

University *Albert-Ludwigs*, Freiburg, Germany,
University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy,
Department of English Studies, Novi Sad

DOI 10.5937/kultura1443118M

UDK 821.111.09-31 СМИТ 3.

82.09

originalan naučni rad

ZADIE SMITH'S IRONIC NARRATOR: THE MANY TRUTHS OF MULTICULTURALISM

Abstract: *Irony mocks truth in language by always implying at least two possible meanings: the literal and the figurative one. As such, irony as a figure of speech is conducive to the topics of Zadie Smith's writing. The omniscient narrator of White Teeth tells the story of a transnational metropolis in an elaborate, ironic tone, verging on parody, in order to bring out the multifaceted and complex relational network that underlies the identities of the 20th century Londoners. The slippage and ambivalence inherent in verbal irony reflect Smith's multiethnic setting, where no easy labels of identity apply, just as the meaning of an ironic utterance is not singular and is subject to multiple interpretations. The narrator of White Teeth conveys irony on the extradiegetic level with the function to expose how living in a multiethnic society leads to a deconstruction of the subject's identity and his deeply-rooted, dogmatic truths about himself and the undying Other.*

Key words: *Black British fiction, narration, irony, multiculturalism*

Black British Fiction: A movement from the margins to the centre

The writings of Zadie Smith are commonly subsumed under the umbrella term Black British fiction, which is a comparatively recent notion in literary nomenclature that calls for some

explanation. Black British literature encompasses texts written in English by people of Caribbean, Asian or African descent from former British imperial colonies who have either immigrated to Britain or have been born in Britain by immigrant parents (Wambu n.pag.). Black British fiction sprang from the experiences of the first black wave of immigration that ensued after the decolonization process in the mid 20th century, evolving gradually into a body of versatile, yet thematically coherent works. Notable authors who marked the first wave of Black British writing include Edward Braithwaite, George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, Roger Mais, Sam Selvon and Wilson Harris, among others. These young and thriving writers relocated to London from the West Indies as already published authors, in need of the resources of the metropolis for furthering their careers.¹ Ball observes how, as a group, the young Caribbean authors were the first to write about “the (post)imperial metropolis from the point of view of the empire’s former subjects” (110). Their narratives show London as an embodiment of imperial legacy, a city that perpetuates racial segregation and social stratification typical of the life in colonies. A notable example of this stage is Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, a novel about immigrant disillusionment with the metropolis’s hostile hosts and slender chances of social, financial and romantic fulfillment. Written in a heart-warming, humorous tone, and more importantly, lending authentic Caribbean creoles to the narrative voice, the novel addresses problems of poverty and isolation of the West Indians in London, a rapidly expanding transnational cosmopolis, which these early postcolonial denizens help to transform into a “world city” it is today.

The work that truly put the Black British fiction on the map of British literary scene, in a turbulent decade when immigrants’ rights were battled over on London streets in riots and marches², was Salman Rushdie’s widely praised *Midnight’s Children* (1981). The novel communicated with its literary predecessors, but exhibited boldness and innovation which forcefully defied marginalization. This is probably the first Black British text that was not strictly labeled “Black” or “Commonwealth”, but was admitted into the “holy canon” of British literature as its rightful member³. The novel heralds a new generation of authors who moved from the themes of postcolonialism typical of the first

1 Dabydeen, D. and Wilson Tagoe, N. (1997) *A Reader’s Guide to the Westindian and Black British Literature*, London: Hansib Publishing, p. 83.

2 For a thorough description of the 1980s race politics in Britain see Gilroy (1987).

3 On the resistance to inclusion of Black British authors in the canon see Brennan (1990).

generation to the post-racial narrative of the rapidly changing multiethnic Britain that was by now the country of birth for many of these writers. The set also included Buchi Emecheta, Grace Nichols and Mike Phillips, to name but few (Wambu n.pag.). Already in 1974, Buchi Emecheta's was one of the few black female voices to be heard on the British literary scene. In a novel poignantly entitled *Second-Class Citizen*, the Nigerian-born Emecheta recorded her private experiences of racism, motherhood and domestic abuse, delivering a damning verdict on both the oppressive Nigerian patriarchy and the disinterested British institutions which fail to protect her from them. Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) is another groundbreaking text which compellingly explores the complex mixed-race heritage of its main character, the young and resourceful Anglo-Indian Karim, who opens the novel with words that would become the leitmotif of the new generation of Black British writers: "I'm an Englishman born and bred, almost" (Kureishi 3). Kureishi's much acclaimed novel proposes alternative and amorphous models of identity, marriage, race and gender relations, and it followed the success of his equally controversial screenplays *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1984) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987).

