Swing Time*, was first published in 2016. *Swing Time* is the story of two young half-Black, half-White girls who try to find their way through life. The story mainly occurs in Britain, but the characters also find themselves in New York and West Africa. The novel follows an unnamed main character – the narrator – through her life, from an early age to adulthood. The narrator is a biracial girl – with a White father and a Jamaican heritage mother. The plot starts in London in 1982 when the only two biracial girls meet in a tap dance class. Tracey – the other girl – has a White mother and an African American father who is in prison. The story follows the girls through their childhood, showing the differences in their home lives and in the way they

manage their lives, easing into adolescence. Later, when the narrator has reached adulthood, she manages to get an internship at YTV (a music channel) thanks to Tracey. After a while, the two lose contact but see one another from time to time. Through her internship, the main character gets an assistant job with her childhood hero, an Australian pop star. With her new job and her employer, Australian popstar Aimee, the narrator finds her way to West Africa to build a school for the local children. Through many turns of events and bad decisions, she eventually falls out with Aimee. Back home, due to the complicated relationship with Aimee, the narrator's life is turned upside down, and she decides to move back in with her mother. The novel ends with her mother dying and the narrator deciding to look up Tracey, who has had two children since they last met. The novel does not have a straight storyline but jumps back and forth with flashbacks from the narrator's childhood and adolescence, giving the reader information from different times of the narrator's life.

The author of the novel, Zadie Smith, is herself biracial. She was born in North London in 1975 and has an English father and a Jamaican mother. She studied English at King's College, Cambridge and graduated in 1997. Her first novel, *White Teeth* (2000), won many awards and prizes; it has been translated into various languages and was even adapted for television. The politics of race and gender are underlying themes in her books, and she uses humour to expose the pretences of people who do not know the daily struggles of race and who cannot consider their viewpoint (Ellam, Woodward 2013). Smith does not use race only politically but humorously, which teaches the reader more about the possible ways to see it.

Swing Time was chosen for this thesis because it focuses on two biracial characters and their life; it illustrates the struggles of growing up biracial and finding one's place in society. In her novel *Swing Time*, Smith also touches on many contemporary societal hot

topics, including Western aid, mother-daughter relationships, childlessness, international adoption, sex tourism, ambition, race, and class (Smith 2017). By tracing the geographical and historical nuances of the Black Atlantic, Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* subverts conventional understandings of the diaspora and questions commonplace markers of identification and belonging. The novel illustrates post-diasporic communities and subjectivities by depicting interconnected areas and the protagonists' fluctuating identities. By tackling gender issues through its representations of female friendships – Tracey and the narrator, mother-daughter ties – the narrator and her mother, and professional relationships between women – the narrator and Aimee, it further complicates experiences of diaspora. The book also employs African diasporic music and black dance styles to investigate motion and stillness, using dance as a resource to challenge established gender, class, and cultural norms (Scafe 2019: 94-99).

This thesis, however, focuses on just one of the numerous issues discussed, namely the development of biracial identities, and for comparison, mainly relies on studies conducted in the United Kingdom focusing on biracial identity and its development – how it is shaped, what or who has the most significant influence, etc. Along with the studies, this thesis uses personal stories from Remi Adekoya's novel *Biracial Britain* to illustrate mixed-race people's identities and struggles through real-life experiences.

The thesis consists of a literature review and a discussion of the development of biracial identities in *Swing Time*. The literature review focuses on the statistics of the mixed-raced population in the UK to show just how large a part of the population they are. Then, a few studies conducted in the UK that focus on the shaping of biracial identities are discussed. Along with the studies, this thesis uses personal experiences from stories of people with mixed backgrounds. The comparison focuses on the two girls – the unnamed narrator and Tracey – and their parental figures, who have a significant impact on shaping

the young identities. The instances are analysed and contrasted to the studies mentioned in the theoretical part.

1. Research into biracial people and their identities in the UK

Biracial identity became a topic of discussion in the UK only at the beginning of the 21st century as the 2001 census was the first one that used 'Mixed or multiple ethnic groups' as an ethnic category (Gov.uk N.d.). It became particularly topical with the engagement of Prince Harry to Meghan Markle in 2017 and their subsequent marriage. The subject has not been that widely researched and covered in literature. This chapter gives a short overview of the size of the mixed-race population of the UK, followed by a discussion of the studies into the identities of mixed-race people and their personal experiences in the UK.

