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1. Introduction

Zadie Smith writes mainly about people from different racial and national heritages, political beliefs and viewpoints. She deliberately utilises stereotypes and, whilst pandering to the reader's black-and-white thinking, she also discredits it at the same time. Furthermore she demonstrates that we, as human beings, are socially constructed and, whilst different, we are all human and are longing for and entertaining the same wishes.

Identity and the manner in which people of mixed parentage are able to develop their own particular individual hybridity within a multicultural society is at the centre of her novels. This diploma thesis focuses on the topic of *Constructions of identity in Zadie Smith's On Beauty* and aims to analyse how Smith deals with and constructs this central theme. Zadie Smith, being of mixed ethnic origin herself, blends well into the new ethnotrend encroaching on literature. In the same vein authors like Meera Syal and Monica Ali act as educated cultural travellers offering insights in two differing cultures.

Elaine Scarry's *On beauty and being just* is named by Smith in the acknowledgements at the beginning of *On Beauty* as one influence for the book. Scarry states that whenever something beautiful is seen, it becomes mesmerising, conjuring up past memories whilst initiating the creation of something new. This could be the reason behind Zadie Smith's open reference to Forster's *Howards End* as a model and an intertext for *On Beauty*, which is expatiated in chapter 2.

There are not, however, merely numerous parallels with regard to plot and structure, but there also seems to be a similar use of pairs of oppositions as a means of grouping the characters and giving them a unique identity. It is shown in chapter 3 that it is the antithetical qualities of black and white, male and female, fat and slim or educated and uneducated around which

characters are grouped and their identities are forged. Howard and his African-American wife Kiki function as opposites elucidating and confirming the other's opposed worldview. While Howard is depicted as a matter-of-fact intellectual, it is Kiki who embodies his emotional counterpart. Their three children Jerome, Zora and Levi are of mixed decent and suffer with their hybrid identity. Exposed as feeling trapped between their father's academic realm and their mother's African American heritage, they are portrayed as not fully belonging to either world.

Postcolonialism as one theoretical framework for scrutinizing the novel is introduced in chapter 4. It attempts to theorise „[...]the similar past of imperialism or colonial rule; imposition of the language of the coloniser as the discourse of acceptable expression; erasure of or denial of language of origin; and imposition and normalisation of the worldview of the coloniser over that of indigenous people, first settlers or forcibly immigrated peoples“ (Wisker, 172). Moreover, postcolonialism deals with issues of identity of former colonisers and the colonised. Whilst she herself is dismissing this positioning, Zadie Smith was repeatedly mentioned in connection with postcolonialism. Laura Moss even concluded Zadie Smith to be a post-postcolonial writer, dealing with those problems and stereotypes of second or third generation immigrants in the former colonising countries.

Chapter 5 is solely concerned with identity as a concept in *On Beauty*. The concept of EA, the 'ethnically ambiguous', is explicated and as Smith is very much concerned with authenticity in her essay „Fail Better“, it merits further discussion. Identity and the different strands of identity are analysed in greater detail in chapter 6 which forms the main body of this thesis. Identity is multi-faceted and as such is subdivided into personal identity, female identity, national identity and social identity. Concise theoretical introductions offer a starting point for a more detailed study of each strand of identity as developed in the novel. Chapter 7 encompasses identity within society and systems of representation which allow us to position ourselves within communities. Giving a definition of identity and embarking on the question

why identity is of such importance in modern society is discussed in chapter 8.

Homi Bhaba, as an important purveyor of postcolonialism, is introduced in chapter 9 and his theory of hybrid identity and diaspora is established. “Bhaba contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in an area that he calls 'The Third Space of enunciation'.” (Wisker, 190). It is illustrated that second or third generation migrants face similar racism to those of earlier generations as well as experiencing a lack of cultural heritage and sense of uprootedness. In contrast, the experience of being caught between two countries and traditions allows a translation between cultures with the potential to positively fuel their creativity.

Chapter 10 is concerned with beauty and how the characters' identities are portrayed through their conceptions of beauty. This discussion of beauty also refers back to Chapter 2 and Elaine Scarry. Her idea of the beautiful, which should be taken back to the universities, is perfectly mirrored in Howard. As a university lecturer and an academic he is used to overanalysing and intellectually responding to beauty and the arts. Only when he forgets his lecture notes and is able to abandon his theoretical knowledge can he perceive Kiki's beauty and retrieve his love.

A short conclusion (chapter 11) summarises the outcome of this thesis.

2. *On Beauty and being just*

In the acknowledgements at the beginning of her book, Zadie Smith does not only name the contents of Elaine Scarry's philosophical essay *On Beauty and being just* as one inspiration for her book, but she also states that the very title of the paper mentioned contributed to her work. Scarry was one of her colleagues during the time she spent as a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies in Harvard in 2002-2003. In her essay Elaine Scarry discussed beauty and stated that it

[...] brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people. Sometimes it gives rise to exact replication and other times to resemblances and still other times to things whose connection to the original site of inspiration is unrecognizable. (Scarry, 3)

Scarry claimed that when falling for the beauty of something, attempts are made not only to replicate the beautiful object itself, but also to backtrack and retrace the heritage of the beautiful article. Thereafter, a point is reached where the origin can no longer be traced and the original conceptual point of beauty is lost. Notwithstanding this, some air of the original truth can still be appreciated in the reproduced object.

Scarry also focuses on the responsibilities of the universities. She is confident that we submit ourselves to the minds of teachers and professors in order to bring light and clarity to that which has no such intelligibility in itself.

By perpetuating beauty, institutions of education help incite the will toward continual creation. Sometimes their institutional gravity and awkwardness can seem totally out of register with beauty, which like a small bird, has an aura of fragility. (Scarry, 8)

She defends the appreciation of beauty and holds that

[...] admiration of art is an ethical act which should be brought back to the universities. To misstate, or even merely understate, the relation of the universities to beauty is one kind

of error that can be made. A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed. (Scarry, 8)

Since Scarry's book centres on the generative nature of beauty, Smith's book also makes use of this idea of self-begetting pulchritude. She not only uses the title of Scarry's essay but incorporates her idea of reproduction while additionally using Forster's novel *Howards End*. Amine Laila in her review on *On Beauty* goes as far as to say that Zadie Smith developed character relations that all evolve around desire and self-deception.

3. *Howards End* as a model and an intertext for *On Beauty*

When Kiki misidentifies a quote from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* for a poem by Sylvia Plath, Christian answers that "Plath stripped it for parts" (OB, 102). As Andrew Hay detects in his article "A thing of Beauty"¹ this indeed is what Smith did to *Howards End*: she disassembled the structure of *Howards End* and rearranged some parts of it to form the skeleton of *On Beauty*. The semblances with *Howards End* are perceived by a literate readership as early as the first sentence of the book. Forster's "One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister" (HE, 17) is clearly taken as a model for "One may as well begin with Jerome's emails to his father" (OB, 3) in *On Beauty*. Moreover, Rimmon-Kenan points out that "information and attitudes presented at an early stage of the text tend to encourage the reader to interpret everything in their light" (Rimmon-Kenan, 121).

This initial impression is only reinforced by the first series of events which show clear parallels – a strategy to be later abandoned. Still, in the course of the story, "even rejected hypotheses may continue exercising some influence on the reader's comprehension" (Rimmon-Kenan, 122). The beginning, and most importantly, the first sentences of a novel are those parts which register most readily within our consciousness.² Therefore, even if during the course of the novel the reader puts aside his first impressions, the idea of similarity between *On Beauty* and *Howards End* and its characters may still linger and intrigue the reader into searching for non-existing echoes in the book. Equally, it casts a different shadow and effect on the reader's evaluation of other events which have relevance to *Howards End*.

¹ Hay, <http://www.oxonianreview.org/issues/5-1/5-1hay.html> [22.7.2008].

² Cf. Wenzel, 163.

Peter Kemp criticises Smith's reworking of Forster's *Howards End* in the Sunday Times. He explains that “cannibalising one of his novels, giving its components a gaudy re-spray and recycling into what turns out to be a ramshackle vehicle for an ill-sorted heap of concerns” (Kemp, *On Beauty by Zadie Smith*) in his understanding is a strange way of giving homage to Forster. In other instances, however, Smith obviously makes fun of her referring to the structural skeleton of Forster's *Howards End* when Howard asks “Can't stand Forster. Enjoying it?” (OB, 298). Bearing that in mind, in *On Beauty*, *Howards End* could in fact culminate in a way to mean “Howard's end”. Beauty, which is the main force in the novel, brings Zora to strive for truth just as it inspires Jerome to search for love, and for Levi it becomes important to find justice. Howard, however, by falling for Victoria, almost loses his family and his wife.

The reference to *Howards End*, however, is not the only thing giving shape to the identity of the characters and *On Beauty*, which was met with criticism: there is Simon Schama's *Rembrandt's Eyes* and Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and being just*. “Literary allusions persist throughout Smith's novel. On occasion these references are clumsy or forced” (Tynan, 79). In particular, Smith's inclusion of her husband's already published poem and imputing the character of Claire with his poem 'On Beauty' was frequently criticised. Maeve Tynan goes as far as to say that

Smith would do well to recall Helen Schlegel's appraisal of books, that they mean us to use them for sign-posts, and are not to blame, if, in our weakness, we mistake the signposts for destination. (Tynan, 89)

Smith, however, uses intertextuality as a means of “incorporating a dual gaze into past and future” (Tynan, 81) and seemingly used this form of the novel to highlight its hybrid characters.

Howards End and *On Beauty* immerse the readers in the family lives of their characters, with a young family member seemingly troubled and in love. Reading Jerome's somewhat naive and petulant e-mail, the readers find themselves a hundred years ahead in the computer age with reversed gender-roles: no longer is it a young girl who is seduced by a man but a young man who is entrapped by a girl. In both novels a letter sets the events in motion. The parallel action rises with Aunt Juley travelling to *Howards End* and climaxes with the meeting of the Schlegel sisters and Leonard Bast at a concert. This key-event is mirrored in *On Beauty* with Carl meeting the Belsey children at a concert. While the Schlegel sisters were listening to Beethoven's Fifth together with their German relatives, the Belsey family attends Mozart's Requiem. Ulka Anjaria argues that here the novel reaches its height of parallelism and the simultaneously unfolding plots thereafter seem to disconnect.

In both novels, the concert becomes a site of tension between the contingencies of domestic life on one hand and transcendental aesthetic appreciation on the other – a tension that sets the stage for the plots to come.“ (Anjaria, 41)

On Beauty - just like *Howards End* - is modelled on the basis of a number of pairs of oppositions. “No reader of the opening chapters of *Howards End* could fail to gather that the Schlegels and the Wilcoxens are meant to be contrasted“ (Bradshaw, 58). Similarly the Belseys and the Kippsens are as conflicting in their world view. Thus the characters in *On Beauty* live in a world of alternatives which shape their identities. However, they are aware of the incompatibility of certain options at their disposal. The “knowledge of the impossibility of connection forms a crucial part of their individual narratives of *Bildung*“ (Anjaria, 40). The world of the Schlegel sisters in *Howards End* can be defined much clearer than that: The ethically good is approved of with hardly any intermittent shades of grey.

While similarly structured, *On Beauty* clearly bears the imprint of the intervening decades and the decolonization of literature by not only introducing binaries of aesthetic value which make claims on the actions of individual characters, but by allowing

the suppressed terms, the devalued aesthetic categories, to index alternative aesthetic universes which make competing claims on the plot in a way not seen in *Howards End*. (Anjaria, 40)

In “*On Beauty* and Being Postcolonial” Ulka Anjaria points out that *On Beauty* functions through the dynamic principle of conflict. Nevertheless, she discloses that while the individual characters have to find their way through an unjust world ruled by aesthetic norms, an awareness of the often drastic differences that govern their world is vital to them. The characters of *On Beauty* have been moulded at a time when binary aesthetics were adamantly refused. The story can, therefore, only develop in a Fosterian way when the needs of a homely life, which Ulka Anjaria refers to as 'novelistic', are absorbed by the anti-aesthetics of a decolonised world. The interdependency of structure and plot depicts the characters' aesthetic crises and serves as an annotation of beauty in general. At the same time, however, it is self-referential in such a way that it comments on the beauty of the novel itself:

Because ... we're so binary, of course, in the way we think. We tend to think in opposites, in the Christian world. We're structured like that – Howard always says that's the trouble. (OB, 175)

3.1. Pairs of oppositions used to create the theme of identity in *On Beauty*

Howards End is built around opposing values and ideas, around the antithesis of prose and passion, English and German background as well as the lower and the upper-middle classes. This is mirrored in *On Beauty* as the whole novel is based on binary oppositions and thus created endeavours. Just as the inherently hybrid characters combine conflicting sets of features, the whole novel is based on oppositions which dictate the course unfurled by the novel and its characters. These antithetical qualities of black and white, male and female, beautiful and ugly, fat and slim or educated and

uneducated are universal to the characters and exist alongside each other. It is these oppositions around which the characters are grouped, the events are arranged and their identity is shaped. In this respect, Smith has singled out identity to become one of her main points of contention. In *Howards End* as well as in *On Beauty* people of three utmost different backgrounds and worldviews collide and manage to interact with each other. Carl and Leonard Bast are both typical representatives of the lower/working classes, the Schlegel sisters and the Belseys both aligned as members of the intellectual middle class, whereas the Wilcoxes and the Kippses are both portrayed as being affiliated to the conservative establishment.

Postcolonial theory which can be deemed relevant for analysis, concentrates particularly on binary oppositions within the plot structure:

Bei dem Versuch, erzähltheoretische Kategorien der Figurendarstellung zu postkolonialen Identitäts- und Alteritätszuschreibungen in Bezug zu setzen, erweisen sich Analysen der Kontrast- und Korrespondenzrelationen als besonders fruchtbar. (Birk and Neumann,133)

A close analysis of those categories may shed light on the construction of identity and the hybrid features of different characters as well as the text itself. The most obvious opposition, decisive in shaping identities within *On Beauty* is that of black and white. This is perfectly mirrored in the relationship between Kiki and Howard and their offspring. Howard's father Harold disapproved of his son marrying a black woman. Kiki's ancestors had been slaves, her great-grandmother was a maid and her only grandmother Lily had been a nurse and had inherited the Belsey residence, 83 Langham. "An inheritance on this scale changes everything for a poor family in America: it makes them middle class" (OB, 17). Kiki feels indebted to the "bedside charm" (OB, 54) of her grandmother for bestowing her with the gift of a house. Living in an all white environment she is very much aware of her being different, which clearly shapes and influences her sense of identity. Furthermore, her body-size stereotypes her as a "big-mama" with little chance for timidity or shyness. She is surrounded by either white academics

or black servants and the lower classes, to whom she feels much more akin. Her children grow up in white upper-class surroundings and their being mixed-race, makes it difficult for them to position themselves within this divided world and establish a feeling of genuine identity.

Although Kiki's husband Howard is critical of the aesthetics of others and is an opponent of Old Masters, he uses a different scale when dealing with women. He is blind to his wife's beauty which has changed over time. Howard represents the intellectual world, while his wife Kiki plays the intuitive and emotional counterpart. This opposition is vital in entrenching their identity and is reinforced by the conversation between Carlene Kipps and Kiki during their first encounter. At first it is their children who are initially connected and only later in the course of the novel the two women develop ties of friendship. Carlene's neo-conservative husband Monty is not only an art historian like Howard, but he is also a fierce opponent. Howard Belsey dislikes and dreads beauty. At university he continuously disillusiones his students and shatters their innate affection for the beautiful with his dry commentary. Monty Kipps on the other hand is something of a hypocritical Christian: he turns Haitian art into money and begins an affair with a college student while his wife suffers from terminal cancer. Still, Howard's son Jerome is impressed by Monty's anti-liberal ideas and turns to Christianity and conservatism after staying with the Kippsens during an internship in London. Howard and Monty themselves are not only rivals at university who disagree on Rembrandt, but they are also political opponents.

Although "Howard the radical art theorist" and Monty "the cultural conservative" (OB, 115) are contrasted they still function as "negative exemplars of emotionally weak men" (Hay, *A thing of Beauty?*).

Howard has always disliked Monty, as any sensible liberal would dislike a man who had dedicated his life to the perverse politics of right-wing iconoclasm, but he had never really hated him, until he had heard the news, three years ago, that Kipps too was writing a book about Rembrandt. (OB, 29)

Monty, although he is black, is against affirmative action and is even described as a “dapper fascist” (OB, 119) who “thinks affirmative action is the work of the devil” (OB, 121). Bearing in mind that the Kippsen children are very self-confident and successful whereas Jerome and Zora both seem to be very insecure and prone to the slightest trepidation, one wonders about “Howard's titular deputy in Wellington's Affirmative Action committee” (OB, 122). Moreover, it is interesting that both Michael and Victoria, who are very adapted as personalities, have something uncanny about them. With Michael it is his very stereotypically black behaviour that he shows when he is agitated, whilst Victoria is the typical jezebel.