Zadie Smith, herself half British and half Jamaican, belongs to the third wave of Black British authors that mostly comprises writers born and raised on the British soil. Unlike their predecessors, the characters created by these authors feel at ease in their urban surrounding and are more successful at reconciling their British nationality with their non-British ethnic roots. This is partly so because Britain is the only home they have ever had, and partly due to the fact the times are changing to their advantage. At the turn of the century, white British racism at length subsided to give way to a new era of welcomed cultural diversity and more or less harmonious cohabitation, encouraged by the demands of global economy and the law of the capital. Though there are still frictions between the dominant and the minority groups, these are today perceived as an exception, rather than a rule. It is easy to infer that the main concern of these British-born descendants of immigrants or mixed-race couples, therefore, is no longer the economic and cultural exclusion, but defining one's identity in such a chaotic and diverse multicultural setting. Themselves often racially hybrids, recent Black British authors write of young people of fluid identity, less tied down by their roots and burdened with the past. They write of full-blooded Londoners who are, as Ball suggests "on the move and on the make" in the capital, with their eyes set on the future (224-25).

The second and third generation characters of Black British fiction, however, time and again revisit the question of who they are and where they come from. Their values are often in conflict with the values of their parents. They are forced to negotiate with the dated attitudes of the older generation, which results in an uneasy compromise. The differences between the immigrant parents and their increasingly anglicized children often make for a wider gap than the one that may exist between these youths and their English neighbours. Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black* is representative of the 1990s tendencies in Black British fiction to relegate the narrative of the older generation (parents of the main character) to a lesser status, while emphasizing the coming-of-age experiences of the street-smart protagonist Dele and his sister Dapo, as they waver between rock and a hard place in the confusing and often violent urban theatre of mid-nineties London. These youngsters move about the city with zest and confidence of locals, while it is their non-assimilated parents who are portrayed as blocking figures, confound to the domestic realm that shelters them from an alien cityscape.⁴ Some notable names of the early 21st century Black British literary scene that tackle the theme of not simply acculturation but, more interestingly, of reconfiguration of identity in London's multi-ethnic communities, are Monica Ali,⁵ Meera Syal⁶ and Andrea Levy.⁷

Irony as the stylistic choice of postcolonialism

Zadie Smith's novels *White Teeth*, *On Beauty* and *NW* portray transnational cityscapes, primarily that of London, and are as concerned with the indigenous city dwellers as with the immigrant experience. Zadie Smith is intent on finding what happens when the paths of socially and racially different Londoners cross in the interstices of the metropolis. As her novels suggest, the outcomes of these encounters are highly unpredictable and they trigger a chain of ironic events. Smith employs irony both on the level of narrative transmission and on the plot level to explore how living in a heterogenous, multiethnic society influences the characters and complicates their sense of identity and truth. Irony is a particularly apt stylistic choice for Smith as it lends itself well to the larger thematic concerns of her work. Ironic ambiguity serves to undermine her characters' exertions to achieve a "pure" identity and deconstructs their historically constructed truths about homeland, culture and

4 Ibid.

5 Ali, M. (2003) *Brick Lane*, New York: Scribner.

6 Syal, M. (1999) *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, New York: Picador.

7 Levy, A. (2004) *Small Island*, London: Headline Book Publishing.

ethnicity. For instance, irony thwarts the Pakistani born Samad's and the Caribbean born Hortense's adherence to a racially and culturally definable personality. It also hinders their British born children and grandchildren, Samad's twins and Irie Jones, in transcending their parents' inherited truths of origin, and the future predicated on this origin, which these children strive to escape. The truth lies somewhere in the middle, irony instructs them.