1.1. Biracial and mixed-race population in Britain

The Office for National Statistics has released a statistical study – Ethnic Group, England and Wales: Census 2021 (Office for National Statistics 2022), comparing the ethnicity of the population of England and Wales from two censuses – those conducted in 2011 and 2021. The study categorises ethnicity into five broad ethnic groups: 'Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh'; 'Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African'; 'Mixed or Multiple'; 'White' and 'Other ethnic groups'. The focus here is on the changes that happened in the mixed or multiple ethnic groups between the 2011 census and the 2021 census.

The statistics show that in 2011, the percentage of people identifying with the mixed or multiple ethnic groups was 2.2% of the population (1.2 million people) and in 2021, the percentage had increased to 2.9% (1.7 million people) (Office for National Statistics 2022). Over the course of ten years, the proportion had increased by half a

million people. Compared to other ethnic groups, excluding the ‘other ethnic groups’, the mixed group is the least represented. Though the mixed groups are the smallest part of the population, they saw the same increase as the ‘Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African’ group (Office for National Statistics 2022).

The smallest subgroup in the ‘Mixed or Multiple’ ethnic group is White/Black African – who account for 0.4% of the population. Followed by White/Asian and Mixed, both 0.8%. The most widespread mixed identity is that of White/Black Caribbean (0.9%). The highest percentage - around 20% - 25% of White and Black African ethnic groups is based in and around London. Around 5-6% of the White and Black African group is based around Manchester. From 2011, the percentage of households in England and Wales with two or more ethnic groups represented has increased from 8.7% (2.0 million) to 10.1% (2.5 million) (Office for National Statistics 2022).

1.2. Research into biracial or mixed-race identities in Britain.

The oldest reachable study on the topic was conducted in 1996 by Paul R. Spickard and explores the construction of racial categories in the United States and Britain. The author compares how racial categories and meanings changed in Britain and the United States during the 20th century by comparing how racial categories are constructed in the two nations. Spickard breaks down the connotations associated with racial classifications and the underlying power dynamics by examining the identification circumstances of mixed-race individuals. The article explores how the social construction of racial categories has developed differently in various contexts, emphasising the changes in group identification, the locations of boundaries, and the power relationships between them (Spickard 1996: 3-13). It concludes that White Americans have long had more definitions regarding race than White Britons. It also discusses how distinct categories in the US are currently falling apart, in part due to the emergence of a mixed-race consciousness among

some individuals of mixed ancestry, and how a British invention from the 1970s and 1980s—a shared Black identity for all non-White Britons—is no longer functioning as well (Spickard 1996: 1-3).

France Winddance Twine's article (2004) addresses the idea of racial literacy and refutes the notion that white parents are incapable of comprehending racism or race. The author provides an overview of the efforts made by white transracial birth parents in England over a seven-year ethnographic study to help their mixed-race offspring develop 'black' identities. The study emphasises the difficulties mixed-race people encounter in a racist culture as well as the nuances of racial identity.

The complexity of racial identity is highlighted throughout the article, especially among mixed-race households. It looks at how parents, mainly white parents, try to instil in their mixed-race children a sense of cultural and political loyalty to the black community. When these parents try to navigate their children's racial identity, they run into conflicting conceptual maps and challenging terrain. In response, the kids push back against the racial dictates of their parents and demand that their biological and cultural links to their white parents be acknowledged (Twine 2004: 15). The study also explores the ambiguity of racial self-identification, demonstrating how US survey questions shape answers and impact identity. It highlights how difficult it is to classify and identify people based just on their race, especially as they get older. The article also talks about the difficulties white parents have when their kids identify as European, which can lead to arguments and conflicts in the household (Twine 2004: 25).

The author presents factual evidence of white transracial parents actively teaching their children to empathise with the challenges of Black people. These behaviours include teaching kids about racial inequality and how to respond to it, involving them in artistic

and consuming activities as a part of racial literacy, and imparting anti-racist knowledge to their mixed-race children (Twine 2004: 6, 26).