Interestingly, Howard's youngest son Levi has been socially pigeon-holed as middle class, but for him it is more essential to be “street“. For Levi this is of particular importance and acting powerfully on the street is vital in that social stratum. He tries to adapt, especially with his language, but he cannot hide that he comes from a good family. Carl is his direct counterpart: he really is from Roxbury and is desperate to meet interesting people. He is reluctantly accepted to Wellington College and is then pushed aside into a job at university. Carl and Leonard Bast inhabit different worlds to that of the Schlegels or the Belseys and appear as the odd ones out in the audience. While Leonard Bast is mainly a catalyst for a series of crunches within the Schlegel family, Zadie Smith opens a strand of plot with Carl who shows an alternative kind of beauty to the aesthetic universes of Howard and Monty.

Ulka Anjaria also comments on the importance of Carl's role in the novel as a “radically revalued Leonard Bast” (Anjara, 43). She further states that “Carl exists as a foil against which the primary strand of the novel unfolds, which details Howard's struggle to live under the influence of a theoretical stance, which, untenably, disavows aesthetics altogether” (Anjaria 43). Zadie Smith follows Carl into an alternate universe which again functions as an opposition to the overtly theoretical world inhabited by Howard and his university colleagues. 'Battling perspectives' (Paproth, 14) are propellant in

the novel, largely focusing on the different characters and their attitudes towards academia and social life. One of the best examples of such an extreme is definitely Zora. Whilst at the concert she does not really listen but rather lets herself be guided through the piece on CD:

Zora concentrating on her Discman, through which a recording of the voice of Professor N.R.A. Gould carefully guided her through each movement. Poor Zora – she lived through footnotes. (OB, 70)

On Beauty is a text full of voices and thus gives the reader an image of a world full of opportunities and differing realities. The text is concerned with the “overtly definitive worldviews held by her characters” (Paproth, 14) which are contrasted and compared throughout the novel. Furthermore, the novel was at times criticised for its number of characters and above all for some of her first person narration which, according to Andrew Hay, falters the story and reminds him of portentous Victorian novels. He states that “[s]uch general observation was still possible in the Edwardian world of Forster's fiction, but in the twenty-first century world of *On Beauty*, it seems contrived and anachronistic” (Hay, *A thing of Beauty?*). As examples of such instances he mainly names the dialogues between Kiki and Carlene. Smith obviously copied Forster's style as with her characters, “the point of view weasels into character's heads” (Murphy Moo, *Zadie, Take Three*).

Wenzel highlights, however, that this model of opposition underlies a certain kind of arbitrariness, as the assigning of opposition cannot be done objectively. Furthermore, in most cases there is agreement on the majority of oppositions among the readership.³ Fundamentally, it is opposite pairs or theoretically exclusive oppositions, such as cold and warm or old and young, which can form a plot as well as comment on and influence each other. Structuralist theory states that culture as well as literature is arranged around these binary opposites. Poststructuralism on the other hand referred to that approach as deceptive and ethnocentric as one opposite usually

³ Cf. Wenzel, 43.

dominates the other.⁴ The close affinity to postcolonialism is obvious: the criticism of ethnocentrism and the avoidance of exclusive binaries is constitutive for both poststructuralism and postcolonialism. Both highlight that the predominant is dependent upon its submissive counterpart and therefore deconstructs hereditary hierarchies.

⁴ Cf. <http://www.answers.com/topic/binary-opposition> [22.7.2008].

4. The beauty of the postcolonial

Zadie Smith as a young author of mixed racial background obviously incorporates her own experiences of a diverse urban life. Born to a Briton and a Jamaican mother in 1975 she grew up in the multicultural borough of Willensden in North London. At the age of eighteen she earned a scholarship for Cambridge University where she earned a degree in literature. Already during her years at university she had published short stories and her first novel *White Teeth* created a media sensation. In her first novel as well as in *Autograph Man* and *On Beauty* she deals with the cultural identities of second and third generation immigrants living in the UK and the United States' multi-ethnic societies. The main characters of her novels are trying to develop a sense of identity and are struggling to define their mixed-decent relationships.

Although she was mentioned in connection with postcolonialism in many articles and reviews, she rejects relations to postcolonial writing. While she has frequently been compared to writers such as Salman Rushdie or Hanif Kureishi, she often pointed out the fact that this “may be well intended, definitely a compliment, but racist nonsense none the less” (Hattenstone, *White Knuckle ride*). However, the majority of articles and reviews have viewed Smith's works in the light of postcolonialism. Thus the very broad field of postcolonialism shall be explored and to which extent Zadie Smith's work is influenced by the sphere of the postcolonial.

4.1. The cultural limbo

Great Britain has a long history of migration through its colonial past, mostly immigration coming from the Raj and West Indian Dominions and more recently from its Ex-African empire. Up to the Commonwealth Migration Act of 1962, citizens from the Commonwealth were free to live and work in the United Kingdom. Afterwards successive British governments sought to regulate immigration through the law of patriality, meaning that only people who had been born, naturalised or had a parent living in Great Britain, were allowed into the country from former colonial states. Despite the limits on immigrants by the time of the 1981 Nationality Act there was a significant amount of different ethnic groups living within British society. The 1991 census was the first to record data of the different ethnic groups within British society, which showed that at least five percent of people living within England and Wales were not white British.⁵ There was a base within the white British population that was sparking the potential for institutionalised racism within Great Britain. This in turn was heated by the National Front and the enigmatic figure of Enoch Powell, which culminated in sewing the seeds of regional and national discontent which resulted years later in the Brixton riots and the later Bradford riots. “Unemployment and police brutality were outlined as two major causal factors“ (Encyclopedia of contemporary British culture, 15) for this civil unrest.

Nonetheless Britain enjoys a reputation of ranking among the most open-minded and tolerant societies with many racial clichés generated between the 1960's and 1980's now considered utterly taboo. The use of the word 'paki'⁶ would be considered just as offensive as TV series like *Love thy neighbour*. This shows how attitudes have changed over time and is exemplified by the warning about the controversial content of the show which is no longer considered acceptable by modern audiences⁷. Today the

⁵ Cf. National statistics, <http://www.Statistics.gov.uk/articles/nojournal/GuideV9.pdf> [14.9.2008]

⁶ Cf. <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Paki> [12.6.2008].

⁷ “The series has since been shown in the UK on satellite Television with warnings at the start of each show.“ Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Thy_Neighbour [10.6.2008]

British population – especially in bigger cities – is more diverse yet at the same time more integrated than it has ever been in its long history. The melting pot is spiced and flavoured with people from all countries giving the UK an even broader variety of nationalities with which to rub shoulders.

According to recent statistics, forty percent of children in London are born to at least one non-white parent. Leicester is now poised to become the first city in England to have a population that is more than 50 % non-white, projected for the year 2011 (Birmingham claims they will reach that point in 2020). (Moss, 11)

This creates a base especially among the young which the media continue to foster. The incorporation of recent new media devices from the BBC such as the *Asian network*⁸ and *1xtra*⁹ are aimed at the Asian and Black youth population respectively.

4.2. The winds of change: Postcolonialism

During the 1980s, interest in theories of philosophy and literature shifted to cultural and discursive practices of colonialism and its legacy. In Britain as well as in the US the colonised and their offspring had been educated in national institutions of learning. With postcolonialism, their education brought forward a new kind of critical stance, which centred on the opposition between the superior white colonisers and the suppressed colonised.

Primarily concerned with textual and literary analysis, and to a large extent poststructuralist in orientation, postcolonialism engages in the study and critique of colonial discourses, with a focus on issues of subjectivity, nationhood, race, subalternity and hybridity, among others. (Mikula, 157)

Said, an American Palestinian critic and theorist, is very often named as the founding father of postcolonial theory¹⁰. In his main work *Orientalism* (1978) he portrayed and criticised Eurocentric prejudices and “explains the

⁸ Cf. Asian Network, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/asiannetwork/> [12.6.2008].

⁹ Cf. 1xtra, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/1xtra/> [12.6.2008].

¹⁰ Cf. Bennet, 267.

hegemonic power of Orientalism in terms of its capacity to reproduce itself through non-coercive social institutions, such as education, art and the media“ (Mikula 145). He unmasks Orientalism as a Western construction, showing that it relies on the binary division between Orient and the Occident, the one becoming everything the other is not. Said’s ideas were taken up and further developed by theorists like Bhabha and Spivak, who share the belief that postcolonialism cannot be thought of in terms of the end of colonialism, but rather signifies that colonialism still influences our society.

In all approaches, however, it is binary opposition and differences which are at the very centre of cultural studies. Hall¹¹ outlines four lines of thought in explaining the importance of differences for cultural studies and postcolonialism and comes to conclude that our make up of identity is never complete but always formed through dialogue with an 'other'. This 'other'¹² and its alterity are ambiguous. Although we feel the need for its existence it produces fear and breeds racism and xenophobia. This leads to the question of identity: what is the cultural identity of immigrants and their children and how can they fit into a society where they still feel alienated, abandoned and sometimes even threatened but which at the same time they call their home? Therefore, the cardinal interest of postcolonial literature lies in the identity of the colonised.

4.3. Zadie Smith as a post-postcolonial author

Connor concludes that “it is now hard to be sure of what the British novel consists“ (Connor, 27). However, postcolonialism and its importance for British contemporary writing can be easily traced by having a look at the Booker Prize list as

[...] there is hardly any winner who could easily fall outside the limits of a post-colonial writing, a fact which emphasises both its power as a discursive category and its in some way disabling

¹¹ Cf. Hall 2004, 116.

¹² Cf. Bennet, 249-251.

pervasiveness. (Childs, 418)

Postcolonialism cannot be thought of in temporal dimensions but rather refers to an ideological concept which claims that learning should move away from the model of the coloniser and that a local perspective should be taken for writing and learning. Zadie Smith is writing from a meeting point or crossroads of where postcolonialism, multiculturalism and the British middle classes interact which is due to her rather rare position as a black woman receiving a university education at Cambridge University at the beginning of the 1990s¹³.

Moss (Moss, 11-17) has concluded that Zadie is not a postcolonial but a post-postcolonial writer, who is “clued into issues relating to multicultural identity“ (Sell, 28). In this context post-postcolonialism is used as an umbrella concept which refers to the new second or third generation of immigrants now living and working in the UK for whom hybridity is becoming more and more an everyday subject incorporated into normal life. Sara Upston in an essay on Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* poses that

[...] rather than alienation, these novels are seen to offer self-assurance, dwelling rather than diaspora, and a new hybridity less about being “in-between“ cultures and more about the fact that culture is now, in essence, “in-between“. (Upston, 337)

Smith writes about a decolonised mind in modern British society where the centre has been moved to the tensions between the British-born white British and those second generation black Caribbean and South Asian populations.

¹³ Zadie Smith earned a scholarship at Cambridge University where she completed a degree in literature.

4.4. Rewriting as a form of intertextuality in the postcolonial novel

The term “rewriting” or “writing back” was devised in an article for the Times in 1982 by Salman Rushdie, who invoked the famous American space opera *The empire strikes back*. The term has since become a buzzword in postcolonial studies and refers to the rewriting of colonial texts. A text which has an intertext inscribed as a matrix represents something that is utterly different, whilst at the same time it refers back to its source. Authors of foreign cultures made use of this technique to disclose a discussion with the intertext serving as a vantage point.

Postcolonial hypertexts, therefore, challenge colonialist representations of colonized peoples and cultures in the same way that feminist hypertexts tend to dispute patriarchal systems and depictions. (Tynan, 75)

Usually it is the minor and often oppressed characters that are placed centre stage to recount a story through their own eyes and provide “a voice for marginalized characters” (Tynan, 76). This even enables the hypertext to alter our thinking on hypotexts, which are often part of the literary canon. One of the most prominent examples is *Wide Sargasso Sea* which is a parallel novel to *Jane Eyre*. “However, Smith's treatment of *Howard's End* is more like Joyce's use of the *Odyssey* in *Ulysses*, as it serves primarily as a structural model and a general inspiration for *On Beauty*” (Paproth, 23). Although *On Beauty* bears the imprints of *Howards End*, according to Paproth it is not in any way interrogating its paragon. “As Smith openly declares in her acknowledgments, *On Beauty* is an “homage” to *Howards End*. The mode is not so much counter-discursive as dialogic” (Tynan, 77).

The Wilcox family in *Howards End* would have provided Smith with plenty of opportunity to expand on marginalised characters and interrogate imperial issues due to their “colonial spirit”. Henry Wilcox accumulated wealth from the West African Rubber Company and following in Henry's footsteps, it is

his son Paul who fills his shoes. The company produces the rubber which is, of course, necessary for the tyres of the cars which the Wilcox men are so terribly fond of. Their cruising around between their properties is evocative of them having travelled and conquered the world: they are not able to stay comfortably in one place for a long time. One could ponder whether rewriting and, in particular, postcolonial writing is not outdated. Following the dismantling of Great Britain, England and other colonial powers experienced a downswing. It was the United States that took pride in taking over a central position in international affairs. However, the British canon still acts

[...] as a touchstone of taste and value, and through RS-English (Received Standard English), which asserts the English of south-east England as a universal norm, the weight of antiquity continues to dominate cultural production in much of the post-colonial world. (Ashcroft, 7)

Herbert Grabes cites Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro and Toni Morrison amongst others as examples. They all make use of the readers' interest in the alterations they generate using traditional and often well-known texts, but at the same time they also adhere to a rather conventional style which proves attractive to a broad readership. Still, Grabes notes that the mixing of genres and its deliberation of conveyed structures is not at all a reversion to traditional aesthetics of the beautiful. It is rather an attempt to overcome a feeling of foreignness and often surprisingly discovers something different within the familiar.¹⁴ This method of 'disfamiliarisation'¹⁵ presupposes that the reader has a textual knowledge of the hypertext. Texts which are regarded as given and which are well known due to their membership of the canon are scrutinised and altered. In the same vein literature stresses and exemplifies the continual process of generation of meaning, and *Howards End* is at the same time sustained through allusion and its place in the canon is thus confirmed. This partial interconnectedness of novels is a perfect foil to the motto of "Only connect!".

¹⁴ Cf. Grabes, 130.

¹⁵ Cf. Tynan, 76.

Birke and Neumann categorise the postcolonial novel as disallowing focalisation; the coloniser should have the exclusive right of perception and this should exemplify the imperial world-view: the other is degenerated to an object devoid of voice and perspective. A polyphonious hybrid text allows for many different perspectives but opposes the binary worldview and destroys the illusion of objectivity. Moreover it is of interest to what extent divergence or interdependency can be seen from individual perspectives.

Die Hybridisierung der kulturellen Identität wird auf formaler Ebene dadurch verstärkt, dass unterschiedliche Sichtweisen gleichberechtigt miteinander konkurrieren und sich dynamisch überlagern. (Birke and Neumann, 130)

Focalisation is a strategy commonly used in *On Beauty* to describe Howard and his personal experiences. Although rare, from time to time an omniscient narrator forces the narrative illusion apart: “We must now jump nine months forward, and back across the Atlantic Ocean” (OB, 42) and sometimes perturbs the illusion built up throughout the novel¹⁶. This narrator is shown to be the one poised and in control of the novel, a narrator who gives, at times, meticulous descriptions of the setting and who frequently digresses.

Still, in contrast to that, the individual characters often provide insight into their innermost feelings through free indirect discourse. This is especially interesting with reference to the portrayal of characters, as the character’s description of themselves allows the reader to picture their personality. By looking through the character’s eyes and immediately living through his or her emotions, the reader is able to infer a lot about their personality.

This strategy of free indirect discourse is most commonly used with Kiki. Despite her being set in stark contrast to the other more intellectual

¹⁶ Howard is given assistance by “Smith” who is first introduced as a helpmeet: “You couldn’t ask for a better helpmeet than Smith J. Miller. But he was an eternal optimist. He didn’t get how this system worked” (OB, 142). Here Zadie Smith with the mentioning of helpmeet Smith obviously refers to herself. At the end of the book only shortly before Howard’s last lecture “[i]t was Smith’s artificial voice of calm. In the past it had always worked, but recently Howard had grown better at attuning himself to the reality of his own situation” (OB, 440). Also, it is Smith who calms him down and reassures him that he is “just fine” (OB, 441).

characters, through her streams of consciousness it becomes obvious that she is more sensitive and sympathetic than many of the cast. One of Kiki's particularly telling and informative streams of consciousness can be discovered whilst the Belsey family is attending the concert and listening to Mozart's Requiem.

The choir is also every person who has changed you during your time on this earth: your many lovers; your family; your enemies, the nameless, faceless woman who slept with your husband; the man you thought you were going to marry; the man you did. (OB, 69)

To sum up, it cannot be denied that with identity politics Zadie Smith is discussing a theme typical for postcolonial work. She largely bases her novel on binary oppositions which are characteristic for postcolonial writing. Though, while using *Howards End* as a model for *On Beauty* she did not intend it as a counter-discourse to Forster's work. Rather she used it as an inspiration and model for her novel.