Irony as both a figure of speech and a situational concept seems to be conducive to the topics of Smith's writing. Smith employs both situational and verbal irony to point out the multifaceted and complex relational network that underlies her characters' identities, which is also how ironic meaning is achieved. The slippage of meaning and ambivalence that are at the core of irony are also inherent in Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, which denotes a conglomerate of the colonizer and the colonial, devised in his milestone text of postcolonial theory, *The Location of Culture*⁸. Irony is a fitting mode of writing for Smith because it shares something in common with *White Teeth*'s hybrid characters who have to negotiate their identities in the contemporary multicultural London. The world of *White Teeth* is shaken to the core by hybridization and this is highlighted with the fact that the narrative is not confound to the immigrant experience. The Chalfens, representatives of the dominant white English middle-classes with their unassailable tradition and coherence, encapsulated in their pretentious self-coined term *Chalfenism*, undergo tectonic changes from the moment their paths cross with the multi-racial Joneses and the immigrant Iqbals. In time, faith and science, history and memory, destiny and chance, Britishness and Otherness, fanatical Islam and fanatical Christianity all collide to produce exciting results and realignments of loyalty, culminating in the triumphant and utterly ironic escape of the experimental mouse at the novel's end. Irony comes as a comic punishment to all the characters who get caught up in cultural stereotypes, the commonly held "truths", about their neighbours or themselves.

8 Hybridity has been attacked by numerous scholars. One such text is Antony Easthope's article "Bhabha, Hybridity and Identity" where the author states that the concept of *hybridity* is analogous to Derrida's *difference* (only appropriated for the colonial context) and that it suffers from the same flaws as Derrida's term. Namely, just as Derrida avoids defining presence that would have to have a substance in order to dissolve into difference, so Bhabha fails to explain how it is possible for hybridity to undermine identity, if Bhabha negates the possibility of both a coherent identity and subjectivity that would give it substance. Easthope even goes on to assert that living in a state of in-betweenness, of interstices, i.e. between multiple identities, which is what Bhabha invites us to do, amounts to psychosis.

The ironic narrator of White Teeth

The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory (Cuddon 1998) maintains that even though irony defies definition, it always involves a discrepancy between words and their meaning, or between actions and results, or between appearance and reality. The two basic kinds of irony to be distinguished are verbal irony and the irony of situation. Sperber and Wilson agree with the traditional stance that ironic meaning usually implies the opposite of what is said, but they add that the motivation for and the effects of irony are much more varied. Beside the implication that the content of the said is untrue (what is often called the substitute of the literal meaning with the figurative one), there are also ironic questions, ironic euphemisms, and ironic allusions to the inappropriateness or irrelevance of what is said, rather than only to its inaccuracy (309).

The list of the most versed English ironists includes Chaucer, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Defoe, Swift, Fielding, Byron, Thomas Hardy, Shaw, Joyce, Evelyn Waugh and Iris Murdoch. More recently, irony has been the chosen tool of postcolonial authors, used to destabilize the fixed relations of centre and periphery, and expose the doubling in hegemonic practices and discourses. As Linda Hutcheon observes in her seminal work on irony *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, irony is a useful counter-discourse to essentialist theories of race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality⁹ as well as a “pungent way of writing back” at the colonial master.¹⁰ By breeding ambiguity in the text, irony exposes the falseness of the colonizer’s “universal truths”, i.e. his carefully devised propagandist stereotypes of the natives.

In keeping with this postcolonial tradition, it is not inconsequential that *White Teeth* abounds in verbal irony at the discourse level, and that the narrative voice exudes an ironic tone. Irony generated by the narrator is verbal irony, i.e. the kind of irony that follows from specific linguistic choices which produce a site of ambivalence and multiple interpretations. The authorial narrator relies on pointed commentary, insightful observations, puns and juxtapositions to produce a comic effect, but more importantly, to reveal the falseness of truths that Smith’s characters hold on to or truths they are running away from. Verbal irony is often the linguistic instrument by means of which the situational irony is communicated. The narrator’s comments serve to amplify the irony at the plot level, which may even be lost for the reader

9 Hutcheon, L. (2004) *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, New York: Routledge, p. 30.

10 New, W. H. (2003) *Grandchild of Empire: About Irony, Mainly in the Commonwealth*, Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, p. 59.