Due to these identity problems, mixed-race children feel the pressure from society to ‘fix’ themselves, which leads to even more issues and questions about themselves. A study conducted on the mental impact of biracial identification in the mixed-race population in Britain was done by Victoria H. Coleman and M. M. Carter (2007). Understanding the intricate relationship between racial self-identification, societal pressures, and psychological well-being among biracial individuals is made possible by the article's insights into the psychological implications of biracial identity and societal pressures. The paper highlights the significance of societal acceptance and validation of multiple racial identities by examining the effects of pressure to identify as monoracial on the psychological well-being of mixed-race individuals. It also clarifies the possible impacts of internalised societal prejudices on forming an excellent racial identity, as well as the psychological frustration that could arise from competing demands on one's identity (Carter and Coleman 2007: 3,4). The significance of a recognised biracial identity is further highlighted by the article's findings, which show that it is linked to lower anxiety and depression ratings than unvalidated or transcendent (biracial individuals who do not classify themselves into any specific racial category (Carter and Coleman 2007: 11)) identities. This emphasises how important it is for society to accept and value a variety of racial identities to support the mental health of mixed-race people. Furthermore, the report highlights the necessity for additional investigation into forming flexible and transcendent identities in persons who identify as biracial, as well as the impact of parental and cultural influences on racial identification decisions (Carter and Coleman 2007: 5, 10).

This social pressure and mental health questions are further discussed in the primary conclusions of the research on psychological measures and biracial self-

identification: the perspectives of mixed-race individuals regarding societal pressures surrounding racial identification did not significantly differ among those who identified as solely black, validated biracial, protean, unvalidated biracial, or transcendent. In the study, there were no statistically significant differences between the reported symptomatology of depression and anxiety in males and girls. The Societal, Attitudinal, and Familial Pressure Scale (SATQ) and the Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) showed significantly higher ratings in those who felt pressured by their peers to identify as monoracial than those who did not. Higher anxiety and depressed symptomatology scores indicated psychological suffering in those who identified as protean or transcendent (Carter and Coleman 2007: 7, 11). According to the article, mixed-race people's mental health is impacted by social pressure to identify as monoracial. The study also points out that internalising mainstream identity criteria, even if one does not meet them, can result in ambiguity about one's own identity and that the pressure to select a racial identity is the root cause of social anxiety (Carter and Coleman 2007: 4, 11).

A study by Miri Song and Peter Aspinall (2012) focused on the national identity of young mixed-race people in Britain. They found that national identity, along with other forms of belonging, plays a crucial role in shaping the identifications and experiences of mixed-race young people in Britain. Their sense of belonging within a minority or a nation is extensively intertwined with their mixed-race youth experiences. Understanding their experiences and national identity gives a more comprehensive insight into the diverse multilayered identification of mixed-race young people in Britain (Song and Aspinall 2012).

The study examines how mixed groups view and interact with their ethnic alternatives, especially in big cities like London, mainly focusing on how mixed-race youth negotiate their identities in a culture characterised by extreme diversity and historical

divisions based on race and ethnicity, as well as how they react to other people's racial opinions about them (Song and Aspinall 2012: 1-5). It also explores the connection of national and racial identification patterns for mixed-race individuals in the British context, illustrating the range of emotions mixed-race individuals may have regarding their perceptions by the general public (Song and Aspinall 2012: 27).

A significant area of interest for the research is how young people of mixed races respond to the discrepancy between how they identify and how other people see them. It was discovered that although these people frequently experienced a racial mismatch between their expressed and observed identities, their reactions to these events differed significantly. Responses to the mismatch included feeling misunderstood, appreciating it, or not caring how others classified them based on their race in daily interactions (Song and Aspinall 2012: 21-26). Furthermore, the study highlighted that some differences in responses to such mismatch emerged among disparate types of mixed people. It also emphasises the need to consider national identity and other forms of belonging in making sense of the diverse and often multilayered identifications and experiences of mixed-race young people in the UK (Song and Aspinall 2012: 21). Overall, the research shows that there are many different ways that people of mixed races might experience racial mismatch and that not everyone finds the mismatch to be negative. The answers differ significantly and are impacted by group membership and personal preferences (Song and Aspinall 2012).

1.3. Biracialism in literature and lived experience

Mixed races and other ethnic backgrounds are discussed in British literature in both academic texts as well as in fiction. A book *Biracial Britain – What It Means To Be Mixed Race* (2021) by Remi Adekoya, has collected a number of stories of mixed-race people in the United Kingdom – their experiences, pains and happiness. Part One – ‘Between Black