5. Identity as a concept in *On Beauty*

Critics often point out the fact that Zadie Smith's novels are only concerned with identity. Her bestselling initial novel *White Teeth* centred on the story of three families living in London with the novel focussing on the characters' identity crises. Smith follows them throughout their lives with a mixture of linear and non-linear narration.¹⁷ By looking back through history, Smith manages to support the fact that many of the characters' problems are related to their identity and she demonstrates how "chance, choice and fate" are decisive in what shapes the individual.

In 2000, Zadie Smith depicted multicultural life in London in *White Teeth*, after which she again turned to the issue of identity and its relevance at the beginning of the 21st century. At this particular time, she may have been influenced by being a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard, and she picked New England as a setting for her novel. In an interview on bookworm¹⁸, Smith described that she intended to select identity and, in particular, the focus of authenticity as a central theme for *On Beauty*. During the interview she reminisced about being frequently accused of not being really black due to her hobbies and interests which included reading. Later on in the show she also explained that it was those reproaches, together with her scientific occupation with morality in literature, which made her broach the issue of authenticity, of being what and who you really are and how to be human.

Mark Stein assesses that the new Black British novel is "about the *formation* of its protagonists – but, importantly it is also about the transformation of British society and cultural institutions" (Stein, xiii). It is Smith's experiences which steer her writing and allow for the enormous popularity of her novels which are enjoyed throughout the English speaking world. Her first novel was "widely hailed as the first black British novel of the new millennium"

¹⁷ Cf. Squires, 55.

¹⁸ Cf. Interview on 'Bookworm'
http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/bw/bw061109zadie_smith [28.10.2008].

(Stein, xi). Despite being acclaimed for an “optimistic portrait of a “post-racial” country” (Chittenden, *Zadie didn't tell*) Smith also received critical acclaim for “whitewashing the truth” (Chittenden, *Zadie didn't tell*).

Due to her mixed racial background, Smith is nevertheless appreciated in a way unthinkable for the early 1980s or 1990s, and today her novels have become a 'yardstick' to measure the talents of subsequent young ethnic minority Britons like Monika Ali.¹⁹ Mark Stein, however, also considers the excessive marketing with which Smith's first novel was hailed and believes that she must have been famous for her talent before it was even published. “Publicist Charlotte Greig's campaign for the hardcover edition was even honoured with a Publishers' Publicity Circle award“ (Stein, 181). What helps with the marketing of the books is Smith's good looks, which she herself admits are advantageous, as for women these days beauty is decisive.²⁰ Smith has definitely followed a trend when she gave her characters a hybrid identity. Hybridity and ethnicity are not only discussed by theorists, but are omnipresent in our modern world and are even transformed into a fashionable concept.

John Aldridge concerns himself with that subject in his article “Forget black, forget white. EA is what is hot”²¹ with EA referring to the new catchphrase “ethnically ambiguous”. Aldridge notes that nowadays it is the often very versatile young people of mixed ethnic backgrounds who seem to fill the majority of jobs in the music industry or in show business. Aldridge quotes McKenzie when stating that “Black urban culture has become mainstream culture”. It is this black and melting-pot culture which we encounter in many advertisements and recognise in stars of all ethnicities especially in the English speaking world.

Black lifestyle is also extremely popular and fashionable amongst white

¹⁹ Cf. Stein, 175.

²⁰ Cf. Kachka, <http://nymag.com/guides/fallpreview/2005/books/12856/> [27.10.2008].

²¹ Cf. Arlridge, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2004/jan/04/britishidentity.race> [3.11.2008].

children. Many of the young whites are fanatical about black music and white 'metrosexual' football star David Beckham was voted to be the most popular black in 2003, "a brother trapped in a white man's body" also referred to as "wigger" while stars like Eminem retain that their music is black.²² This ethno-trend has also encroached on literature, with many authors consciously or subconsciously jumping onto the bandwagon. But why is it that this trend of hybrid and remixed cultures, the mixture of past and present, are ever more popular even within literature? Safraz Manzoor in his article "Why do Asian writers need to be authentic to succeed?"²³ suggests that we, as readers, are mainly interested in something "raw, true and authentic". Although he notices that the media seem to be calling for this authenticity, Safraz Manzoor notes that the most successful and highly acclaimed authors often turn out to be of hybrid background and have experienced elite, university education.

This fact becomes less enigmatic, however, when we bear in mind that this majority of successful authors are already in some way educated cultural travellers having grown up with privilege and a first hand experience of differing cultures. Hence there remains the question of exactly at what level authenticity exists within their personalities. They may come to feel that they can easily survive in both worlds whilst not feeling totally at home in either. The literary institutions, therefore, embrace literature from those individuals as this affords them the scapegoat for not signing those voices of untaught migrants, which might not be as well matched with their own ideas of minorities.

Zadie Smith is very much concerned with this question of authenticity in literature, which she explicitly scrutinises in her essay "Fail better"²⁴. There she asks the questions "What makes a good writer? Is writing an expression of self, or, as T.S. Eliot argued, 'an escape from personality'? Do novelists

²² The Offspring had their big success with "I'm pretty fly (for a white guy)" which is basically about being a whigger.

²³ Cf. Manzoor, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/apr/30/1> [3.11.2008].

²⁴ Cf. Smith, <http://faculty.sunydutchess.edu/oneill/failbetter.htm> [3.11.2008].

have a duty? Do readers? Why are there so few truly great novels?" Smith points out that "somewhere between a critic's necessary superficiality and a writer's natural dishonesty, the truth of how we judge literary success or failure is lost". Of course the writer uses his imagination and although Barthes warns not to limit a text by looking at it solely against the background of its author, Smith notices that remarkable writers are also often remarkable theoreticians who understand that "[a] writer's personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner." This fingerprint of the author Smith is attributed to their success or failure.

Smith criticises the loss of beauty in life in general and she uses this as a theme in *On Beauty*. In order to climb the slippery literary slope of academia, everything must be analysed and dissected, to this end the individual's innate ability to recognise beauty as it once existed is lost. In the book, Howard and Zora are both classic examples of people who cling to the dissected analysis of the arts. In "Fail better" Smith pictures inauthenticity in its most minute form as the clichés which allow one to sleepwalk through a whole book. In contrast the authentic to her is something grand, the "intimation of a metaphysical event, you can never know" as it is based on the exclusive experience of "a conscience other than you". In this essay, Smith hybridises the identity of the writer herself: she contends that an author must comprehend what is outside of the individual, and that can only be understood by what lies inside of oneself. Thus, the writer has to make this comprehensible to another conscience: the reader. Smith calls on the reader not to lean back as if in front of television, but rather to view reading as an art which must be exercised.

6. Identity matters

6.1. Multiplicity of identities

The Britannica defines the multiple layers of identity as follows:

Identity refers to both group self-awareness of common unique characteristics and individual self-awareness of inclusion in such a group. Self-awareness may be formulated in comprehensive cultural terms (ethnic identity), in biogenetic terms (racial identity), in terms of sexual orientation, and in terms of gender. (Robotham, *Identity*)

Never in the long history of the world has the buzzword identity been of greater interest. The 20th century was a time of identity-crisis, corporate-identity and even identity-theft. Identity has never been as important as it is today in this age of seemingly endless possibilities. Attempts are made to foster and feed this all-important punchy image of the individual with our identity: a conglomeration of predispositions, wishes, dreams and a good deal of encryption of the real person.

Psychologists and therapists assist in enhancing the individual's character and coming to grips with others' personalities. Simon even suggests that by taking a look behind the scenes, identity could prove to be nothing but 'analytic fiction'²⁵. Nonetheless he stresses that understanding identity as a concept can be extremely helpful in explaining human behaviour and reactions. Individual identities consist of various puzzle pieces. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume compared the soul to a commonwealth, which perpetuates its stable identity by integrating and constantly changing related but yet foreign elements:

[...] I cannot compare the soul more properly to any thing than a republic or a commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons who propagate the same republic in the incessant changes of its parts. (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature, Section IV*)

²⁵ Cf. Simon, 3.

Not only are humans determined by gender, but also by the social class into which they are born, ethnic background, their nationality and, nowadays, even an online-identity. All of these different identity layers form our self and account for the image we project to the outside world. Psychology as well as sociology are concerned with identity and the expression is utilised by them as an umbrella-term covering the entire concept.

6.2.1. Personal identity

Personal identity may also be referred to as a psychological identity. It is everything that makes human beings unique and differentiates them from others. Personal identity encompasses all characteristics that constitute our personality, whereas group identity refers to features which make up a group and are commonly shared by all of its members.²⁶ The humanist belief that identity is something innate and has an essence has been heavily rejected by and through the works of philosophers and psychologists such as Derrida, Lacan and Freud. If identity is not an essence but rather changes over time, then it is vital for the individual personality to identify with certain groups in order to develop a sense of belonging and hence a feeling of identity. This is especially relevant during adolescence when young people are in search of affiliation.

Identity, however, is always partly defined by outside influences and the resulting attribution of characteristics. A migrant may identify him or herself more strongly (and will be identified more readily by others) as a citizen of their home-country than if he or she had never migrated. Losing or giving up identity is one of the most psychologically demanding tasks. If, however, a person withdraws from an identity imposed on him or herself by others this can be liberating and, furthermore, may provide a new outlook on life.

²⁶ Cf. Simon, 37.

Neo-Freudian Erik Erikson²⁷ was one of the most influential scientists exploring identity and he coined the catch-phrase 'identity-crisis'. Erikson explained identity-formation throughout life and divided it into eight different phases, each typical of a certain age or period in life. What he referred to as 'ego-identity' or 'the self' is one's personal identity, the little peculiarities that make human beings what they are.

The identity debate and the mosaic jig-saw that completes the picture of 'the self' raise the question of diachronic and synchronic personal identity²⁸. Synchronic personal identity is the sum of character traits which distinguish a person at a particular time, the diachronic personal identity on the other hand, concerns itself with personal continuity and how a person remains the same throughout different stages of life. Furthermore, this poses the question of how a person's identity may have differed if he or she had encountered diverse living circumstances. In an interview with Kuan-Sing Chen, Stuart Hall stated that although life is now lived in a globalised world (which raises a number of very general questions, which are relevant to everyone, but which can only be solved together), individuals will always emanate from within themselves:

In the early stages, perhaps we spoke too much about the working class, about subcultures. Now nobody talks about them at all. They talk about myself, my mother, my father, my friends, and that is, of course, a very selective experience, especially in relation to classes and the society as a whole in which we operate, and which we are trying to transform. (Morley, 442)

6.2.2. Personal identity in *On Beauty*

"We don't know what we want and yet we are responsible for what we are" (OB 328) states Monty referring to one of Howard's "liberal lodestars", Jean Paul Sartre (cf OB 328). This is very much the opinion of Zora: she is devoid of identity, although she still works very hard on her appearance. Despite

²⁷ Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik_Erikson [1.9.2008].

²⁸ Cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_identity_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_identity_(philosophy)) [1.9.2008].

being confident on the outside she is very insecure on the inside and hides behind her bossiness and authoritativeness. There is one point in the novel when it becomes blindingly clear that the thing she is most concerned about is the opinion of other people and what they might think of her. On the way to the pool she stops and ponders how other people may perceive her: "She asked herself the extremely difficult question: *What would I think of me?* She had been gunning for something like 'bohemian intellectual; fearless; graceful; brave and bold'" (OB 129).

Furthermore, it becomes clear that Zora is in an identity crisis. Zora does not know where she is positioned, yet she still demands a great deal of herself. To a large extent she is defined by her position as a student and constantly tries to reinvent her identity by following a strict program. When starting her second year at university she seems to have been waiting for some kind of magical transformation to take place over night:

Time is not what it is but how it is felt, and Zora felt no different. Still living at home, still a virgin. And yet heading for her first day as a sophomore. Last year, when Zora was a freshman, sophomores had seemed altogether a different kind of human: so very definite in their tastes and opinions, in their loves and ideas. Zora woke up this morning hopeful that a transformation of this kind might have visited her in the night, but, finding it hadn't, she did what girls generally do when they don't feel the part: she dressed it instead. How successful this had been she couldn't say. Now she stopped to examine herself in the window of Lorelie's, a campy fifties hairdressers on the corner of Houghton and Main. She tried to put herself in her peers' shoes. (OB, 129)

She even tries to come up with a "Zora Self-Improvement Programme" (OB, 129) which includes a lot of work for university and sport. This is what is most striking about Zora and what is most outstanding about her character. At one point Smith even goes as far as to say that "For a whole twenty-three seconds the last thing on Zora's mind was herself" (OB, 133).

When Zora's behaviour is scrutinised by Claire, Smith makes it obvious that she is attempting to highlight her own particular reason behind this. By endowing Claire with the insight of psychoanalysis, Smith is trying to inform the reader about what she believes is the reason for such female behaviour. Smith clearly states that the problem is addiction to "self-sabotage" (OB, 223). Claire, who is reflecting upon her 'psychological breakthroughs', notices that her problem of self-sabotage is mirrored in a lot of young women, in particular Zora. Claire is portrayed as an outsider within the group, and in this introspective psychological part of the chapter she uses this insight as a helpful tool. Moreover, concealment and revelation play another important role in the novel. Although the whole story from Howard is not made clear in the first part of the novel, a great deal of their affair is revealed in the second half through Claire's introspection.

Claire stands in stark contrast to Kiki who is utterly different not only in her looks but also in her personality. "At fifty-two, her face was still a girl's face. A beautiful though girl's face" (OB, 15). This is also what Carlene Kipps remarks later about Kiki as one of the outstanding features of her looks. Kiki is very emotional but interestingly she has "a thesis for a face of which only Howard could know every line and reference" (OB, 14). Claire and Kiki are worlds apart but despite their being very different Howard falls for his colleague Claire, whom he has known for many years. Despite (or because of) their being different Howard betrays Kiki with, of all women, Claire. Claire is in therapy and reflects her innermost feelings. Thus her reflections have a different function to those of Zora who is very unsure about herself and therefore constantly in self-doubt.

Victoria faces the same problems as Zora, and despite being more beautiful than her, she sleeps with men in search of the same validation, being aware that her combination of prettiness and cleverness is not tolerable to many. Interestingly, Victoria mentions that Kiki is a role model for her. This has a strange air to it as she is about to have sexual relations with Kiki's husband,

and indeed the irony of heralding someone's wife as a goddess and then subsequently suggesting to cheat on her can be regarded as somewhat bizarre. Additionally it is her who tells Howard that his "class is all about never ever saying *I like the tomato*" (OB 312). Howard's class asks the question: "What's so beautiful about this tomato? Who decided on its worth?" (OB 312). Howard wears the world on his sleeve and "... like many academics, Howard was innocent of the world" (OB, 33).

While he is meant to see things objectively Kiki remains more of a mystery to the reader. Only at the end does Howard notice that Kiki had been facing similar problems to his midlife crisis. Howard is indeed changing throughout the novel and his change is more obvious than Kiki's, whose constant transformation could be attributed to the menopause, although this is only hinted at in the novel. On the one hand Kiki is "grateful she was not an intellectual" (OB, 43) but on the other hand she loves listening to Howard as "she was happiest when she could get him to talk to her about his ideas" (OB, 72). At times, however, she appears to be at a loss when it comes to understanding and interpreting her husband, and when Warren asks what Howard likes, Kiki simply answers that "[t]herein lies the mystery" (OB, 54). She is aware that Howard has a similarly inflated ego as his daughter Zora.²⁹ Despite at times distancing herself from Howard and being deeply hurt, she does not give up on him and proves her affection to be resistant and consistent against all odds.

The only account she could give of this decision was that she was not quite done loving him, which was the same as saying she was not yet done with Love. Love itself being coeval with knowing Howard. (OB, 60)

Jerome, also deeply hurt and lovesick, is irritated by his mother's behaviour. He simply cannot understand her avoidance of confrontation: "Just ignore the problem, forgive and forget, and poof, it's gone away" (OB, 59). For him, though, it "wasn't about just the girl. Jerome had fallen in love with a family" (OB, 44). What he had experienced was more than simply his first love. "It

²⁹ Cf. OB, 339 „She is one of the people who exist on this planet who isn't you“.

was a kind of blissful un-selfing; a summer of un-Belsey; he had allowed the Kippes' world and their ways to take him over entirely" (OB, 44). The Kippes had provided him with an array of new ideas, so much so that when he returned with his family he found himself in an identity crisis. Now that he was without Vee and had made a fool of himself, he even dreamed about an escape, going to Europe and ignoring "[t]he absurdity of this plan - economically, personally, educationally" (OB, 59).

6.3.1 National identity

A nation is a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members. (Smith, 14)

National identity alludes to both the characteristic features of the group and the individual's feeling of belonging to that group. This is due to the perceived common heritage and desire to emanate its characteristics. Almost all nationalist movements act on the assumption that a shared ancestry unites the nation and is the root of its particular characteristics. This belief of having a given identity is also referred to as Primordialism. It claims that a formation of nations is a natural occurrence tracing its roots back to ancient times. Gökhan Bacık³⁰ quotes Geertz when referring to assumed blood ties, race, language, region, religion and custom as providers of national identity. Needless to say that following the cruelty of the 2nd World War primordialism was met with harsh criticism and refusal.