if the narrator were not such an apt ironist. The narrator of *White Teeth* is an irresistibly sardonic, yet sympathetic authorial persona who at times recedes in the background to give floor to figural narrative situation, i.e. the seemingly unmediated thought content of the reflector character. Yet the narrator continually reminds us of herself through comments, evaluations and jokes, at times addressing the reader, one example being when she invites the reader not to be jealous of the dashing Millat's sexual allure (WT 368). Although the narrator's irony is mostly in the service of ridicule, it is not condescending, nor does it alienate the reader. The narrator, even at her most caustic, retains a benevolent god-like attitude to the characters, or at least one of a nosy, but well-meaning neighbour. The narrator's ironic disposition is, thus, vital for Smith's deft characterization, as it informs the narrative with highly realistic and easy to identify with paradoxes and delusions of daily realities in a metropolis.

Narrative irony is almost never the simple reversal of meaning in the novel, i.e. the substitution of the intended meaning with an utterance that states the opposite. It is nuanced and could roughly be classified into five loose categories of irony as outlined by Hutcheon (156): (1) change of register; (2) exaggeration/understatement (3) contradiction/incongruity; (4) repetition/echoic mention.¹¹

Change of register is a very common strategy of the narrator, where trivial, banal or embarrassing situations are expressed in an overly lofty tone and incongruent formal vocabulary. The reverse also applies, where colloquial, even vulgar expressions are mingled with a markedly ceremonial tone to denote a contrast in perception of the character and his/her reality, or to the contradiction in the character's personality. It is often found in contrasts between the register of a character's idiom or thoughts and the register of the narrator's comments, or psychonarration. For example, the narrator interrupts a rather colloquial speech delivered by Shiva to Samad about Samad's failed affair with a white Protestant woman, with an ironic remark about Shiva's educational improvement:

“ ‘Told you,’ said Shiva, shaking his head and passing Samad a basket of yellow napkins to be shaped like castles. ‘I told you not to fuck with that business, didn’t I. Too much history there, man. You see, it ain’t just you she’s angry with, is it?’ Samad shrugged and began on the turrets. ‘No man, history, history. It’s all brown man leaving English woman, it’s all Nehru saying See-Ya to Madam Britannia.’ Shiva, in an effort to improve himself,

¹¹ Hutcheon also mentions literalization/simplification as a signal of irony. However, I was unable to find representative material for this specific feature in the language of the narrator of *White Teeth*.

had joined the Open University. ‘It’s all complicated, complicated shit, it’s all about pride. Ten quid says she wanted you as a servant boy, a wallah peeling the grapes’ (WT 202).

Two things can be inferred from the narrator’s comment: one is that although Shiva’s knowledge of history has improved at the Open University, his language is still markedly working-class. The other one is the poignant observation that Shiva makes about the survival of colonial dichotomies and racist power structures, still alive and well in the early 1990s London setting of the scene, alerting us to the fact that imperial legacy lives on to influence people’s professional and romantic lives even this late in the day. The shift of register correlates with contradiction/incongruity as another common indication of irony, because the mismatch of language with the situation, or juxtaposition of formal and informal register, highlights the discrepancy between how the characters perceive themselves and the reality of their position. Shift of register is also important for characterization, as when one character uses an overly formal and polite language in a dialogue with another character that speaks in a substandard London dialect and uses swear words. Such is the scene where an extremely polished and “more English than the English” Magid, recently returned from Pakistan, bothers the London born and bred Irie about some commonalities of Western life that he finds puzzling, such as the meaning of “shrink to fit” jeans (WT 428-29).