and White' - of the book is relevant for this thesis as it contains eleven stories by mixed-race individuals with black and white parents. Their stories are about racism and the struggles of being a mixed-race person in the UK as well as in the world, the journey to finding one's identity and place in the world. These stories show how shaping their identity is different for everyone, and it does not happen only in childhood. Most of the stories talk about how the storytellers grew up – how they managed their biracialism, what the struggles and pressures of society were and how they deal with them now when they are older. The stories start with the oldest interviewee and end with the youngest. The stories are all somewhat similar as they deal with the development of biracial identities, but every interviewee is different and develops their identity on their own. Some of the interviewees do not have one parental figure, while some have a happy family; some grow up in a rough neighbourhood where almost every day is a fight for their life, while some grow up in a more accepting community and as said before, the interviewees differ by age – the oldest being 75 while the youngest is only six. These aspects differ for each storyteller and affect how they see themselves, their identity, and their race. However, a common line for each story is the struggle to understand where they fit in and where to find the support to figure out who they are. The constant shaping of identity follows these people throughout their lives, and still, at the age of sixty and seventy, some of them learn new things about themselves that help them become who they are (Adekoya 2021: 11-167).

Through these studies and stories, it is understandable how mixed-race identity will be formed, what affects it, what might disturb it, and what the obstacles and possible disturbances might be.

Biracial people tend to experience racial mismatch – like being considered 'black', which might cause issues for some of them, as they do not see themselves as 'black' but rather mixed-race. These mixed-race identities are shaped by the environment and people

around them. One of the largest effects comes from parental figures and how they teach their children how to see race. It is important that parents from different races teach their children about their heritage and culture. Still, it is also important to not overdo it and let the children choose an identity for themselves so as not to cause any mental health issues. Biracial people tend to show significantly higher depression and anxiety levels, which might lead to issues with identity and self-image. This is also caused by the environment and the feeling of belonging. It is important for biracial people to belong to a group or even share their experiences with people who have similar struggles. The feeling of national identity also helps with the feeling of belonging as being already a part of something bigger; it is easier to fit into the mixed-race minority group. These findings, along with the stories of Remi Adekoya, will be further analysed and compared to Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* to see how the novel reflects them.

2. Biracial identities in *Swing Time* compared to real-life experiences of biracial people in the UK

This chapter compares the biracial identity aspect of the novel to the reality of biracialism in the United Kingdom through previous research and statistics; besides studies, this analysis also relies on the personal experience of mixed-race people. The chosen passages from the novel are compared to the studies and stories from real life to see how the two correlate. The passages were selected using close reading as well as keywords like race, identity, background, Whiteness, Blackness, mixed, etc. They were then studied to see if they fit the overall analysis. The chosen passages are mainly from the beginning of the novel as they are the part where the characters primarily develop their identities. However, some passages are taken from the end of the novel, where the characters look back at their life.

2.1 Biracial identities in *Swing Time*

Biracialism is a significant topic in the novel and plays a crucial part in the development of both the narrator and Tracey. From the very beginning, it is seen how the two mixed-race girls keep together in dance classes:

> There were many other girls present but for obvious reasons we noticed each other, the similarities and the differences, as girls will. 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. (Smith 2017: 9)

Even though they get along with the others, they still feel the difference:

> Yet there was always this mutual awareness, an invisible band strung between us, connecting us and preventing us from straying too deeply into relations with others. /…/ But though we giggled and joked with these white girls during class /…/ Tracey and I lined up next to each other, every time, it was almost unconscious, two iron filings drawn to a magnet. (Smith 2017: 16)

The feeling of being different and relating more to each other than to the white girls in their class shaped the identities of both girls throughout their childhood. Both girls impact each other and their identities, which is almost as important as the environment and family life around them. The girls' mutual awareness and connection suggest a deep bond formed through shared experiences of racial difference. This bond is a form of support and validation for their biracial identities. The narrator's and Tracey's shared experiences of feeling disconnected from their white peers and forming a solid bond with each other highlight the significance of belonging within a minority group. Their sense of connection serves as a source of belonging and affirmation of their mixed-race identity, echoing Song and Aspinall's (2012) exploration of national identity and belonging among mixed-race individuals. The narrator's and Tracey's experiences of feeling different from their peers and gravitating towards each other also reflect the psychological impact of racial identity. Their unconscious alignment with each other and sense of mutual understanding suggests a coping mechanism for navigating the challenges of being biracial in a predominantly white environment, just as said by Coleman and Carter (2007).