In *Imagined Communities* Benedict Anderson indicated that a nation is in fact an imagined construction as "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 6) Still, the nation is not perceived as an all-embracing entity but rather a body limited by boundaries and, thus, no nation exists which contains the whole of mankind. This socio-cultural concept, therefore,

³⁰ Cf. Bacık, <http://www.alternativesjournal.net/volume1/number1/bacik.htm> [16.10.2008].

defines identity by attributing people with a national affiliation.³¹ Not only does one's common descent promote a feeling of shared belonging, but the spoken language also supports this. Culture is additionally important to national identity as it evokes a feeling of inheritance of the past and thus consolidates this sense of belonging. The fact that religion is often experienced within a collective group promotes it to an additional national characteristic.

The modern world allows for a variety of cultural and international contacts, which enrich our lives but also raise the potential for social conflict. Globalisation and the formation of supranational political and economic entities make the world's boundaries permeable and at the same time confirm the importance of the nation for the individual's own self-concept. In modern society it is extremely difficult to avoid contact with members of other nationalities. Allport stresses that this "undermines the salience of group or category memberships" (Simon, 136). If group members see themselves not as members of their respective group, but rather as individuals, this leads to a reduction in rejection. He stresses four conditions which have to be met in order to allow for inter-group contact: equal status, common goal, cooperation and authority sanction.³² Personalised contact and self-disclosure are a prerequisite for friendship between cultures and nationalities.

These interpersonal experiences, in turn, influence intergroup perceptions. Simply the knowledge that an acquaintance has an immigrant as a friend can positively affect that individual's idea of that particular group of immigrants. This leads to greater appreciation of the minority group and hence to what Pettigrew calls 'deprovincialization'.³³ Thus, this causes a gradual shedding of stereotypes which, according to McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears, is nothing but "shared group beliefs" (McGarty, 2).

³¹ Cf. Anderson, 5.

³² Cf. Simon, 138.

³³ Cf. Simon, 139.

6.3.2. National identity in *On Beauty*

Just how far is a discussion on national identity relevant to *On Beauty*? It was the 'national question' which Forster pondered 1910 when he wrote *Howards End*. In the Introduction to *Howards End*, Samuel Hynes explains the precarious situation of change that England found itself in, and that it was exactly the climate that Forster had in mind:

England in 1910 was a nation in crisis – rich and powerful (the empire would never again be so vast), but divided, uncertain, and threatened. [...] It was as though everyone in England knew the questions, but no one knew the answers. (Hynes. iix)

This national question could be relevant for *On Beauty*, as it could be argued that, being a homage to *Howards End*, *On Beauty* not only adopted parts of the plot, but perhaps rather drew parallels between Great Britain as a former nation of great prosperity and the United States.

Referring to the national question, Forster seems to support the approach, however, that it was primarily a question of class and how a small number of the well-off could exploit the masses. Forster highlights this by contrasting the well-off Wilcoxens and Schlegels who “stand upon money as upon islands” (HE 47) while “most of the others are down below the surface” (HE, 47) similar to Leonard Bast:

The boy, Leonard Bast, stood at the extreme verge of gentility. He was not in the abyss, but he could see it, and at times people whom he knew had dropped in, and counted no more. He knew that he was poor, and would admit it: he would have died sooner than confess any inferiority to the rich. [...] He was not as courteous as the average rich man, nor as intelligent, nor as healthy, nor as lovable. His mind and his body had been alike underfed, because he was poor, and because he was modern they were always craving better food. [...] But in his day the angel of Democracy had arisen enshadowing the classes with leathern wings, and proclaiming: “All men are equal – all men, that is to say, who possess umbrellas.”, and so he was obliged to assert gentility, lest he slipped into the abyss where nothing counts and the statements of Democracy are inaudible. (HE, 34-35)

Interestingly, Forster also lets Mister Wilcox work for a rubber company at a time when there must have been an awareness amongst the population that one of the greatest genocides on the African continent was taking place under Leopold's reign in the Congo. Henry Wickham had developed a method for making rubber tyres from natural rubber which was to be found in large quantities in the Congo region. Hence compulsory labour and slavery were responsible for the cruel killings of about ten million people in the Congo between 1888 and 1908.

At the turn of the 21st century, America gave a more complete picture than that of industrial Great Britain. Although social hierarchies have undergone some changes since then, some people are still supposedly more equal than others. The social question of today largely corresponds to the question of family background, and is often a matter of pigment. This became an even more apparent problem after 9/11 and the resulting prejudice towards Muslims and people of Arabian decent. After the attacks of September 11th and the subsequent war in Iraq, the United States and its government came under hard attack. American politicians had been very critical about some European countries and their depreciative reaction to the Iraq war which Rumsfeld came to coin as “the old European countries” (BBC News January 23rd, 2003). These animosities are depicted in *On Beauty* by Kiki and her reactions to Europeans and their comments on the US.

Kiki instinctively bristled – after a lifetime of bad-mouthing her own country, these past few years she had grown into a new sensitivity. She had to leave the room when Howard's English friends settled into their armchairs after dinner and began the assault. (OB, 92)

Moreover, September 11th is the date that Kiki and Howard married many years ago and, to the amazement of many of their friends, they still celebrate this day. In the book many characters are

[...] troubled by the question of the use or value of art and literature in a post-9/11 world where all established values seem to have been upended; neither the 'high' culture of the academy, nor the 'low' culture of the street escape this

interrogation, while the notion of distinguishing between them is also dissected. (Merritt, *A thing of Beauty*)

On a more general level, the friendship between Carlene and Kiki is at times strained due to their different backgrounds. Kiki is characterised in contrast to the old-fashioned ways of Carlene, who initially sends a hand-delivered “extremely old-fashioned, un-ironic and frankly un-American visiting card” (OB, 162). At times Kiki feels uncomfortable in her presence and regards her reactions as “simply impolite” (OB, 92) but then comes to accept them as “a cultural difference” (OB, 92). Nevertheless, Kiki is obviously hurt when Carlene criticises American television: “Well, in England we tend to think of it as awful nonsense, I suppose” (OB, 169). Howard also wonders how his colleagues might perceive the British and, indeed, him as a person: “Howard had often wondered what impression of the British, as a nation, his American colleagues must glean from their acquaintance with the two of them” (OB, 324).

6.4.1. Ethnic identity

Ethnic identity is

the sense of identification of oneself or of others as belonging to a group of people who share – real or putative – common ancestry, language, blood ties, religion, customs, memories and/or phenotypal features. (Hawley, 158)

For Hall, ethnicity is “a question of cultural positioning, not biological essentialism” (Rojek, 178) and today ethnicity is not regarded as primordial but rather as a rational choice. Ethnic and national identity are, however, still very often used synonymously as the terms are not clear cut. Although definitions overlap, in general a nation is a political entity referring to a group of people who live within the boundaries of a particular country. Ethnicity, however, may exceed national boundaries. A member of an ethnic minority group accepts that there is a certain shared cultural and traditional background, whereas race is rooted in the idea of biological classification.

The members of an ethnic group usually recognise common cultural, linguistic, religious and biological traits as distinctive for the ethnic group. What is fundamental to most definitions of an ethnic group is its own perception of a shared belonging. Max Weber defined ethnic groups as follows

Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or customs or both, or because of memories of colonialization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation; furthermore it does not matter whether a formal blood relationship exists. (Ammon, 355)

There are four elements relevant to the configuration of ethnic identity and its boundaries within the group³⁴:

- 1 ethnic awareness (understanding of one's own and other groups)
- 2 ethnic self-identification (label used for one's own group)
- 3 ethnic attitudes (feelings about own and other groups)
- 4 ethnic behaviours (behaviour patterns specific to an ethnic group)

Black people (those who are “African Americans” and “Black British”) are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in both the United States and in Great Britain. Black is the accepted term in British English for all people having black skin. In America, however, it is perceived unacceptable to a lot of people in that ethnic group and the term has become slightly stigmatised.

Due to the American 'melting pot', each individual has a perceived ethnic identity, so, for example, it is common to refer to oneself as German-American, Italian-American, Jewish-American etc. Many members of the black community found it offensive that they should, therefore, only be referred to as black. Hence the term African-American arose as the politically correct and acceptable expression for referring to the black community in America. It should be noted, however, that although not

³⁴ Cf. http://www.uky.edu/Classes/FAM/357/fam544/ethnic_identity.htm [12.10. 2008].

entirely politically correct, the term black is still regularly used by both the mainstream media and many members of the American society. In general though, Americans choose to identify themselves more by their ethnic identity than the British. This may be due to the fact that the population of Great Britain is much more homogeneous than the residents of the United States who generally came to live in the country due to migration over hundreds of years.

One of the first scientists to contest racial identity and “a key interpreter and disseminator of Pan-Africanism” (Zamir, 1) was DuBois, the first African American to receive a PhD from Harvard University. DuBois stated that African Americans perceive identity as a more delicate and often very conflicting matter. Their consciousness of being both American and African, (their perception of themselves as Africans whilst living within the American society which attempts to dominate them) makes them liable for self-hatred and a weak self-conception.³⁵ This view was also re-iterated by Patricia Hill Collins who (also in referring to herself as a female university professor) values this point of view as an “outsider within” (Smith, 242).

Elijah Anderson is an American sociologist and best known for his book *The code of the Street*. He follows DuBois in another respect: he investigated the “code of the streets” (Smith, 243). According to DuBois this special code of behaviour and diction surfaced due to a lack of trust in the police and the courts to establish justice and safeguard the masses. The relative plight of many African Americans added to this mistrust and this culminated in the creation of a climate of danger in certain areas where there is a constant state of alert. In these neighbourhoods it is a matter of survival, the codes must be followed and even decent, law-abiding citizens are forced to adhere to them in order to avoid being dominated by gangsters in areas where the police does not dare to go. Anderson also remarked that people living in these areas are forced to accept a certain amount of “superficial playing with

³⁵ Cf. Philip Smith, 2.

other elements of the code (e.g. the ostentatious demonstration of expensive jewellery and clothing) on the part of their children, as they recognise how status works in the streets” (Smith, 243).

Orlando Patterson is another well known sociologist and Professor at Havard University who is expecially interested in how poverty relates to ethnic and racial background. He stresses that blacks are a minority in the US, with whites outnumbering them eight to one³⁶ In *Color Class Identity* authors confirm that there is a new form of covert racism which is subtle but restrictive for coloured people. A persistent connection between spatial and social mobility in the United States has resulted in penalised groups being forced to live in certain areas, thus leading to the promotion of subtle discrimination. According to Massey and Denton, this 'clustering of America'³⁷ accounts for children going to a school within a certain area where they then very often remain stranded.

In a very real way, therefore, barriers to spatial mobility are barriers to social mobility, and where one lives determines a variety of salient factors that affect individual well-being: the quality of schooling, the value of housing, exposure to crime, the quality of public services, and the character of children's peers. (Massey and Denton, 138)

Shelby Steele, however, is opposed to affirmative action and highlights the impact of the individual's own decisions.³⁸ He is aware of the fact that blacks are still disadvantaged in many areas of life, but contends the view that it is institutions or the government which should be held responsible for not believing in the young coloured population. This would give those in powerful positions even more authority. He believes that the young should take responsibility for their own lives and decisions instead of victimising them.

³⁶ Cf. Orlando Patterson, 69.

³⁷ Cf. Massey and Denton, 138.

³⁸ Cf. Steele, 24-43.

6.4.2. Ethnic Identity in *On Beauty*

Maeve Tynan declares that *On Beauty* “blends literary texts, contending ideologies, and diverse races and ethnicities within its covers” (Tynan, 73). The main protagonists, Howard and his wife Kiki, come from the most different ethnic backgrounds. Howard, son of a butcher, is of white English descent while his wife Kiki is African-American and his direct rival Monty Kipps is Afro-Caribbean of Trinidadian descent. Howard detests his rival Monty, whose family believes in conservative values and ideals. Monty opposes Affirmative Action, a movement which fights for the facilitation of university admission for coloured students. When Kiki and her husband Howard fell in love their life had been a different one: now they are middle class and live in a well off area of Wellington.

Their son Levi holds strong admiration and even worship for underprivileged blacks and “Levi treasured the urban as previous generations worshipped the pastoral” (OB, 79). He regards blacks as being urban despite the fact that his mother Kiki is from the countryside:

It was this sphinx-like expression that sometimes induced their American friends to imagine a more exotic provenance for her than she actually possessed. In fact she was from simple Florida country stock. (OB, 8)

When at the market, Kiki asks a market-stall owner where he comes from. “We are all from Africa” (OB, 49) he answers. This is how Kiki still feels, even after years and years of being with Howard and his friends and colleagues: being different and not belonging to them. She feels pangs of guilt, as if she had betrayed her culture. This becomes clear when she confronts Howard regarding his betrayal. She feels “alone in this...sea of white” (OB, 206). Throughout the book, while drifting apart from Howard, she becomes exceedingly worried about the fact that she has no friends and, most of all, that she does not know any “black folk” (OB, 206) anymore. Whilst at the concert, Kiki invents a self-congratulatory speech to the “imaginary guild of black American mothers” (OB, 71) which depicts her

pride for her son Jerome and also for herself as a mother, having raised this young man. She is of the opinion that “you just need to have faith, I guess, and you need to counter the dismal self-image that black men receive as their birthright from America” (OB, 71). Despite this Kiki is realistic about the difference between theory and practice: being told by her mother: “You gotta work *five times as hard* as the white girl sitting next to you. And that was sure as hell true” (OB 367).

Levi, Howard's and Kiki's youngest son, is up to his neck in teenage identity crisis and tries to assert his black identity through socialising with the in-crowd members of a Haitian gang. He devoutly believes that the real America can only be experienced in Roxbury. His older sister Zora tells him the naked truth: “You live in Wellington. You go to Arundel. You've got our name ironed into your underwear” (OB 63). Levi is rebellious, he is in his early teens and lives in a world where, according to his looks, he should not be living in affluent Wellington. On the other hand his idiom and diction expose him as not being a member of the other disadvantaged group either. He therefore imitates their way of speaking. Zora thinks that “It is the worst kind of pretention, you know, to fake the way you speak – to steal somebody else's grammar - people less fortunate than you, it's grotesque” (OB, 85). Language is identified here as one of the strongest markers of group identity. He speaks with a Brooklyn vernacular although he has never been to Brooklyn and hides himself under hooded tops and wide shirts. To him living in Wellington is similar to being imprisoned: “He looked out with dread at the place as it began to manifest itself outside the grimy windows. The pristine white spires of the college seemed to him like the watchtowers of a prison to which he was returning” (OB, 79). He sometimes had flings with girls, but due to his living in Wellington he did not dare to take them home, which they obviously found quite strange and resulted in them soon “drifting away, confused by his strange determination not to tell them anything at all about his life or to show them where he lived” (OB, 183).

When the Belseys go to a concert and have to wait in the queue, Levi mentions that “[a] brother don't need a gate – he jumps the fence. That's street“ (OB, 63). Following Howard's and Kiki's disbelieving amusement, Zora explains that “in Levi's little world if you're a Negro you have some kind of mysterious holy communion with sidewalks and corners” (OB, 63). Levi has a sales associate position in a mega store where he works a few hours each Saturday. There he can leave classy Wellington behind for some time and meet some of his street-friends.

The job itself was no occasion for joy: he hated the corny baseball cap he had to wear and the bad pop music he was compelled to sell; the tragic loser of a floor manager who imagined he was the king of Levi; [...] All it was good for was to get him out of the toy-town that was Wellington and a bit of money to spend in Boston once he got there. (OB, 79)

Levi is desperately trying to be authentically black and for this he even keeps his real identity secret. To him a black person living in a rich neighbourhood is no better than any white person. He thinks that “[A]ny black lady who be white enough to live in Redwood thinks *zackly* the same way as any old white lady“ (OB, 85).

Smith explains that Carl was very much modelled on her brother, the British rapper Doc Brown³⁹. In this article Zadie Smith contends Rap to be “a very confident art form”. Carl is into rap music and spoken word performances which present him as very poised, and although he has not received a particularly good formal education, he is an intelligent young man. Although little is learned about him as a character, Carl succeeds in representing a positive example of black identity on the street - retaining his cultural identity whilst finding success through accepting the right opportunities presented to him. Furthermore, he is not a figure of pity to be looked down upon, just like anybody else, he retains his pride and belief that he can achieve his goals himself, without the condescending assistance from Zora which is evidenced in the book (OB, 410 “She's Martin Luther King.”). This help is given in error,

³⁹ Cf. Barton, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2005/mar/04/poetry.popandrock> [2.11.2008].

and is offered because she favours him. She is, however, unable to understand that Carl does not need to follow the path of academia, as she has in her life, in order to be successful or happy. He is, perhaps, set as an example for Monty's concept of non-affirmative action and might prove that "Opportunity [...] is a right but not a gift" (OB, 367).