Contradiction or incongruity at the verbal level occurs when the narrator’s comment of a situation contains an unexpected twist or tone that does not coalesce with the circumstances. For example, there can be an incongruity between the solemnity of a situation, as it is perceived by a character, and the narrator’s flippant, even farcical treatment of the subject. Incongruity occurs, when, for instance, the narrator remarks that the place that Archie has chosen for his failed suicide is “not a place a man came to die, but “a place a man came in order to go to other places via the A41” (WT 3). The ironic tone already hints that Archie’s plan to end his life will fall through, and that the situation will have a comical rather than the expected tragic epilogue. Indeed, in a bizarre turn of events, Archie’s life is saved by a flock of pigeons who will at that precise moment defecate on the roof of the local butcher’s, prompting the owner to step outside and spot Archie as he was trying to gas himself. A similar discordance between a tragic situation and concepts from media entertainment is employed in the observation that Archie’s flashback of his life, as he was preparing to die, was a “a short, unedifying viewing experience, low on entertainment value, the metaphysical equivalent of the Queen’s speech”,

which pokes fun not just at Archie's pretensions at death, but at the Queen as well (WT 14). In this scene, the clash of the trivial with the dignified sparks the ironic effect both at the discourse level and the plot level, prompting Archie not to take himself or his troubles too seriously.

Incongruity can also appear in another common form, when terminology from a scientific field, military jargon, or some other specific register is applied by the narrator to a situation in everyday life. For example, a rather ordinary male get-together at a local pub to drink and discuss the recent developments is ironically called a *summit* by the narrator to emphasize the importance of the meeting for Archie and Samad, who assume the role of the heads of state, while their small-scale personal problems are compared to the events of utmost importance for the country. Such type of incongruity is also found when it is said that "it took him [Archie] an hour and a quarter just *to get through enemy lines*" (9, my emphasis) when he was visiting his recently divorced wife to reclaim a broken Hoover. The ironic word choice establishes a comic parallel between a war and a divorce, which is particularly apt when taking into account Archie's and Samad's poor performance in WWII, for which these two men must compensate by making mini-wars out of their commonplace experiences.

Another scene where war rhetoric is employed for an everyday circumstance is for the tense atmosphere in the hair salon where black women take their desperate desire to straighten their curly hair in order to approximate the dominant culture's ideal of beauty. The passage vividly describes the extent of pain these women are prepared to endure for the sake of this, while the workers at the salon are portrayed as ruthless authorities and arbiters of truth. The narrator observes:

"In comparison, the female section of P. K's was a deathly thing. Here, the impossible desire for straightness and 'movement' fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle; here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damnest to beat each curly hair into submission" (WT 275).

The beauty parlour is, contrary to what the concept of this establishment normally implies, not a place where black women came to relax and be pampered, but a bloody battle ground where endurance was put to the test, primarily because of the excruciatingly painful sensations caused by ammonia on these women's heads that are described further in the text and which make Irie bleed. The warring parties here are ultimately the English and the African standards of beauty, and the English side seems to be winning by a landslide. Alghamdi identifies

an additional situational irony in this scene that “borders on absurdity”: Irie desires to look less Jamaican and more European in order to appeal to Millat, but ironically, Millat is not white, either (Alghamdi 121). It reminds us that both the Pakistani Millat and the very Caribbean looking Irie have internalized European ideals of beauty which they strive to achieve.

Exaggeration and understatement, the latter frequently in the form of litotes and euphemisms, make for another effective tool of irony. In a way, they are a variant of incongruity between expression and situation, since the language used is either markedly stronger or weaker than the situation in question requires. An ironic exaggeration is felt when the enthusiastic Archie is hailed at the door of a commune party by a youngster who cultivates a strong dislike of corduroy in which Archie is dressed from head to foot, so the narrator remarks that for this young man “to be confronted with a mass of it, at nine a.m. on the first day of a New Year, is an apparition *lethal* in its sheer quantity of negative vibes” (WT 19, my emphasis). Similarly, the delusions and arrogance of adolescence are ironized with hyperbolic language when the narrator says of the 15-year-old Irie:

“She was that *age*. Whatever she said burst like genius into centuries of silence. Whatever she touched was the first stroke of its kind. Whatever she believed was not formed by faith but carved from certainty. Whatever she thought was the first time such thought had ever been think” (WT 238).