2.2 Biracial identities in *Swing Time* - Tracey

Tracey is a complicated character with a tough childhood and home life. She has a significant impact on the narrator –like a role model. Though the girls spend most of their childhood together, their paths separate in early adulthood, and they meet only a handful of times later in life. Twine (2004) states that parenting significantly impacts shaping an identity. Tracey’s mother convinced her that her father was a famous dancer in the Michel Jackson group. In contrast, he actually was a convicted felon who was serving his time in prison and thus was the missing father figure in Tracey’s life (Smith 2017). This influences Tracey from her early childhood; her missing African American father left a hole in her

that she tried to fill with made-up stories and other imaginative things. The narrator and Tracey liked to write stories together. In many of those stories, there were "African men 'lurked in the shadows' with iron bars to break the knees of lily-white dancers /…/" (Smith 2017: 32). Unlike the narrator Tracey never truly accepted that she is biracial, and thus shaped herself a completely new identity: " /…/ in one, the prima had a terrible secret: she was 'half-caste' /…/" (Smith 2017: 32). At the same time though Tracey also does not feel like she fits into the other group either. She talks about how the groups can mingle and communicate with each other. Still, they will never truly blend and understand each other: "There could be no real friendship between Cabbage Patch and Garbage Pail, not right now, not in England" (Smith 2017: 53). It almost looks like Tracey disregards race completely as she confidently calls one of the kids from school 'Paki' and later states that "It's just a word" (Smith 2017: 82). Twine (2004) talks about the importance of parental guidance and influence in the matters of race and heritage, Tracey's mother, however, did not manage to show and help her understand the other part of herself and thus Tracey never truly understood herself fully. Similarly, she never found her 'group'; she understood that she was not part of the White culture, but she also did not have her own place in the class. Song and Aspinall (2012) talk about the importance of belonging to a group or a nation and the effects they have on shaping young identities. Thus, Tracey does not have her own group and does not have family support on the matter. She never gets the whole insight into her heritage and identity. This sort of identity crisis also happens in real life, not just in novels. Rita, the first story in Remi Adekoya's book (2021), grows up without her Black father to teach her about her heritage. Though to her family she is 'Black', she does not feel like it; she has always thought about herself as a White person and still does at the age of seventy. She went through life having a white family; a racist mum, a rapist step-father and white siblings. Even though they did not consider her part of them, she still felt like

she was more of a White person (Adekoya 2021: 12-18). The same case was with Bea, whose father is of mixed race and whose mother is white. She aspired to be as thin and as white as possible, which led to her struggling with anorexia and mental health (Adekoya 2021: 141). Similarly, Tracey has mostly White role models, and though it is not written down, it is seen through her actions and decisions that she also wants to embrace more of her white side, which feels safer and more familiar to her. As a child, she tells the narrator that they will never be the same as the White kids in their class, but she also always chooses to go along with the 'white' trends. Differently from the narrator, whose mother tried to keep the narrator more on her 'Black' side. At one point after a party, when the narrator's mother picks up the girls, Tracey accuses both of them of kidnapping and controlling her:

> Tracey accused us both of kidnapping her, or trying to control her, we who had always been trying to control her, ever since she was a child, who always knew what was best for her, what was best for everybody, we had even tried to steal her from her own mother, her own father! (Smith 2017: 233)

This mirrors how Tracey disagrees with the narrator's mother and their identity. This belief becomes even more apparent at the end of the novel when the narrator finds out that Tracey has been harassing her sick mother with emails (Smith 2017: 390-395). It looks like for Tracey, it is almost insulting to be considered somewhat black; though she has African-American roots, she does not want them. Tracey's lashing out also has quite a significant effect on the narrator. As the narrator is deeply affected by Tracey and her beliefs, she also starts to doubt herself and her identity, that maybe the group she thought she belonged to is not the one for her.

Tracey grows up relatively young; she has a rebellious nature and is seen doing some pretty controversial things from an early age. She smokes cigarettes, abuses alcohol, hangs out with suspicious people and overall tends to have 'her' way of doing things (Smith 2017: 59, 234). During her teenage years, when the narrator runs into her, Tracey is

shown to be having a drug overdose; she also gets pregnant relatively young and keeps the children. Though Tracey has an authoritarian and confident personality, she still struggles with mental health. This comes from having a broken family but also from her not belonging anywhere, and she does not find her people throughout her adolescence. All this circles back to Song and Aspinall (2012) talking about how not belonging affects mixed-race youngsters but also Carter and Coleman (2007), who found higher depression levels in mixed-race people. Tracey portrays both of these – struggling with depression and not belonging, which both shape her throughout her life. Tracey knows what she wants and where she wants to belong from an early age, but she has a hard time making it out to be accurate, as she still struggles with fitting in. The narrator does not interact much with Tracey in her adulthood, but at the end of the novel, she goes to visit her a few times to check up on her children. At the end of the novel, she sees Tracey dancing with her children, and she looks genuinely happy. Even though Tracy struggled through her life and continues to struggle to provide a good life for her children, it seems she finally found her place and happiness (Smith 2017: 453).