6.5.1. Female identity

Similar to discussions about race and ethnicity, there have been heated theoretical debates about the concepts of gender. Gayle Rubin, a cultural anthropologist and gender activist, follows one strand of thought amongst other prominent sociologists and philosophers. For her sex is predetermined through physiological and other differences. In contrast to this she refers to gender and gender identity as a person's subjective identification and feeling of being male or female. Sociology affirmed the view of gender as something we grow into "by powerful social structures" (Holmes, 40).

More recently Judith Butler, an American poststructuralist philosopher who does not separate but subsumes sex under the heading of gender, hit upon:

Post-structuralism questions binary systems of classification which insist gender must be fixed as either feminine or masculine. In contrast to structuralism it proposes that gender has no 'real' basis as part of individuals and their bodies, but that gender differences are created by language. (Holmes, 173)

Butler, being one of the most prominent figures of third-wave feminism, put the biological-natural status of sex up for discussion. According to Judith Butler, the distinction between male and female is an excuse for stereotyping sexuality as well as gender.

Many women are still disadvantaged because of their gender. Even today there is a "biological determinism common in everyday thinking about differences between men and women" (Holmes, 171). Holmes expatiates that there are many streams of thought in mapping the links between class

and gender⁴⁰ referring to materialist visions, discourse and culture or the standard classifications of class. Female subordination is due to the fact that over hundreds of years their work output was not available for the market. Women fulfilled their domestic duties and did their unpaid work within the family. Their limited financial freedom hardened their commitment to stay within the family, often allowing them little personal freedom and fostering the role of the obedient wife. In addition, the wealth of the family was usually bequeathed to the oldest son, which left little opportunity for a young woman other than to find a respectable husband.

“Black women, marginalized on account of their 'race' as well as their gender, face qualitatively different problems in their pursuit of more self-directed lives“ (Boesenberg, 7). In the past they were urged to leave their traditions behind and accept Western cultures, which offered them less status and autonomy than their traditional way of life. In Great Britain as well as in the United States black females are surrounded by mainstream culture which pressurises them in various ways. A woman's place in African society is largely within the household, with her most important duty being the organisation of her husband. Despite colonisation, the division of gender roles has remained largely consistent in African countries. When African women come to Great Britain they find that their role is radically changed: everything in the Western world is emphasised as a difference, and if they were to do what they did in Africa, it would make them the odd one out.

The children of those women, who, according to the laws of their native culture, are supposed to bring honour to their parents, grow up in a totally different society in Great Britain. They are often sent to school simply because the government demands it. Later in life, the same children get a job and become self-sufficient, their perspectives therefore change and they foster the idea that they want to be able to choose their own husband and try to integrate with their host culture.

⁴⁰ Cf. Holmes, 176.

Lighter skin is generally considered more fashionable. This puts black people and especially black women living in Europe or America under pressure. There is a huge market for paling creams, products to straighten hair and there is a marketplace for wigs as well as for hair implants. Subtle discrimination imposes European values on black women: the lighter you are, the more beautiful you are. Black stars and role models like Beyoncé⁴¹ and Destiny's Child spend huge amounts of money on such products and thus they fuel a whole beauty industry. The favouring of a paler complexion as opposed to black skin has its roots in part in a sad and tragic chapter of African history. The Belgians as well as the Germans claimed to have taken civilisation to the Africans. While ruling the kingdom of Rwanda and Burundi, the Germans came to the conclusion that the Tutsis with their paler skin and more European features might not be of African origin, but rather must have migrated to the African continent from somewhere else. Believing the Tutsis were of white ancestry and therefore higher up in the hierarchy, they gave them special status and the subsequent consequential tensions led to genocide. Hence blacks with European-like noses and a paler complexion were also favoured within black communities.

The female body is of special relevance to feminists, as it has been associated with femininity throughout humanity. Furthermore, it has been disparaged for its uncleanliness, immorality and decay.⁴² In explaining the different roles of women and men in our patriarchal society, feminists also turned to Pierre Bourdieu and his idea of cultural and social capital.

6.5.2. Female Identity in *On Beauty*

Smith very much portrays stereotypes of women: there is the big mama embodied by Kiki, the young and beautiful Victoria who “looks like Nefertiti”

⁴¹ August 2008 L'Oreal was accused of making Beyoncé appear with extremely whitewashed skin in an ad for hair tinting lotion. Cf. <http://www.herald.ie/opinion/comment/uproar-as-beyonces-loreal-ad-goes-beyond-the-pale-1450259.html> 1.9.2008

⁴² Cf. Oliver, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/Kristeva.html> [1.9.2008].

(OB, 123) a sex-symbol to men of all ages, then there is Zora who is devoid of any identity, despairingly trying to meet her environs' demands and Claire who is in therapy⁴³ and deeply concerned with her inner life.

While some black female writers are clear about their endeavour to alter false representations of black women, transforming them from stereotypes into positive images of black womanhood, writer Zadie Smith does not always leave readers with the sense that she wishes to move her black female characters beyond stereotypical archetypes. (Walters, 124)

Walters highlights that Zadie Smith utilises those stereotypes as a 'satirical device' (Walters, 127). On the one hand, this tool allows the raising of an awareness of those stereotypes (whilst Smith was at times accused of turning them almost into caricatures) and on the other hand the characters in *On Beauty* identify with those stereotypical groups and thus bring an image of them into being.⁴⁴

It is Carlene who points out that "Men move with their minds and women must move with their bodies" (OB, 96). Furthermore Smith largely adheres to this prejudice and attempts to play with it. Laila Amine points out that the female characters in the novel "are both depicted as arrogant and selfish and stand out as gate-keepers of values for their respective families" (Amine, *On Beauty*).

Kiki definitely "plays the role of the submissive, silenced wife" (Walters, 129). The time when Kiki's body corresponded to the current appreciation of beauty had long since passed. Once she had been slim and beautiful, but time had taken its toll and her weight had increased by approximately 150 pounds. It is not, however, only her looks which had altered, but along with her physical transformation her personality and her character seem to have changed. Her looks are of a certain kind due to her race and she has the clichéd appearance of a big mama.

⁴³ Cf. OB, 223 "Claire Malcolm was addicted to self sabotage".

⁴⁴ Cf. Walters, 128.

The size was sexual and at the same time more than sexual: sex was only one small element of its symbolic range. If she were white, maybe it would refer only to sex, but she was not. And so her chest gave off a mass of signals beyond her direct control: sassy, sisterly, predatory, motherly, threatening, comforting – it was a mirror-world she had stepped into in her mid forties, a strange fabulation of the person she believed she was. She could no longer be meek or shy. Her body had directed her to a new personality; [...] (OB, 47)

Kiki is very much aware of her looks and refers to herself as the “aunt Jemima on the cookie boxes” which are “the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry played around” (OB, 51). She suffers from the fact that her bodily image is not thought to be sexually attractive any longer. Still she finds some pleasure in the fact that now there are other reactions from men. They openly flirt with her as if hinting at the blatant unspoken rule and that there is not, and could not possibly be, any kind of sexual encounter between them.

When you are no longer in the sexual universe – when you are supposedly too old, or too big, or simply no longer thought of in that way – apparently a whole new range of male reactions to you come into play. One of them is humour. Then they find you funny. (OB, 51)

Notwithstanding the feeling of unattractiveness and the reality of being considered a big mama, she actually plays with that image. When talking to Claire she makes use of her racial background and talks to her “moving her head from side to side in a manner she understood white people enjoyed” (OB, 52). Claire and Kiki have known each other for as long as Kiki and Howard have known each other. Still, after thirty years the two of them “did not quite gel as friends” (OB, 52) but still they “had always been fond of each other” (OB, 227). The contrast between the two women is most predominant in their bodily appearance. Claire, who is “five foot one and physically prepubescent, even now, at fifty-four” (OB, 51) can in no way be compared to overweight Kiki as far as her physical appearance is concerned. Claire “was neatly made with the minimum of material” (OB, 51) and with her “elfin head” (OB, 51) she is, in Kiki’s eyes, definitely out of her league.

Interestingly Claire thinks of Kiki as radiating a certain beauty that she herself and many of the young girls do not possess:

Claire remembered when Howard first met his wife, back when Kiki was a nursing student in New York. At that time her beauty was awesome, almost unspeakable, but more than this she radiated an essential female nature Claire had already imagined in her poetry – natural, honest, powerful, unmediated, full of something like genuine desire. A goddess of the everyday. (OB, 227)

Through Claire's introspection she is predominantly portrayed as a woman who fails to come to grips with the many attributes expected of her as well as the many wishes and desires that she holds inside. Being of a “privileged and emotionally austere” (OB, 215) background, she appears to long for the liberation of her innermost hopes and beliefs that she has held back over the years and for which poetry had once been a form of expression.

She was a woman still controlled by the traumas of her girlhood. It made more sense to put her three-year-old self in the dock. As Dr Byford explained, she was really the victim of a vicious, peculiarly female psychological disorder: she felt one thing and did another. She was a stranger to herself. (OB, 226)

Still, it is previously intimated that Claire holds an understanding of beauty which is not solely modelled on looks, but rather in contrast

Claire spoke often in her poetry of the idea of 'fittingness': that is, when your chosen pursuit and your ability to achieve it – no matter how small or insignificant both might be – are matched exactly, are fitting. (OB, 214)

Victoria stands in stark contrast to the rest of the novel's female cast and this is particularly obvious in comparison to “Zora's virginal demureness” (Walters, 137). While the mama and the intellectual stereotypes are rather disassociated from their sexual being, “the jezebel is defined by her hypersexuality” (Walters, 134). Victoria, who does not initially correspond to that ‘jezebel’ stereotype, transforms herself through the second part of the book into what is “a sexual super freak” (Walters, 136). Most amazingly Victoria even flatters Kiki before seducing her husband.

'Kiki', she said suddenly. And how awful the corruption when you hear the name of your heart in the mouth of the person you are about to betray her with! 'Kiki', she repeated, 'your wife. She's amazing looking. She's like a queen. Imperious looking.' 'Queen?'

'She's very beautiful said Victoria impatiently, as if Howard were being particularly dense about an obvious truth. 'Like an African queen.' (OB, 313)

Walters accentuates that by overtly exaggerating and demonstrating Victoria's sexuality, Smith discloses the “representation of black women as sexual deviants” (Walters 136) and Walters closes her essay *Still Mammies and Hos* by sustaining that Smith is purposely stereotyping her female characters:

Perhaps when Smith becomes comfortable with writing from the female perspective she will create a black female protagonist who eludes the stereotypes and who is as complex and as round as the white male characters she creates. (Walters, 137)

Interestingly, Victoria comes to America together with her parents, which is indeed strange as she studied in Cambridge which she leaves to come to Wellington. From this the reader induces that there is something to come involving Victoria. She is the beautiful and seductive black beauty and moreover it could be assumed that she is the spitting image of Kiki in her early years.

According to Elaine Scarry's essay this is of particular interest. She concludes that the image perceived as beautiful, has an instinctive impact upon the viewer as an echo of some past beauty experienced by the beholder. It could therefore be argued that by falling in love with Vee, it really is the former image of Kiki which crosses Howard's mind and entices him to become emotionally involved with her.

6.6.1. Social identity and class

Class politics are and always have been very important in the UK. The intellectual middle class and the conservative establishment largely accept that identity is conferred through societal position. Social identity can be seen as an origin that creates a basis for and unites all other forms of identity. Understanding the key differences between the diverse layers of social identity, class is a helpful concept. Class

[...] usually refers to someone's position within a social hierarchy (or stratification system) based around the job you do, the money that it earns, the access it provides to other resources, the amount of control you have over your work, and how much respect is attached to that position within the hierarchy. (Holmes, 130-131)

To be positioned in that hierarchy Pierre Bourdieu argues that three forms of capital are needed: economic, social and cultural capital. The first refers to money and other possessions. Social capital refers to the individual's social network and cultural capital is a way of thinking or of being 'somebody' demonstrated through taste and actions. Bourdieu states that "the middle class ways of thinking and being are privileged" (Holmes, 140). Knowledge, such as that of good behaviour or classical music and good wine, is a middle class privilege. Each fraction of society has its own interests and its own tastes which are shaped from early childhood, with food, furniture and clothing being the most telling, since those things are not usually taught in educational systems but rather learnt through social networking.

Structured relations between people are called "field" by Bourdieu. In each field particular values are effective and fought out within that specific area. To sustain one's position in such a field, a certain habitus is to be decisive. Habitus is "the set of learned embodied ways of doing and thinking" (Holmes, 141). Middle-class children learn to speak, dress and behave in a certain way, which is condoned at school and in later life, as their

compliance is approved of by the general field of education.⁴⁵ This triggers a cycle with the dominant classes presenting language and gait that rises above those with a habitus less suitable for the field. Thus not only economic but also cultural capital is handed down to the next generations via social and cultural reproduction. It is important to note that it takes a long time for cultural capital to be acquired and in the course of time it becomes part of our very self. From the first years of our lives it shapes our identity and acts as a barrier to social mobility.⁴⁶

The dominant exhibits more of what Bourdieu terms 'symbolic capital'. Symbolic capital refers to power, honour, prestige or something of innate value. If a person of high symbolic capital attempts to alter the symbolic capital of those who possess less, then this is referred to as symbolic violence. The dominated have ideas and categories of thought imposed upon them, which are then taken as being 'just' and thus incorporated into their lives. Therefore, in a broader scope, social violence is simply a justification within the social order promoted by a means of perception.

Symbolic capital can sometimes be mistaken for cultural capital and is a source of misrecognition. Part of this process is the converting of symbolic or economic capital e.g. wealth and good diction, into cultural capital, which very often goes hand in hand with a university education. In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Bourdieu analyses the power structures within the educational system which play a key role in reproducing the social system. Furthermore, this is reinforced by reference to the authority of language, which Bourdieu refers to as magisterial language.

Magisterial language, a status attribute which owes most of its effects to the institution, since it can never be dissociated from the relation of academic authority in which it is manifested, is

⁴⁵This could also be said of Diane Abbott MP for Labour in London and famously one of the first elected black female MPs. She caused a media sensation in 2003 when she decided to send her black son in public education as to avoid pigeon holing him in the black working classed London school system. Cf. Wintour: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2003/nov/04/uk.schools> [29.10.2008].

⁴⁶ Cf. Philip Smith, 133.

able to appear as an intrinsic quality of the person when it merely diverts an advantage of office onto the office-holder. (Bourdieu, 110)

6.6.2. Social identity and class in *On Beauty*

Smith herself has argued that all her ideas “are class based” (Mullan, *Enlived by Exasperation*). Having experienced class advancement from a working class family with Jamaican roots to a graduate of Cambridge and later high-flying authoress, she knows about the corresponding feeling of loss. She notices that if “you move class it's always a loss” (Mullan, *Enlived by Exasperation*) and this feeling of loss is felt on both sides of the social ladder, with its injustices at the very centre of her novel. Mostly applying to her own experiences, she describes both worlds: that of the underprivileged “coloured” who lives street-life and who is excluded from university-life and, in turn, those who are part of the intellectual elite.

Many aspects of identity, like gender, ethnicity and personal identity, come to interact on the level of social identity. An individual's place in society is not only shaped by his or her gender and ethnic background, but also by education. Carl is set apart from the rest of the characters as he was born into the working class, from what he declares it is further ascertained that although “not an *educated* brother” (OB, 76) he is interested in culture and attending what he calls “free shit” (OB 76), as he is aware that he “would meet the people he didn't usually meet” (OB, 75) there. It is only by pure chance that he becomes acquainted with the Belsey family. Due to association with Zora, he later comes into contact with Claire at the “Bus Stop”, a Moroccan restaurant with a basement and club space where poetry slams are held. As Claire, a professor giving poetry classes at Wellington, recognises Carl's talent, she invites him to her lectures although he is not a student. Through this whole scenario, the reader becomes acutely aware of the fact that the young students attending the class are overfed with theories, which are then utilised in real life situations.

Zora, despite being part of this university elite, is not considered talented by Claire and, therefore, initially had not been accepted to participate in her classes. When Zora previously discovered that Claire Malcolm had accepted a young and talented optician in her class but had denied her the chance to take part, she was furious and accused Claire of not accepting her in the class due to her being Howard's daughter. Claire, however, is attempting to “refine and polish...a sensibility“ (OB, 158) which she does not believe Zora possesses at all. Nevertheless, Claire has to admit defeat and accept Zora into her class, as even Monty Kipps critically commented on her selective entry restrictions. He generally is of the opinion that “[o]ppportunity [...] is a right – but not a gift. Rights are earned. And opportunity must come through the proper channels. Otherwise the system is radically devalued“ (OB, 367). In his opinion if the differences between the classes were to be annihilated, this would destroy society as we know it. For him it is not acceptable to favour black students of poor background, but rather he believes that they should work hard for what they get.