An additional comic effect is provided by the non-standard past participle of the verb *think* by analogy with the paradigmatic forms of comparable verbs. In a similar vein, the narrator ridicules the Iqbals’ cousin Zinat, who prompts Samad to tell her his secret, reminding him of her confidentiality and discretion. The narrator juxtaposes Zinat’s covenant with an explanation that “whatever was told Zinat invariably lit up the telephone network, rebounded off aials, radio-waves and satellites along the way, picked up finally by advanced alien civilizations as it bounced through the atmosphere of planets removed from this one” (WT 165-66). On the other end of this spectrum, an understatement for sex is comically used to denote the difference between principles and practice in the scene when the teenage Clara finally meets her high-school crush Ryan Topps on a mission to convert him to The Church Of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the encounter ends with them “fumbling on Ryan’s couch (*which went a good deal further than one might expect of a Christian girl*)” (WT 36, original emphasis). An understatement is also employed in relation to Samad, to highlight Samad’s psychological downplaying of his own guilt in kidnapping his

son, when it is said that Samad was aware “that he had *not yet informed Alsana*” about his plans (WT 196, original emphasis).

Repetition and echoic mention reverberate throughout the novel and they function either as a symbol that is woven through different plotlines (such as teeth), or as a motif that has a function in irony. Such is the phrase “dying is no easy trick” which is ironic in its oxymoronic word choice, but also in its deployment in every occasion when a character does not “manage” to die according to a plan. It is first used for Archie’s failed suicide and later for Archie’s and Samad’s captain Dickinson-Smith, whom, much to his chagrin, death has evaded for the most of WWII. Eventually, the captain does not die a heroic English death at the hands of a foreign enemy, in the tradition of his heroic family, but shamefully commits suicide.

The most potent echoic mentions, however, are intertextual quotes from religious texts, such as the Bible and Quran, which the characters appropriate for their own ends and repeat with a difference. For example, when the phrase “all things are pure to the pure” is repeated several times in relation to Samad, each time it has an added connotation that it takes up from Samad’s current state of mind and behavior, and these new associations alter the original meaning of the phrase in the holy text. It is strategically positioned in the novel to emphasize Samad’s relativization and trivialization of Muslim doctrines. The irony is in the fact that Samad desires desperately to be a good Muslim and demands of his entire family to do the same, yet he eschews religious principles by interpreting them flexibly when he is faced with a temptation which he is too weak to resist. The phrase is first introduced when Samad is attracted to his sons’ music teacher and is repeated by him while he is compulsively masturbating, where the line serves to justify his sinful behavior to himself. His distortion of the phrase echoes over the following pages each time Samad sins, as when he is going to meet Poppy Burt-Jones. Irony is highlighted by coupling this phrase from a religious text with another one, a colloquial, typically British phrase: “can’t say fairer than that”. These two lines alternate to trivialize Samad’s faith and to ironically foreground Samad’s split identity between a devout Pakistani Muslim and a secular modern British man, a split to which he does not admit. Samad’s reinterpretation of religious principles ultimately point to their dysfunctionality in the late 20th century, hybrid world of London that Samad inhabits and shed light on the necessity to redefine them according to the altered circumstances. The novel creates an impression that Samad is indeed an honest Muslim who gives his best to do the right thing but gets stuck in a psychotic mental divide. Samad’s repetition of a religious line with a difference

and his stretching of its boundaries to accommodate his behavior should be seen as a constructive effort toward a feasible form of religion, one that takes into account the divided loyalties of life in immigration. As immigrant is transformed by foreign influence, so too their culture has to evolve in order to still have the power of a universal truth. Tradition can survive only if, in Deleuzian terms, it is repeated with a difference.

In yet another echoic mention, the narrator quotes St. Paul, “It is better to marry than to burn (with passion)”, with reference to the wedding of Archie and Clara. However, this quote is ironized by means of the one that follows it. The narrator sarcastically adds: “Good advice. Of course, *First Corinthians* also inform us that we *should not muzzle the fox while it is treading out the grain* – so, go figure” (WT 46). The narrator ridicules the second quote, because it commands little authority in the modern world, and undermines the first quote in the process, making clear she does not believe that the first quote is such a valid piece of advice after all. Another prominent intertextual echo is the reading of Shakespeare’s sonnet 130 in English class that parallels 15-year-old Irie’s musings about her physical appearance. Irie’s hope of finding a reflection of herself in the sonnet is aborted by her white English teacher who assures her there is no chance that Shakespeare dedicated this sonnet to a black, i.e. African woman.