2.3 Biracial identities in *Swing Time* – the narrator

The narrator's identity development is a complicated journey all through her life. Though her early childhood has the most impact on her, it is still seen, even at the end of the novel, that she is sometimes confused and unsure of herself. Mirroring her life, it is seen that identity is not set in stone and will not stay the same throughout her life; instead, it will develop and change relative to where she is in her life.

As opposed to Tracey, the narrator is influenced by both her parents in her life. Her mother, also an unnamed character, plays a considerable role in the narrator's life. Though they have a falling out, the narrator still finds her way back to her mother at the end of the

novel. Her mother is a strong woman with strong beliefs and a firm understanding of the world. She teaches the narrator about race and the inequality of life:

> She didn't pick me up from school any more - my father did that now - because the scene aggravated her too much, in particular the way, each afternoon, time collapsed, and all those mothers became kids again, kids who had come to collect their kids, and all of these kids together turned from school with relief, free finally to speak with each other in their own way, and to laugh and joke and eat ice cream form the waiting ice-cream van, and to make what they considered to be natural amount of noise. My mother didn't fit into all of that any longer. She still cared for the group - intellectually, politically - but she was no longer one of them. (Smith 2017: 49, 50)

Her mother, though very passionate about race and her culture, is still somewhat indifferent to them. This gives the narrator a mixed signal as to how to really understand her heritage and culture. While completely denying the white background of her daughter: “You think you're one of them? Is that what you think?” (Smith 2017: 82), the narrator’s mother still teaches her about her roots and her history:

> And then there were all the outrageous historical cases I heard of at my mother's knee, tales of the furiously talented women - and these were all women, in my mother's telling - women who might have run faster than a speeding train, if they had been free to do so, but for whom, born in the wrong time, in the wrong place, all stops were closed, who were never even permitted to enter the station. And wasn't I so much freer than any of them - born in England, in modern times - not to mention so much lighter, so much straighter of nose, so much less likely to be mistaken for the very essence of Blackness itself? (Smith 2017: 212)

For the narrator, her mother is a strong, triumphant woman who knows how the world works. Her mother’s strong opinion on the matter of race reassures the narrator and makes her feel like she belongs. The narrator looks up to her mother’s ideas and uses them later in her life. However, her mother’s social behaviour and her strong opinions about race also undermine the narrator’s understanding of her ethnic background. As her mother ties almost all her daughter’s issues back to race, she does not let the narrator see the world in peace; instead, she teaches her to always be on her toes and sometimes even to look for problems where there are none. The narrator shapes her identity through her mother’s lessons and his father's indifference. When the narrator is a young girl, she finds out that her father has two other children outside his marriage (Smith 2017: 43). The illegitimate children are both White, as are their parents. This confuses the narrator and frankly

diminishes the picture of her father in the narrator's eyes. She realises that she will never fit in with her father's other children:

> As far as I could see we had no features in common at all, the whole thing was ridiculous, and I could see that this Emma person thought exactly the same of me. Apart from the comically obvious fact that I was black and she was white, I was big-boned and she was narrow, I was tall for my age and she was short for hers, my eyes were big and brown and hers were narrow and green (Smith 2017: 44).

Similarly, she sees the boy to be exactly like her father:

> /…/ looking at the boy, I found I could not deny his essential rightness. It was right that he should be my father's son, anyone looking at him would see the sense of it. What didn't make sense was me /…/ yes, he is right and I am wrong (Smith 2017: 46).

These white children do not make any sense to the narrator; she thought that she was honest and she was right, but for her, the whiteness of these children proves her wrong. This shows her that she will never truly fit into the white community, even if part of her should be a part of it. This encounter tears a line for her between black and white; she is too white for the black community and too black for the white community.