Monty is very critical about the

[...] under-the-counter manner in which class admissions are organized here at Wellington – a policy that is a blatant corruption of the Affirmative Action bill (which, by the way, is itself a corruption) – whereby students who are NOT enrolled at this college are yet taught in classes here, by professors, who, at their own “discretion” (as it is so disingenuously put), allow these “students” into their classes, choosing them over *actual* students better qualified than they – NOT because these young people meet the academic standards of Wellington, no, but because they are considered *needy cases* – as if it helps minorities to be pushed through an elite environment to which they are not yet suited. (OB, 329)

He does realise, however, that class differences are also interlinked with education and that this leads to a vicious circle with blacks from the lower classes having virtually no chance of changing their situation for the better. His ego and his conviction, however, still do not allow him to ease his strict deliberations.

Although his friends and colleagues at university seem to assume that Carl would like to exploit his new opportunities, he himself feels quite content with this present position in Wellington's music department. It is only when Zora surprises him with Victoria that her feelings of betrayal surface, as she seems to be certain that Carl's acceptance at the university was largely due to her own beneficial status. He, however, is not of her opinion: "Apparently you expected some payback. Apparently I had to sleep with yo'shank as well" (OB, 413). Although Carl had become accustomed to his environment, when in emotional distress he clearly changes back to his previous role:

This was no longer the charming Carl Thomas of Wellington's Black Music Library. This was the Carl who had sat out on the front porches of Roxbury apartments on steamy summer days. This was the Carl who could play the Dozens good as anybody. Zora had never been spoken to like this in her life. (OB, 413)

Zora is insecure and fancies Carl who has an outstanding personality and is loved by everybody. Although Carl is under-privileged he is in possession of something that Kiki as well as the children appreciate: his good looks, his being intelligent and witty and Levi likes him for his being original and 'street'. What they seem to love or like in him is the black part of the personality that they have lost. Howard is the only one in the family who almost shoves him away when he is outside and wants to come in for the party. When first meeting Carl he reacted "'Rubens', said Howard suddenly. 'Your face. From the four African heads'" (OB 77).

Levi is, in general, very critical of the Wellingtonians. He is immediately in favour of Carl, and impressed with him as he believes that: "This ain't America. You think this is America? This is toytown. I was born in this country – trust me. You go into Roxbury, you go into the Bronx, you see America. That's *street*" (OB, 63). He is seemingly adopted by a group of street gang who raise his awareness of the cruelties which were perpetrated on the Haitians. Levi, who has a certain social standing, strongly empathises with the idea of suffering. He feels split as his mom and dad are ethnically different and according to his looks he neither belongs to the wealthy upper-

class surroundings of Wellington, nor to the neighbourhoods he is hanging out in. It is him, of all the characters, who has to experience most that identity is to a large extent determined by class.

7. Identity within society

“Man is only a man because he is a part of society“ claimed Durkheim, the founding figure of sociology. In society we are always dependent on each other and cannot live alone. Both Woodward and Hall concern themselves with what they call 'representation' and its impact on identity. Representation is a cultural process which

includes the signifying practices and symbolic systems through which meanings are produced and which position us as subjects. Representations produce meanings through which we can make sense of our experience and of who we are. (Woodward, 14)

Such systems of representation provide us with pre-fabricated identities and alleviate the process of positioning the individual within the society. The OED defines society as “the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community” ([askoxford.com](http://www.askoxford.com), http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/society). When defining society, its organisational patterns and the criteria for inclusion are both essential questions. It would be misleading to believe that aggregate behaviour is identical to that of the individual. This fallacy of composition⁴⁷ would not only neglect that groups have the ability to accomplish more than the individual, but also that a person is shaped by defining him or herself as existing within or outside the accepted borders of society or a group.

One of the most crucial aspects in the shaping of societies is culture. Sturken and Cartwright define culture as “the shared practices of a group, community, or society, through which meaning is made out of the visual, aural and textual world of representations“ (Sturken and Cartwright, 3). Largely referring to Hall (1996), Giles and Middleton (1999) point out that individuals belonging to the same culture must share the same cultural codes, thus sharing the same concepts and ideas in order to understand the world in a similar way. These concepts have a representational function as e.g. clothes, gestures, expressions as well as language which then transmit

⁴⁷ Cf. <http://www.huppi.com/kangaroo/L-nosociety.htm> [15.6.2008].

meaning and represent what the individual wants to be.

In order to make sense of the world we need classification and categorisation. A single individual sign cannot be deciphered on its own, but the interpretation of its meaning is dependent on a series of similar or contrasting signs. Language itself also works through differentiation and representation and, therefore, culture and cultural symbols operate in a similar way, they are able to construct and transmit meaning in themselves, but nonetheless are devoid of any real significance to the untrained eye.⁴⁸ This process of decoding and encoding is referred to as semiotics and provides theoreticians with the instruments to investigate culture as well as ethnicity. Eco, as quoted in Reichl, defines semiotics as follows:

The sign [in common usage] is a gesture produced with the intention of communicating, that is, in order to transmit one's representation or inner state to another being. The existence of a certain rule (a code) enabling both the sender and the addressee to understand the manifestation in the same way must, of course, be presupposed if the transmission is to be successful [...] (Reichl 50).

Levi, for instance, considers blackness as a construct and creates representations of himself in order to advance his identity of a black teenager. He continually changes his code and reorientates himself in order to achieve authenticity as a black young man. As a result he changes his way of speech, alters his dress style and even disavows his family. Nevertheless, to those individuals part of the social stratum he is trying to belong to, he remains the privileged son of a white professor he actually is.

⁴⁸ Cf. Hall 1996, 4-5.

8. Identity defined

In one sense, the term refers to properties of uniqueness and individuality, the essential differences making a person distinct from all others, as in 'self-identity'. In another sense, it refers to qualities of sameness, in that persons may associate themselves, or be associated by others, with groups or categories on the basis of some salient common feature, e.g. 'ethnic identity'. (Byron, 292)

Personal, national, cultural, gender as well as ethnic identity have to be connected, with gender and ethnic identity being fundamental as they function through visible markers and “operate as our penultimate visible identities“ (Alcoff, 6).

Alcoff argues that

[...] the reality of identities often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them. (Alcoff, 5)

The question of identity is not only central to literature but to modern society in general and it is closely connected with societal changes. Identity crises are a phenomenon of and a reaction to late modernity: Never has the question of identity been so widely discussed as in this age of globalisation. Through migration humans have spread across the globe and transformed societies. Considering the ever-increasing complexity of modern society, it is easy to distinguish why identity is seen as a reflexive concept with more and more people deliberating their own identity make-up.

Social theorists have viewed identity as being in crisis since the dawn of the 20th century. The causes of this have been held as radical changes in the structure of society, leading to what Ernesto Laclau first coined as the 'dislocation of identity'. Laclau contends that modern societies lack a centre and thus have no articulating or organisational principle which allows for the evolution of various different identities. “This is fragmenting the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality, which

gave us firm locations as social individuals“ (Hall 1992, 274).

However, the question of identity has been of interest for thousands of years since the ancient world philosophers engaged in the question and attempted to develop a formula for identity, which they viewed as a constant form. In contrast, however, it appeared to them that identity seemed to be in a state of constant flux and, moreover, that continuity seemed to be an equally important criterion as mutability.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, it could be observed that identities are “constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies“ (Hall 1996, 4). Woodward and Hall (1996) both take the contradictory philosophical views of essentialism and non-essentialism as the starting point for their questioning of identity. Essentialism regards identity as having some essential core⁵⁰ or essence composed of the three capacities of reason, consciousness and action.

Referring to essentialist philosophical theory, Hall reveals that the essentialist ideal of Enlightenment is an idea which cannot be valid in its original form, but without which the current debate on identity could not take place as it would be lacking a starting point.⁵¹ He proceeds to illustrate that the concepts of identity and identification range amongst the most discussed but the least understood concepts, and goes on to define identity as being

[...] constructed on the back of recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. (Hall 1996, 3)

Contrasting this with a discursive and structural approach, Hall shows that there is, in fact, no coherent self. Identification, being the process of identifying with others⁵², is revealed as a constant process of construction

⁴⁹ Cf. Galster, 70.

⁵⁰ Cf. Woodward, 28.

⁵¹ Cf. Hall 1996, 2.

⁵² Cf. Woodward, 14.

which accumulates through exposure to difference. „Like all signifying practices, it is subject to the 'play', of difference. It obeys the logic of more than one“ (Hall 1996, 3).

In psychology, identification is grounded in projection, referring to emotional bonding with other people throughout the different stages of life. According to Freud, the earliest bonding identifies our parents to be objects of love, whilst at the same time rivals. Additionally, in the field of psychology, therefore, one of the most basic principles of identities is that they are produced through both simultaneous exclusion and inclusion. In fact, what Hall calls a “constitutive outside”⁵³ is necessary to identity, meaning that identity exists through that what it is not. Furthermore, every identity has “at its 'margin', an excess - something more. The unity, the homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational, is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure“ (Hall 1996, 5).

Hall defines identity through a range of core characteristics, of which the most important could be summed up as follows⁵⁴: identities are

- 1 never singular but multiple constructions
- 2 constantly in the process of change and transformation
- 3 constructed within and not without discourse
- 4 products of a marking of difference and exclusion
- 5 constructed through, not exclusive of, difference

Zadie Smith to a large extent follows this definition of identity in *On Beauty*. The characters in *On Beauty* are not singular constructed but composed of many different strands of identity which to a varying degree are crucial for their self-concepts. Moreover, all main characters are shown to undergo a change in some way: Howard and Kiki succeed in overcoming their midlife

⁵³ Cf Stuart Hall 1996, 4.

⁵⁴ Cf Stuart Hall 1996, 4.

crisis and save their marriage, Carl undergoes a transformation from rapper to university employee, while Zora gains a new form of self confidence. Tynan compares Smith's understanding of identity to that of a journey and declares that “[e]xistence is not the successful resolution of conflicting thoughts, histories, cultures, and ideologies; existence resides in the chaos of constant becoming” (Tynan, 86).

Character traits and many of the developments mentioned are depicted through pairs of opposition, which differentiate and exclude certain character traits from others. While not exclusively used as a means of character-forming, the use of pairs of opposition clearly is Smith's main instrument for giving her characters shape. For Zadie Smith “Identity, then, is a matter of positioning as well as simply being” (Tynan, 86).

9. Hybridity

In general, hybridity refers to mixture although “at its simplest, hybridity, however, implies a disruption and forcing together of any unlike living things [...] making difference into sameness” (Young, 26). Originally a biological notion, it was adopted as a descriptive term by cultural studies in the 20th century. Fludernik points out that hybridity “has undergone some extensive reinterpretations and refunctionalisations that have turned it into a key concept in postcolonial studies” (Fludernik, 19) and have converted it into a fashionable concept on modern theory.

In the 18th century colonial times, the concept of hybridity was used to fuel the “fearful discourse of racial mixing” (Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybridity>). The first time that the term was applied to humans was as early as 1813 and to the intermingling of races in 1861. The term “was problematic, dangerous and scandalizing” (Fludernik, 20). Pseudoscientific approaches such as Phrenology were used to encourage the belief that Europeans were superior to Asians or Africans. Hybrids were viewed as even worse: abnormal genetically-degenerated people. This appallingly prejudicial attitude within the sciences may highlight the fear and tentativeness of the colonisers, who held a fear of the unknown and opposed other races attaining equal status.

Nowadays, within the field of postcolonial studies, the term came to denote individuals who have lost their sense of belonging due to their life being lived between two distinct cultures⁵⁵.

For Bhabha, hybridity becomes the moment in which the discourse of colonial authority loses its univocal grip on meaning and finds itself open to the trace of the language of the other, enabling the critic to trace complex movements of disarming alterity in the colonial text. (Young, 22)

In line with the “term’s constitutive concept of a crossing of different species” (Fludernik, 10) it came to designate philological composites, but

⁵⁵ Cf. Zamojski, 60.

theoreticians have frequently pointed out “the immense ideological and political load that the originally biological term carries within the contemporary debate“ (Fludernik, 11).

9.1. Homi Bhabha and his theory of hybridity

Homi Bhabha is one of the most influential migrant intellectuals of our time. Born in India he studied first in Bombay and later Oxford to work as a lecturer at Sussex University and then lecture in Chicago and at Harvard. He became renowned during the 1980s when he published some essays which in 1994 were published under the title *The Location of Culture*, a collection bringing together his many explorations on colonial identity.

Bhabha's work explores how language transforms the way identities are structured when colonizer and colonized interact, finding that colonialism is marked by a complex economy of identity in which colonized and colonizer depend on each other. (Huddart, 3)

His work takes a central position in post-colonial literary theory and developed some of the key concepts of current discourse analysis: hybridity, mimicry, difference and ambivalence are part of the current mainstream conceptual vocabulary for the reading of postcolonial texts. In creating those concepts Bhabha largely draws on poststructuralist theories and doing so he alludes to many distinct writers and philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, Said, Gramsci, Bakhtin as well as the psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan.

Huddart⁵⁶ points out that two cardinal ideas taken over by Bhabha from Derrida and Foucault respectively are those of “iteration“ and “statement“. In order to be of any true meaning, a statement must be reproducible in various contexts. A statement is always shaped by its context and

[...] any change in the statement's conditions of the use and reinvestment, any alteration in its field of experience or verification, or indeed any difference in the problems to be

⁵⁶ Cf. David Huddart, 16.

solved, can lead to the emergence of a new statement: the difference of the same. (Bhabha, 22)

He takes Derrida's notion of "difference" (Huddart, 4) and extends it to a more cultural sphere in order to apply it to cultural differences.

Bhabha certainly draws upon some of Derrida's ideas in order to challenge narratives of fixity that have been central to colonial conceptions of non-Western cultures; one of the debts of that he declares most prominently is the one owed to Derrida's 'The double session', an essay that extends the notion of supplementarity to Plato's theory of mimesis in the *Philebus*. Plato here distinguishes between an original and his reproduction, but according to Derrida this dichotomy collapses because in the *Philebus* original truth [...] is itself described as a form of representation [...]. (Leonard, 127)

French philosopher Jaques Derrida held the firm belief that everything that has some kind of structure cannot be understood without its genesis. This belief is also taken up by Homi Bhabha who reveals that "colonial perceptions are formed around conflictual images and representations – copies of copies, disjointed and split assignments - rather than cohesively referential significations" (Leonard, 128).

Homi Bhabha is not interested in "existence of dialectical pairs which appear to confirm each other in distinct, separate identities" (Smith, 248) but rather he approaches the dichotomy of coloniser and colonised focusing not only on the centre and margin but also on the space in between, the "third space of enunciation" (Bhabha, 37).

These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular and common – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha, 1-2).

He assigns this interstitial category to mould all cultural statements and systems and shape cultural identity. An identity deriving from this "luminal" space can by definition not be of "pure" origin but is a hybrid.

Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all

sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. (Bhabha, 112)

9.2. Hybrid Identity and Diaspora

Homi Bhabha refers to migrants as cases of hybrid identity. "Such people can destabilize traditional identities and violate supposedly mutually exclusive categories because they are simultaneously of both the East and West" (Smith, 237). Theorists like Gilroy, Patterson and Lee have all made use of Bhabha's concept and have developed his idea of the migrant other. Migrants of hybrid identities live in 'diaspora', a term originally denoting the dispersion of the Jewish community and deriving from the Greek 'to disperse' (Wisker, 26). The term touches on the subject of being dispersed from a place of origin and scattered over an alternative location. Over hundreds of years, slavery brought about a global diaspora, while many Asian workers left their home-countries as indentured labourers⁵⁷. As they were forced to provide manpower, they found themselves living in "a new culture and yet making their own versions of it, their own version of self, while still retaining versions of the home culture" (Wisker, 92).

It is emphasised by McLeod that first and subsequent generations diverge in approaching the matter of 'diaspora'. The experience of being disrupted from home and living in totally new surroundings overshadows the migrants' feelings; whereas those born in the UK or US, as second or third generation migrants, experience a lack of cultural heritage, not knowing their real origins. To them the feeling of home and "the 'interior knowledge' of a distant place is unavailable" (McLeod, 212). Despite this, they also encounter similar instances of racism which reconnects them to their antecedents and painfully reintegrates a feeling of heritage within their identities. They develop a sense of belonging, but to them the "idea of the home country becomes split from the experience of returning home" (McLeod, 208). Irie in

⁵⁷ Cf. Gina Wisker, 26.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* imagines Jamaica in such a way:

No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs – this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity* that have now passed into the language. And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginningest of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page. (*White Teeth*, 402)

Both migrants and their descendants are caught between two places, not knowing where they belong and, additionally, those of second and third generation not knowing where they descend from: their origin remains a blank page to them.