Repetition has a special place in the narrator’s spectrum of ironic strategies, as it participates in the theme of the novel, i.e. the immigrants’ oscillation between the tradition and the modern, between past and present, between homeland and the new land. Repetition is what the characters do because they are unable to tear away from the past and are too entangled in the roots that bind them to a homeland that is irrecoverable. The narrator notices that the immigrants are prone to traumatic repetition and that it probably has to do with their “moving from West to East or East to West or from island to island”. She continues:

“Even when you arrive, you are going back and forth; your children are going round and round. There’s no proper term for it – original sin seems too harsh; maybe original trauma would be better. A trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all, and this is the tragedy of the Iqbals – that they can’t help but re-enact the dash they once made from one land to another, from one faith to another from one brown mother country into the pale, freckled arms of an imperial sovereign. It will take a few replays before they move on to the next tune” (WT 161-62).

Conclusion

Smith's deft and varied deployment of irony at the discourse level in *White Teeth* brings home the lessons of British struggle with cultural dilution, loss of homeland, and racism. It targets the crisis of identity and hybridization of British society in the last few decades, which is especially observable in the second generation characters, Magid, Millat and Irie. Narrator's irony hybridizes truth, and tells the characters of Smith's novels they are not who they seem to be by their skin, it being comparable with the literal, surface meaning of an ironic utterance. The secondary, figurative meanings of an ironic utterance run parallel to the secondary underlying aspects of *White Teeth's* characters, such as the latent British mentality of non-British immigrant children. The cultural and genetic exchange goes in all directions in Smith's multiethnic hodge-podge: the immigrant characters and their children are anglicized, but the mainstream English population represented by the Chalfens is also deeply affected by their interaction with the Iqbals and the Joneses. However, this is not where the exchange ends, as the immigrants are further influenced by one another and the genetic and cultural ties are achieved across minority and majority communities, taking the form of friendships, antagonisms, professional and love affairs.

By means of verbal irony, the narrator dismantles given truths, because whatever is read or heard in verbal irony, always points to something else that goes into its making, which is not readily visible. Through irony, the stable meanings of origin, home and identity of the characters are destabilized and made ambiguous. Irony always contains at least two possible meanings: the literal one and the figurative one. More often than not, it goes even further, implying manifold interpretations of one and the same string of words. The narrator's ambivalence in *White Teeth* thus serves to question the identities of both the minorities and of the white Britons, and reveals just how "contaminated" these seemingly discreet groups are by one another. Irony is the reason behind the success of *White Teeth's* social commentary on cultural politics in contemporary Britain. It is the tool by which Smith challenges the essentialist basis of her characters' identification with any ethnic or cultural category, performing an infinitely important, if not the principal humanist task in the present day, of exposing the truth of origin as a myth of origin.

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Татјана Миловасављевић
Универзитет *Albert-Ludvigs* у Фрајбургу, Немачка,
Универзитет у Новом Саду, Филозофски факултет –
Катедра за англистику, Нови Сад

ИРОНИЧНИ ПРИПОВЕДАЧ ЗЕЈДИ СМИТ:
ВИШЕ ЛИЦА ИСТИНЕ У МУЛТИКУЛТУРАЛИЗМУ

Сажетак

Иронија се поиграва истином у језику тако што имплицира бар два значења истог исказа: буквално и фигуративно. Као таква, иронија је погодна стилско оруђе за уобличавање тема којима се баве романи Зејди Смит (*Zadie Smith*). Свезнајући приповедач Белих зуба (*White Teeth*) казује причу о савременом животу у наднационалној метрополи својим неумољиво ироничним тоном, флертујући са пародијом, разоткривајући њоме вишеслојне идентитете житеља Лондона 20. века. Измицање значења и амбивалентност који су суштина вербалне ироније, чине ову стилску фигуру језичким панданом мултиетничког универзума романа, који, као и иронија, одолева дефиницији. Ликови који га настањују, попут ироније, немају јединствено значење и подлежу вишеструким интерпретацијама. Приповедачева иронија тако на екстрадијегетском нивоу демонстрира како живот у једној хетерогеној, мултиетничкој заједници води подривању идентитета и деконструкцији дубоко укоревених догматских истина субјекта о себи и неуништивом Другом.

Кључне речи: *црна британска проза, приповедни поступак, иронија, мултикултурализам*