She is also influenced by Tracey, but her mother's and Tracey's influence conflict with each other, leaving the narrator to decide which one of them she respects more. Throughout her life, it is seen that though Tracey had a significant impact on her, she still shaped her identity and her persona more on her mother than on Tracey. She has a clear understanding of her 'blackness' as well as her 'whiteness'; she knows that she is not entirely white, but she also identifies more as black than she does white. She uses this identification also for others, for her Brazilians are part of the white culture: "You think far too much about race - did anyone tell you this? But wait: to you I am white? /.../ Well it's interesting for me. In Brazil we don't understand ourselves as white, you understand. At least my family does not" (Smith 2017: 251, 252). This identification as black or white is a complicated matter; Spickard (1996: 3) brings out the same issue – since the seventies, Britons have had an overall black identity for all non-white residents. This labelling does not work as there as a massive part of the community is from various ethnic backgrounds.

Mixed groups have a hard time belonging to a group, and this labelling makes the outside pressure even worse. In Adekoya's book (2021), Eugene talks about his life growing up in Liverpool. At the time in Liverpool, they had clear racial groups that kept together; once visiting a friend, Eugene was told that they also had a black kid, Sammy, on the block. The so-called black kid turned out to be Spanish, which confused Eugene, as for him, Sammy was definitely not black (Adekoya 2021: 25). These kinds of race questions might confuse mixed-race people even more as, for them, they are not part of anything. As Eugene later talks, the matter that helped him develop his identity was a collective black community (Adekoya 2021: 37); it was where he truly felt at home. Without a community, it is hard to establish who you are. The narrator does not have that community and stability, which is one of the factors that prevent her from finding herself in her early childhood.

The narrator shapes her identity by watching old musicals and familiarising herself with her culture; she also has significant influence from her time in Africa, where she gets even more insight into herself from the characters she meets there. While Tracey understands herself and her wants from quite an early age, the narrator goes through her life searching for her place in society and looking for herself in others, like finding places or people that reflect herself. According to Eugene in Adekoya's *Biracial Britain* (2021), this helped him the most while finding himself. It seems that the narrator also finds this community and culture to be the most important for her. She never considers herself White and thus embraces that though she might not be black enough for society, she still feels more at home belonging there.

Opposed to Tracey, the narrator has an influence from both sides of her family. She struggles to fit into her own skin and understand who she is, but she still gets through life successfully. Her fear of belonging follows her through her school life, dance classes, and work. While working for Aimee, the narrator finds new angles to life; she gets to

experience new cultures and life outside of her own little apartment. This helps her understand herself and make peace with belonging. Though the narrator does not understand it, she ties herself to people around her to belong somewhere, whether it be Tracey, her mother or Aimee. This gives her reassurance that even if she does not belong to a big group, she still belongs somewhere. This becomes apparent when Aimee fires her for sleeping with her lover. The narrator understands that her whole life was about Aimee. Once again, she tied her entire being to someone and just went along with it. She realises that she indeed was not free the whole time, she was just a side character in Aimee's life (Smith 2017: 380-382). Belonging is the most crucial part of life for the narrator; she does not want to be the odd one out, even if it means being attached to someone else. She holds on to people in her life, even if they are unhealthy for her, to find that feeling of belonging. It seems that by the end of the novel, when the narrator reconnects with her mother while Tracey has made a truce with who she is and is step-by-step figuring herself out, the narrator is still lost. She still locks on to people and dislikes being just herself.

The narrator and Tracey start their journey together in a dance class, where they only have each other to rely on. From there forward, the girls take different approaches regarding their identities and places in the world. Tracey's stormy childhood and fractured family dynamic significantly shape her identity. Raised by a mother who fabricates stories about her absent father, Tracey deals with a sense of loss and confusion, attempting to fill the void with imagination. Despite her rebellious nature and struggles with mental health, Tracey's strong personality wields a profound influence on the narrator. However, her inability to fully embrace her biracial heritage and find a sense of belonging leaves her adrift, navigating life's challenges without a clear anchor. Contrastingly, the narrator's journey is marked by a more nuanced exploration of her racial and cultural identity. Influenced by both her mother's passionate teachings on race and her father's indifferent

attitude, she embarks on a quest for self-discovery. Engaging with her African roots and immersing herself in diverse cultural experiences, the narrator deals with the complexities of belonging. Despite her efforts to forge her identity, she remains plagued by insecurities and a persistent fear of not fitting in (Smith 2017).

The narrator's and Tracey's storylines align with academic debates on mixed-race identification in published works. Tracey's struggle with her missing father figure and its impact on her sense of self are reflected in Twine's (2004) emphasis on the critical role that parental guidance plays in shaping identity. Similarly, Song and Aspinall (2012) stress the value of community belonging, reflecting the narrator's search for a sense of cultural connection and acceptance.