Gilroy accentuates that a diaspora writer “must continually plot for himself itinerant cultural routes” (McLeod, 215) and thus he establishes a connection between history, the future and the present. In such a way, hybrids have the ability to provide a translation between cultures. McLeod further stresses that this 'Third Space' is a “place of immense creativity and possibility” (McLeod 215), as the migrant has the benefit of experiencing the outlook that the world itself is not pure, but rather is incomplete and that routes exist which are different to those of traditional fixity. In *Imaginary Homelands* Salman Rushdie remarks upon the strain, but also on the privilege, of hybrid writers:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools, but however ambiguous and shifting the ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. (Rushdie, 15)

According to Bhabha, the coloniser formulates stereotypes of the colonised which encompass all the fears he holds of the unknown entity. These fears and anxieties allow for the colonised to undermine the colonisers' power by repetition and mimicking as a possible means of resistance.

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (Bhabha, 86)

This strategy enters into literature by rewriting and mimicking the colonisers' manner of writing.

What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a writing, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable. (Bhabha, 87)

When the authentic or original crosses our mind while reading, we sample some covert knowledge which Bhabha calls 'uncanny'. The 'uncanny' has the ability to challenge existing value judgements and objects of supremacy.

Culture is *heimlich*, with its disciplinary generalizations, its mimetic narratives, its homologous empty time, its seriality, its progress, its customs and coherence. But cultural authority is also *unheimlich*, for to be distinctive, signficatory, influential and identifiable, it has to be translated, disseminated, differentiated, interdisciplinary, intertextual, international, inter-racial. (Bhabha, 136)

The migrant represents the "dual nature of culture, always situated in relation to both an original culture and a new location" (Huddart, 84).

9.3. The uncanny in *On Beauty*

The feeling of the uncanny is present in *On Beauty* on a very subtle level and is mostly expressed through the characters' vernacular and behaviour. There is one example at the very beginning of *On Beauty* which develops very slowly. However, despite this gradual build up, the reader is immediately aware that it bears the very echo of the uncanny: Howard indeed moves location when visiting London (OB, 27) in order to see his son and the Kippsens. Back in his old hometown "[h]e was not tourist and he did not look about him" (OB, 27). Travelling alone, Howard is lacking an outside perspective usually provided by his wife and children. Instead he is able to observe and focus on London from the inside. This is undoubtedly one of Smith's strengths as it is just as much her hometown as it is Howard's. It is this area of Kilburn where she resides and where Howard and Michael meet at the tube station. Smith makes a number of fastidious observations which depict how familiar she must be with the area.

First and foremost, the reader notices that there is an immediate switch in language. While walking through the tube station, Howard does not observe an Asian American but an "Asian boy" and Smith does not refer to his cigarette, but to his "fag" which he dropped and "nudged into the gutter" (OB, 28). Monty's son Michael arrives to collect him from the tube station. He is a risk analyst for an equities firm (OB, 33) and Howard immediately notices his "noble looks" (OB, 33).

There was something fatally humourless, even in the way the young man walked, a status-preserving precision to each step, as if proving to a policeman that he could walk along a straight white line. (OB, 34)

Michael is extremely middle class and typically English in his demeanour. Howard notices a certain "pomposity of the young man" (OB, 35) who intentionally displays his feeling that other Black Caribbean people have lost touch with their original ideals. He outs himself as being similarly conservative to his father and that he believes in family values. He states "I

was at the same uni as my dad at one point – I think that's a good thing, when families are close knit” (OB, 35). Moreover, he is very keen to inform Howard that he is much closer to his father than Howard is to Jerome. He points out, that his “mum's always been at home, which makes a lot of difference” (OB, 35). When Howard insists that Jerome and Victoria are engaged, Michael gets extremely agitated. He suddenly rearranges his jaw (OB, 37) and reverts to black London vernacular: “I don't know where you got that idea, yeah, but just seriously, like, remove it, because it just isn't even ... Phew!’ he said, breathing out heavily, shaking his head and replacing his glasses” (OB, 37). He also ceases to address Howard as Professor, but shouts “You've got the wrong end of something there, mate, but whatever it is, I suggest you get the right end of it before you walk into my father's house, you understand?” (OB, 37). At times the impression given by Michael's transition in body language and speech becomes exceedingly obvious and overstated.

Nevertheless, Smith discloses that diction is very much related to class. Michael is conservative and English in his manner, but when he changes, he becomes very black: he morphes his body-language and speech into a somewhat more stereotypically black demeanour. During this transformation, he abandons his supremacy within the class system in order to align himself with an alternate culture and thus reveals a part of his personality, which is uncannily different. Michael is very middle class and very British. His demeanour suddenly changes, however, when he becomes agitated and he then immediately converts himself into a black man: he shifts his identity which Howard notices as a “slip in his accent, to something a little rougher” (OB, 38) whilst Howard simply remains the same. Michael has the opportunity of alternating between his identities, which is perceived by Howard as daunting. Apparently, Smith intended to demonstrate how even Howard Belsey, who has been married to a black woman for thirty years and has three children with her, can still be intimidated by a prig if he changes accent and acts like a gangster from the streets.

The nobility he had first thought he detected in Michael's face was rapidly being replaced by a hardening, a nonchalant manner supplanted by its exact opposite, as if some fluid poisonous to his system had been swapped for the blood in his veins. (OB, 39)

Michael transforms into a black person, into someone to “feel genuinely afraid of” (OB, 38). Howard senses something of a “medieval turn” (OB, 38) in the conversation, but in reality it is a particularly 'black' turn which is depicted in the vernacular used by Michael. He insinuates that Jerome is mentally retarded in order to attempt to contemplate sexual relations with his sister⁵⁸, insisting that Victoria is a virgin. Furthermore, Howard's “desire to be involved in the argument, in the culture, fell off” (OB, 38). Michael's modification in tone is even more astounding, since he is very much of his father's opinion about his heritage and, therefore, is very much in denial of being coloured. With Jerome, he even “argued that being black was not an identity but an accidental matter of pigment” (OB, 44) Nevertheless, to some extent the awareness of stereotypically black behaviour must be innately imprinted on him. It appears that as Howard's children did not have the opportunity to develop a definite identity, they are now lacking the capacity to embrace their black heritage. To some extent it has been denied to them, and, therefore, their black ancestry is either lost or over-played.

9.4. Hybrid identity in *On Beauty*

Zora, Levi and Jerome grew up in completely white surroundings. Owing to their family's relative wealth and their mixed background they experience a sheltered and privileged childhood. According to their looks however, they would not normally live in the rich part of Wellington. It is first and foremost their upbringing and class which differentiate them from those coloured people living in Roxbury. For Smith, being of mixed race is a useful instrument depicting the struggle many bi-national families find themselves in.

⁵⁸ Cf. OB, 38 “If he's *touched*”.

The Belsey's house is one symbol conveying divisiveness. Susan Alice Fischer argues that the question of 'belonging' is directly transferred from *Howards End* to *On Beauty*. This time it is not about possessing a house or home, but rather a question of affiliation, of belonging to an identity group and a place to call home where you actually feel you belong. It is, at times, hard for the Belsey children to feel at home. This becomes clear when Zora adamantly defends her younger brother Levi who is stared at by a suspicious white old lady as he wants to enter the house.⁵⁹ Even the building itself gives a picture of disconnectedness:

The sole original window is the skylight at the very top of the house, a harlequin pane that casts a disc of varicoloured light upon different spots on the upper landing as the sun passes over America, turning a white shirt pink as one passes through it, for example, or a yellow tie blue. Once the spot reaches the floor in mid morning it is a family superstition never to step through it. (OB, 16)

This superstition shows the fear that the Belsey family faces about taking a positive position and addressing their coloured heritage. "Even now, as young adults, they continue to step round it on their way down the stairs" (OB, 16). Both Howard and Kiki similarly avoid the topic. Although being married to Kiki for such a long time and having three children with her, Howard has the typical feeling of being the guilty white male. "He disliked and feared conversations with his children that concerned race, as he suspected this one would" (OB, 85). The house and the date of its erection bear the imprint of racial segregation: the house was built in 1856, the same year the Dred Scott case⁶⁰ was brought before court and its outcome was still drawn.⁶¹

Interestingly, another relevant date in American contemporary history is of importance to Howard and Kiki, although never clearly articulated, it is hinted

⁵⁹ Cf. OB, 83.

⁶⁰ Dred Scott was a slave who after living in territories where slavery was prohibited fought for his right of freedom. As a black person he was not considered a citizen but a thing with no rights at all. Cf. <http://library.wustl.edu/vlib/dredscott/chronology.html> [20.10.2008].

⁶¹ Cf. Fischer, 109.

that they were married on September, 11th. It is never discussed in direct terms but all hints are suggestive of the day in 2001 when two suicide bombers attacked the World Trade Centre. At Howard and Kiki's anniversary party, it is the guests' reactions which indicate the mentioned date: "Jack asked the date. Kiki told him, Jack's face gave in to that tiny involuntary shudder with which Kiki had, in recent years, become familiar" (OB, 68). Susan Alice Fischer stresses that this date shows that the house is in fact no place of refuge, neither for the family, nor for their guests. "Moreover, by bracketing much of the novel between the historical events suggested by the year 1856 and September 11th, Smith signals the dangers of binary and dehumanizing ideological divides" (Fischer, 109).

The feeling Zadie Smith undoubtedly wanted to convey is that of being lost and, at the same time, trapped between two very different worlds in a defenceless state of limbo: there is the academic and white world of Howard, who is not really happy with his life and betrays Kiki. Alternatively there is Kiki, who is the kind-hearted symbol of the big mama and stands in stark contrast to Howard's world of academia. Even though their children seem to descend from and belong to both worlds simultaneously, they cannot cushion the feeling of chastisement, as both their parents fail to display that they are morally responsible, neither for themselves, their partner nor their family. Howard and Kiki are themselves torn: Kiki is not the person she formerly was and realising that she lives in an ageing body weakens her soul. Although she was conceived as a polar version of Howard, she is rather endowed with the characteristics of a swamped stereotype.⁶²

⁶² Cf. OB, 111.

10. On Beauty

Beauty does not by definition correlate to identity but it highlights everybody's identity in the book and shall therefore be investigated.. The reader explores the characters mainly through their conceptions of beauty. Beauty is limiting also because Smith bases it on a philosophical text and her perceptions which encapsulate the three main elements of the novel: identity, intertextuality and philosophy.

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder and therefore tells us a lot about the character through whose eyes we perceive the world. Beauty is largely determined by our cultural background. It has been topic of discussion from Greek antiquity to the modern era. Homer considered luminance as the source of beauty just as Aristotle referred to symmetry as being beautiful. Plato's understanding of beauty⁶³ was highly ambivalent. He thought that the arts would interfere with his understanding of the state. He believed that art would have a detrimental effect on those too sensitive; he sought to control the production of works of art by only permitting pieces that could be presented in line with tradition. Everything else, he feared, could destroy the harmonious balance within his state.

According to Plato's metaphysics, the abstract world of the Form possesses a greater degree of reality than the physical world with its changing, unstable events and objects. Hence the more direct the appreciation of Forms, the closer a human mind can approach Truth. Imitations such as paintings mimic the mere appearance of physical objects, becoming (as he puts in *Republic X*) three times removed from reality and the truth. (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics, *Feminist Aesthetics*)

18th century classism came to view those who did not work in the fields and who were, therefore, of a paler complexion as very fashionable. This was due to the fact that members of the lower agricultural working classes were subjected to long hours of daily exposure to the sun and, as a result, were generally tanned in appearance. This analogy can still be viewed to a certain

⁶³ Cf. <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platon#Kunstverst.C3.A4ndnis> [27.7.2008].

extent in developing countries, such as in Africa and India where pale skin is considered a virtue of beauty. Whether this has been inherited from the former colonial racial concepts of white supremacy, or whether its roots stem from the above-mentioned classism that existed until the 20th century in Europe is a matter of debate.

A certain irony exists in Western civilisation today, however, as following the rise of the working classes within the factories, it is now perceived that those who are able to spend time enough outdoors to achieve a tan must be of a more privileged background. This, in turn, has led to today's sunbathing culture that exists within North America and Europe. Furthermore, it has resulted in a questionable dilemma for those of a multicultural background; which is a more desirable beauty feature, the darker skin of the European concept or the lighter skin of the native? It is, however, still white standards of beauty which are the norm in modern society. "The effect of popular American culture's visual construction of beauty is that it bestows presence or absence" (Pereira, 124).

Women are judged much more often by their looks than men. In the media almost everything is airbrushed to create an artificial whitewash. This, in turn, fuels the pressure on black women to attempt to fit into that dominant imaginary world. "Beauty must be reconceptualised as a raced experience in order to understand and fully explore the diverse experiences women have in relation to, and within, cultures" (Poran, *Denying diversity*).

10.1. The concept of beauty in *On Beauty* : Paint It, Black!

“Scenes of beauty are scenes in which a character, narrator, or speaker negotiates ideas about beauty, either their own beauty, or that of another“ (Pereira, xiv-xv). Beauty and aesthetics are central to *On Beauty* with the individual characters conveying different roles of pulchritude within the academic world, the arts and human relations.

Howard Belsey is a professor of art history at the fictitious Wellington college and has been attempting, for what seems like a very long time, to finish his book “Against Rembrandt: Interrogating a master“. Howard is more interested in theory than in the appreciation of art itself. Whilst he is seduced into starting an affair with his colleague Claire and a colleague's daughter, his wife Kiki struggles with her fading beauty. Their daughter Zora quarrels against her body image and falls in love with a handsome but underprivileged young man.

Together with Elaine Scarry, Zadie Smith cites another influence for her book: Simon Schama's *Rembrandt's eyes*. Rembrandt, who created around 40 self-portraits, is contrasted with his older more consistent colleague Rubens, who only put four self-portraits to canvas. Rembrandt's many different disguises make him appear elusive. The various positions he represents himself in seem to be a concealment rather than an account of his many personae. This also finds way into *On Beauty*. It does not seem to be pure chance that Howard occupies himself with Rembrandt above all painters. There are a number of portraits in the house that show Howard in various disguises:

After Harold Belsey follows a jolly parade of Howard himself in his seventies, eighties and nineties incarnations. Despite costume changes, the significant features remain largely unchanged by the years. (OB, 18)

When, after their sexual encounter, Victora finds some portraits of Howard,

she comments: "You know what I thought when I saw them? Rembrandt's portraits. Right?" (OB, 336).⁶⁴ Howard finds himself in an identity crisis not always aware that he belongs to his family, and sometimes seeming to take the bait too easily. Rembrandt himself also had difficulties in resisting his young housemaids. Schama describes not only the paintings of the master, but also occupies himself with the life of the genius. He asks:

War Hendricke errötet, als sie zum ersten Mal spürte, dass er sie anschaute? Jedenfalls verging nicht viel Zeit, bis er sie in seinem Bett haben wollte und nicht mehr Geertje. Und dann musste Geertje auch das Haus verlassen. Dann erst begannen die richtigen Schwierigkeiten [...]. (Schama, 544)

Kiki's place in the Belsey family is never disputed. However, after Howard's repeated unfaithfulness she leaves the house. It turns out that Kiki was the soul of the house and without her nothing is the same as it had been before. Already in the second chapter the importance of the house as a symbol of homeliness and belonging is shown. This is especially apparent when a direct comparison between Kiki's and Howard's poisoned marriage and a house is drawn: "It was an offer to kick open a door in the mansion of their marriage leading on to an ante-chamber of misery" (OB, 15). In stark contrast to that is the relationship of Howard and Claire: "Their three week affair never even met with a bedroom. To go to a bedroom would have been a conscious decision" (OB, 224)

Making Howard an expert on Rembrandt and at the same time making him blind to the beauty of his paintings reads like pure scorn. Not only does he hate representational painting, he disquiets his students with his theories of Foucault. Moreover he cannot see the beauty of his wife and shuts himself away from all forms of beauty. Susan Alice Fischer goes as far as to say that:

It is one of the great ironies of the novel that Howard, an art

⁶⁴ These might be the pictures taken by Howard when he comes to London. Although Victoria comments on Howard seemingly only to have one suit this seems fairly unlikely as then the pictures would have remained in his pockets for what must be more than a year.

historian and the only member of his family who is not myopic, is so incapable of seeing. Indeed, sight – and to a lesser extent hearing – are used symbolically throughout the novel, and Howard's blindness is a trait he has passed on to his family. (Fischer, 110)

The title of his lecture “Constructing the human 1600-1700” reads like another reference to the many different constructions of identities in the book. Interestingly, the second part of the book, which is largely concerned with university life, is called “The anatomy lesson” and refers directly to a painting by Rembrandt. The picture is a commissioned piece and was produced for the assembly room of the surgeons' guild-house in Amsterdam.⁶⁵ The public dissection of a human corpse was a tradition and was celebrated whenever a praelector assumed office. The heading “The Anatomy Lesson” in the second part of the novel is annotated with a quote from Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and being just*, with Scarry openly disputing the Scientifics in the universities. To read this as a foil to the novel, Howard's lectures appear strikingly dry and it becomes obvious that he destroys his students' natural love of art and beauty. He never really intends to sense the beauty in the pictures but rather dissects them in a manner that corrodes their unique splendour.