Adekoya's exploration of multiracial experiences in *Biracial Britain* (2021) sheds more light on people's difficulties when juggling multiple racial identities. Eugene's quest for acceptance resonates in the narrator's journey, highlighting the community's role in forming identity.

Overall, the experiences that the characters have in the novel reflect the studies and real-life experiences that they are compared to. Similarly to real life, the characters struggle with mental health, family, belonging, heritage and, overall, with forming their identity. The struggles to understand their biracial identities reflect what is happening in the UK society today – biracial people find it hard to understand who they are and where they belong.

Conclusion

Biracialism as a concept and biracial identity is relatively new in the United Kingdom; thus, it is not extensively researched or understood. The mixed-race population forms a considerable part of the whole population of the UK and keeps growing every year as the world becomes more diverse and less and less segregated. Biracial or mixed-race individuals have a hard time finding their place in society as they are not a part of one community but a little bit of both (or more). This creates an illusion for them that they do not fit in, which can cause identity struggles. This analysis tried to determine whether the development of the biracial identity of the two main characters of *Swing Time* mirrors how it happens in real life – what the struggles are, how they are shaped, what affects them, and so on.

Swing Time illustrates the struggles of identity of two young biracial girls through their lives while they search for their place in the world. The novel demonstrates the ups and downs of their lives, as well as their family and beliefs.

Through analysis, it can be seen that both characters have problems and struggle to find their own identity and place in society. The issues they face are different due to the different backgrounds of the girls, but they still revolve around the same problem – identity. Both characters try to understand themselves and their place in the world from an early age but still struggle with it later in their lives as well. They face problems like racial mismatch, mental health issues, belonging somewhere, denying their heritage, feeling less than others and much more. These issues also mirror what all the research and personal experience have gathered. The main struggle for mixed-race people is fitting in, whether at home, at school or at work site. Both characters are looking for a way to fit into their own lives as well as society; they struggle with it throughout their lives, and it deeply affects

them both. It also became apparent that monoracial family members also significantly impact how the characters see themselves and race in general. Due to having different parental role models as children, the characters view themselves and race quite differently. While Tracey, having no father figure and no one to teach her about her African American heritage, disregards the black part of herself and fully embraces the white part. On the other hand, the narrator, having both parents who teach her about her heritage, embraces her African American heritage as that is what she is taught to do. This struggle mirrors some of the stories Remi Adekoya talks about in his novel (2021) and even Twine's (2004) study on how parental figures affect biracial kids.

In conclusion, *Swing Time* is an excellent example of two biracial girls on a quest to find their own identity. It is a great story about friendship, struggles, hardship and belonging. It perfectly mirrors how identity is constantly developing and not set in stone as the reviewed studies and personal stories suggested; it evolves and grows as the characters get older. The girls' journey to find a missing piece themselves is a hard and difficult one, but in the end, it is essential to realise that it is not a closed story but rather a story with a loose ending and a lifelong journey to who they are.

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Resümee

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Karolin Allikas
The Development of Biracial Identities in Zadie Smith's Novel Swing Time and in the UK Today
Segarassilise identiteedi kujunemine Zadie Smithi romaanis „Swing Time" ja tänapäevases Suurbritannias
Bakalaureusetöö
2024
Lehekülgede arv: 29

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva lõputöö eesmärk on analüüsida, kuidas peegeldab Zadie Smithi romaan "Swing Time" segarassiliste (ingl k. *biracial*) tegelaste rassilise identiteedi kujunemist samal teemal tehtud uurimuste ja elulise kogemusega Suurbritannias. Segarassist populatsioon on Suurbritannias pidevas kasvujärgus ning nende eristamine on aina aktuaalsem teema. Kuigi segarassidest rahvastik ei ole Suurbritannias uus nähtus, on see mõistena küllaltki värske ning sellel teemal ei ole tehtud piisavalt uurimistööd.

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Analüüsi osas keskendutakse kahele peategelasele ning nende identiteedi arengule terve romaani vältel. Analüüs on jagatud kolmeks – teema sissejuhatus, esimese peategelase analüüs ning teise peategelase analüüs. Analüüsis võrreldakse segmente romaanist tehtud uurimustega ning ilukirjanduses välja toodud elulise kogemusega. Kokkuvõttes antakse ülevaade leitud tulemustest.

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Märksõnad: segarass, identiteet, Zadie Smith, „Swing Time", kirjandusanalüüs

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