This is clarified with the introduction of Katie in the 10th chapter:

Katie is proficient in both the arts and the sciences, but her heart – if this makes sense – has always resided in the left part of her brain. Katie loves the arts. Given her parents' relative poverty and limited education, she knows that it would probably have made more sense for her family if she'd tried for medical school or even Harvard law. (OB, 249)

Certainly Smith utilises this girl to intimate to the debate on class. Moreover, Katie, who is in love with the arts and regards Picasso and Rembrandt (respectively) as the most amazing human beings ever, is terrified by her professor Howard Belsey. “She used to dream about one day attending a college class about Rembrandt with other intelligent people who loved

⁶⁵ Cf. Kuhl, 20.

Rembrandt and were not ashamed to express this love“ (OB, 250). Instead, she finds a whole new world that she does not understand, even making extensive use of her Webster's dictionary. She has to discuss “Jacob struggles with the angel“ for homework and gives her best effort in interpreting the picture. She struggles to find the right words to describe the work, as to her it appears “not truly moving“ as “the struggle is not really there“. The picture of a naked woman, however, she finds extraordinarily moving although there is no obvious beauty in the picture. “Seated nude“ is the portrayal of “a misshapen woman, naked, with tubby little breasts and a hugely distended belly“ (OB, 251).

What is truly moving to Katie is that she comes to see an image of her future self in that picture of the ageing woman. In an analogy to Scarry, who states that we look for parallels whenever we see something beautiful, Katie fathoms the picture and in doing so she looks into the past and comes to see her own future in it. Scarry states that:

[...] what is beautiful prompts the mind to move chronologically back in the search for precedents and parallels, to move forward into new acts of creation, to move conceptually over, to bring things into relation, and does all this with a kind of urgency as though one's life depended on it. (Scarry, 30)

Realizing that the picture adheres to her own self, Katie overcomes all theoretical knowledge that she has of the picture being “technically good but visually disgusting“ (OB, 251) and is deeply moved by the beauty of the piece. It appears to speak to her and with this encourages her. In her eyes the picture becomes a message to all women.

Katie – a stringbean, physically – can even see her own body contained in this body, as if Rembrandt were saying to her, and to all women: 'For you are of the earth, as my nude is, and you will come to this point too, and be blessed if you feel as little shame, as much joy, as she!' (OB, 251)

Back in class Katie is struck dumb: not able to speak one word, she listens to the heavily theoretical debates between Howard, Victoria and a student he seems to admire as she truly adores him. Unable to open her mouth she

dozes off and shuts herself away again from the lecture.

In his first lecture Howard asked his students “to imagine prettiness as the mask that power wears“ (OB, 155). He then goes on to tell them that he wants to “recast Aesthetics as a rarefied language of exclusion“ and that “art is the Western myth [...] with which we both *console* ourselves and make ourselves.“ In his lecture Howard refers to the very subject matter of the novel: he comments on and criticises the binary system of science with his reference to exclusion and criticises art as a western construction. He even acknowledges that it is always the powerful who define the standards of beauty. Howard’s comprehension of the history of beauty, though, turns out to be a mixed blessing: although he knows about the construction of beauty, he is not immune to the very cultural norms he despises. There seems to be an innate longing for the beautiful within each of us and we want to be on a par with those regarded as attractive. If we cannot be beautiful, however, we want to be overwhelmed with beauty. On the other hand we fear and begrudge those who are either more beautiful or more intelligent. The only thing which could be worse is a combination of the two, and this is clearly expressed when the good-looking Victoria raises her hand in class and through the reactions of the other students Howard realizes that “the class as a whole could not abide prettiness and cleverness“ (OB, 157).

Kiki has a completely different approach to understanding the beauty of art. When invited to Carlene Kipps, she makes the acquaintance of Maitresse Erzulie⁶⁶:

In the centre of the frame there was a tall, naked black woman wearing only a red bandanna and standing in a fantastical white space, surrounded all about by tropical branches and kaleidoscopic fruit and flowers. Four pink birds, one green parrot. Three humming birds. Many brown butterflies. It was painted in a primitive, childlike style, everything flat on canvas. No perspective, no depth. (OB 174-175)

⁶⁶ Scheeler, <http://www.heritagekonpa.com/Guede%20The%20guardian%20of%20Death%20PAPA%20BARON.htm> [12.9.2008].

Kiki views the work with awe and the description of the picture of a black woman in a “fantastical white space” could be a reference to herself. The woman in the picture, as Carlene explains to Kiki, is a Voodoo goddess also called the Black Virgin and “represents love, beauty, purity, the ideal female and the moon ... and she's the mystery of jealousy, vengeance and discord, and, on the other hand, of love, perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty and fortune“(OB 174). She sees the goddess as a unification of contrasting traits and all the Catholic saints, and this makes Kiki ponder the Christian understanding of life. She remembers Howard saying that in the Christian world people think in “exclusive opposites” (OB 174) and that this would make everything more problematic. Madame Erzulie appeals to Kiki as she represents the hybrid view of life that she herself has to live: a black person in predominantly white and often deceptive surroundings.

In other sources Maitresse Erzuli is also referred to as the patron of the arts and goddess of water. This symbol of pureness becomes interesting as Howard has a moment of limpidity and clarity when showing the picture of Hendrijcke Bathing, a woman wading through a river, in one of his lectures on Rembrandt:

On the wall a pretty, blousy Dutch woman in a simple white smock paddled in water up to her calves. Howard's audience looked at her and then at Howard and then at the woman once more, awaiting elucidation. The woman for her part, looked away, coyly, into the water. She seemed to be considering whether to wade deeper. The surface of the water was dark, reflective – a cautious bather could not be certain of what lurked beneath. Howard looked at Kiki. In her face, his life. (OB, 442)

Howard suddenly seems to lose his fear of analysing things at greater depth from the heart and he actually enlarges the picture of the nude. He comes to see her beauty as well as that of his wife, who is sitting in the audience. With the naked woman, the picture comes to symbolize the “naked truth“, representing a quest for the submerged hidden depths in secluded waters. Howard is not afraid to look beyond the surface anymore and finally faces up to the facts within himself and his wife Kiki.

This closes the final and third part of the book entitled “On Beauty and being wrong”.

10.2. Oh how much more does doth beauty beauteous seem

As Rimmon-Kenan points out, language is limited to successive perception⁶⁷. Events, even if they happen simultaneously, can only be explained one after the other. In comparison to a painting, the linear medium of literature is initially clearly disadvantaged: a picture can evoke many different feelings at the same time while a text always has a beginning and an end and is condemned to gradual progression. Texts can only be understood word by word and sentence by sentence, the story unfolds in a pre-determined, chronological order, whereas everything in a picture is portrayed at the same time and must be perceived as such rather than in a textual, linear way.

Werner Wolf declared that a picture has potential 'tellability' if it shows something exceptional and that this, therefore, opens the dimensions of time, reaching into the viewer's past and the present imagination: the events prior to the depicted moment and what is about to happen is imagined. The picture can only capture a moment in time whereas the verbal medium can define coherences through grammar and lexicon. Still, language can be utilised to attempt to describe that which is beautiful. One opportunity for conveying emotions with words is the use of poetry. Nick Laird, husband to Zadie Smith, has designed a poem titled *On Beauty* for her book, Smith foists this on Claire. The third and final part of the book is prefixed by a poem from Mark Doty's “School of the arts”.

⁶⁷ Cf. Slomith Rimmon-Kenan, 120-121.

11. Conclusion

When reading and studying *On Beauty*, the reader immediately notices that the dissemblance the novel pursues, is the exact opposite of what Zadie Smith attempts to convey in her book. Smith demonstrates that the over-analysis of art destroys the beautifulness of the piece and that people should rather indulge and abide by things of beauty in order to fully appreciate their splendour.

Along the same vein, Zadie Smith prefixed the second part of her novel with Elaine Scarry's "To misstate or even to understate, the relation of the universities to beauty is one kind of error that can be made" (Scarry, 8). It is, however, a point of interest that while Smith apparently regards the universities as being of great value, she prefers to portray the inadequacies of their professors and their affairs with students, in a style which reads rather satirically. Smith portrays the extremes of a scholarly and an exacting appreciation of beauty with the characters of Howard, a university professor of the arts, and his daughter, Zora. Zora is portrayed as a young woman ensnared in a scholarly world of high ambitions, who continually attempts to prove herself as an intellectual. Although Howard is a professor of the arts, he is still unable to appreciate the beauty within the paintings he discusses. Moreover, he applies double standards, as on the one hand he despises the constructions of beauty of others, while on the other hand he cannot perceive the beauty of his own wife.

Still, it could be argued that in specifically stereotyping the female cast of *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith generally criticises the setting of standards [of beauty] and depicts how an understanding of the topic is culturally predetermined, while criticising this very concept at the same time. Nevertheless, Zadie Smith was still accused of not doing any justice to women, mainly due to the stereotypical depiction of her female characters. One reason might be that after *White Teeth* she was accused of mainly writing about young women and decided "to feature many young black men – characters conspicuous by

their absence from her first book, *White Teeth*” (BBC news, *Smith to tackle 'young black men'*)

On Beauty can be viewed against the foil of *Howards End*, which Zadie Smith openly admitted to have used as a model for her text. Some parallels can be drawn between the Belseys and the Schlegels and the Wilcoxens and Monty's family. However, in Forster's time, the Schlegel's progressive politics were not only easily separable from the Wilcoxens' established conservatism. At that time especially progressive politics were associated with aesthetics and the arts, whilst nowadays beauty does not only belong to one particular set of ideas, but has rather become a universal concept to all parties and could be seen in terms of Bourdieu as 'the new capital'. In *On Beauty* the class struggle described in *Howards End* is turned into an ethnic struggle, with those of immigrant decent often finding it more difficult to access higher education. The ethnic struggle of course would have been virtually unknown to Forster and his contemporaries.

At the same time the novel further identifies a new development within modern society: Levi seeks solace in those parts of the community which are considered the substratum of society. In attempting to live a 'street' life, Levi forages for an identity which is in keeping with his looks. Growing up in predominantly white surroundings, Levi, who is of hybrid identity, feels uprooted and seeks a connection with the part of his identity which, according to his feelings, has been denied. There is a breaking down of class barriers in the modern world and more and more people identify with blacks as there is a new glamour in the culture. While the British are known to be “the most class-ridden society under the sun” the Americans pride themselves in having the American dream where everything is possible – facilitating a climbing of the social ladder from dishwasher to millionaire. Still, Zadie Smith shows that class is something we cling to in order to identify ourselves. We take pride in our origins and if we are denied those affiliations we feel uprooted and lost.

Despite growing up in surroundings which lay the foundations for a successful life, all of the Belsey children seem to be in search of their authentic self and try to find a place in society. Levi is attempting to become more authentically black and seeks justice for his Haitian friends; Zora is constantly comparing herself to others, and Jerome, after a disastrous affair with Victoria, is seeking some kind of redemption. In trying to achieve this, they all set out to play a role which undermines their very identities and only furthers the compartmentalisation depicted in *On Beauty*.

Zadie Smith, being of hybrid decent herself, is one of the new luminaries on the literary horizon. Authors who are considered ethnically ambiguous are becoming increasingly popular in the cultural industries. This is due to the fact that they are cultural travellers, and, as such, manage to feed the reader's interest with all that is different and foreign to their own conception of the world. They draw comparisons between the reader's knowledge and their own of the world where they grew up. They are in a position not only to stereotype, but also to satirise both worlds; that of the eastern world and that of the world inhabited by the migrant other. In analysing the novel it could thus be demonstrated how Kiki, who illustrates the stereotypical example of a big mama, is constructed as a polar version of Howard. While Howard is known among the students as the one not able to say that he likes the "tomato", Kiki is portrayed as being the more intuitive part of the couple, despite not being part of the intellectual world. They themselves, however, are torn and this is shown in their struggle to retrieve their marriage which is falling apart.

This design of oppositions is characteristic of the novel, oppositions which also bear the imprint of *Howards End*. Postcolonialism as well as Poststructuralism were critical about those binary concepts and rejected them as being unjust, as one part of the concept is usually charged with being superior. Bearing in mind that while the novel could be called a post-postcolonial novel as it is mainly concerned with those individuals of second

or third generations it could also be argued that this disruption mirrors the inner conflict of the protagonists.

Only at the very end of the novel, when Howard has forgotten his lecture notes and enlarges one of his slides, is he hit by the beauty of the respective piece. When he comes to see his wife in the audience he is also struck by her beauty and is suddenly able to abandon all the theoretical knowledge that has been restraining him. "Howard made the picture larger on the wall, as Smith had explained to him how to do. The woman's fleshiness filled the wall. He looked out into the audience once more and saw Kiki only" (OB, 443).

Remembering Elaine Scarry's statement regarding the innate search for things which evoke images of past beauties (which among other reasons may have intrigued Howard to start an affair with Victoria), Scarry believes that it is also those things of beauty which foment the urge to create something new:

I began here with the way beautiful things have a forward momentum, the way they incite the desire to bring new things into the world: infants, epics, sonnets, drawings, dances, laws, philosophic dialogues, theological tracts. But we soon found ourselves turning backward, for the beautiful faces and songs that lift us forward into new ground kept calling out to us as well, inciting us to rediscover and recover them in whatever new things get made. (Scarry, 31)

Although the novel does not present a solution to the posed questions, it is intimated that, with Howard's recognition of his wife's beauty, there exists a possibility of a peaceful reunion.

12. Appendix

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12.3. Abstract

Zadie Smith ist eine der bekanntesten britischen Nachwuchsautorinnen und erreichte mit ihrem im Jahr 2000 erschienenen Erstlingswerk *White Teeth* internationale Bekanntheit. Mittlerweile hat die junge Schriftstellerin drei Romane und zahlreiche Kurzgeschichten verfasst und wurde mit namhaften Autoren wie Salman Rushdie verglichen. In ihren Romanen beschäftigt sich die als Tochter einer Jamaikanerin und eines Engländers geborene Smith mit den Problemen einer multikulturellen Gesellschaft. Im Zentrum ihrer Romane steht dabei die Identitätssuche von MigrantInnen zweiter und dritter Generation, die zwar in verschiedenen kulturellen Räumen assimiliert sind, sich als Personen mit hybrider Identität aber weder der Herkunftskultur noch der neuen Heimat vollständig zugehörig fühlen.

In dieser Arbeit steht die Identitätskonstruktion in Smiths *On Beauty* im Vordergrund. Ausgehend von Elaine Scarrys philosophischem Essay *On beauty and being just* wird gezeigt, dass das Schöne den Wunsch der Nachahmung in uns weckt. Jede so entstandene Replik birgt einen Teil der ursprünglichen Schönheit in sich. Das könnte erklären, warum Smith *On Beauty* als Hommage an Forsters *Howards End* angelegt hat. Neben zahlreichen Parallelen in Handlung und Struktur zeichnet sich *On Beauty* durch eine ähnliche Verwendung von Kontrast- und Korrespondenzrelationen aus. So kann etwa gezeigt werden, dass die Charaktere in *On Beauty* anhand von Gegensatzpaaren wie schwarz/weiß, gebildet/ungebildet oder weiblich/männlich konstruiert sind.

Da Zadie Smith mehrfach im Zusammenhang mit anderen postkolonialen Autoren gebracht wurde, wird diskutiert inwiefern Smith in ihrem Roman postkoloniale Ideen verarbeitet. So wurde Zadie Smith etwa als post-postkoloniale Autorin bezeichnet. Hybride Identitäten bilden in einer multikulturellen Gesellschaft längst keine Ausnahmeerscheinung mehr, sondern sind prägend für eine moderne, multikulturelle Gesellschaft. Als junge, gebildete Autoren mit multiethnischem Hintergrund verfügen

Schriftstellerinnen wie Zadie Smith oder Meera Syal über interkulturelle Kompetenzen, die es ihnen erlauben, uns Einblick in ihre Ursprungskultur zu geben.

Identität ist aber vielfach geprägt und definiert sich nicht nur über ethnische Zugehörigkeit. Daher wird Identität im Hauptteil vorliegender Arbeit sowohl in ethnische als auch persönliche, nationale, weibliche und soziale Identität gegliedert und Identitätskonstruktion in *On Beauty* unter den jeweils verschiedenen Gesichtspunkten behandelt. Eine besondere Rolle spielt dabei auch die Klassenzugehörigkeit, die sehr oft mit der ethnischen Herkunft korreliert. Grundlegend bleibt aber, dass sich Identität vor allem durch Abgrenzung von dem 'Anderen' herausbildet. In diesem Zusammenhang wird Homi Bhabha und seine Theorie der hybriden Identität vorgestellt. Da Smith für ihren Roman das universitäre Umfeld gewählt hat und der Hauptprotagonist Howard Belsey Kunstprofessor ist, stellt sich zudem die Frage, inwiefern sich die Figuren des Romans durch ihr Verständnis von Schönheit unterscheiden und wie die Wahrnehmung von Schönheit ihre Identität prägt .

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