



THE UNNAMED NARRATOR OF ZADIE SMITH'S SWING TIME

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Abstract

Zadie Smith is a prominent writer of contemporary British literature. The novel “*Swing Time*” follows an unnamed female main character, who looks back on her life and the events that shaped it. This novel is constructed in a different way using flashback techniques. The novel explores the narrator’s construction of identity. The present study focuses on the relationship of narrator with the other women characters in the novel from a psychological view. It portrays the protagonist’s emotional dependence towards others to live her own life.

Keywords : Relationship, Sense of self, Emotional dependence, Search for identity.

Introduction

Swing Time is a fifth novel of Zadie Smith. It was published in 2016. This novel is narrated by an unnamed narrator from the perspective of first person narration. It focuses on the relationship between the narrator and her childhood friend Tracey. The story revolves around friendship, music and one’s true identity by highlighting the themes of multiculturalism, racism and classism. The novel divided into seven parts and alternates between narrator’s childhood and adulthood.

Emotional Dependence of Narrator

Swing Time illustrates the story of two mixed race young girls, Tracey and an unnamed narrator. The unnamed narrator is the protagonist of the novel. She remains unnamed in order to emphasize her anxiety about her identity. She has a white father and a Jamaican mother who was highly political oriented and disliked motherhood. She lacks a sense of self which is partly because of her biracial identity and partly because of her parents’ unhappiness. She grows up in project housing in London. Her love towards dance helps the narrator to escape from her present life. It shows the emotional dependency which the narrator needs.

Emotional dependency refers to a person’s excessive reliance on others for an emotional well – being and a sense of identity. They often seek constant reassurance and validation from others to feel valued and secured. “According to Bornstein, emotional dependency refers to a need for protection and support and a strong confidence in the relationship as an essential element for self – esteem, identity, and overall

functioning of the person.” (Petruccelli) The narrator’s relationship with the three important women – Tracey, narrator’s mother and Aimee – in her life is central to the novel. The narrator emotionally depends on these characters to create her own self.

Tracey is an extremely talented dancer but increasingly unstable. She is raised by a white single mother in a low-income apartment. She is a fiercely independent character. The narrator and Tracey met each other in 1982 in a tap dance class. When they met for the first time, they have noticed their similarities and differences. Both Tracey and the narrator are biracial children with the same skin tone. The narrator describes about their skin tone as: “Our shade of brown was exactly the same – as if one piece of tan material had been cut to make us both – and our freckles gathered in the same areas, we were of the same height”(Smith,9). The resemblance in their skin colour brings the narrator close to Tracey. Socially they are from different kinds of background. The narrator’s mother always disapproves of both Tracey and her mother. Despite her approval, their friendship between the narrator and Tracey developed. They discuss about their passion for dancing and about their mixed culture. Tracey is naturally talented in dancing and on the other hand the narrator has a rich knowledge on music and rhythm. But the narrator is often jealous of Tracey’s freedom and maturity, failing to realize the real situation of Tracey. Because Tracey has had no other choice and wants to be mature with her single white mother and constantly imprisoned black father. Despite of their differences, being a pair in the dance class, they share their opinions to each other and become close friends.

Tracey’s existence provides the sense of home to the narrator. Tracey helps to define her identity in her schooldays. “It took Tracey moving to my classroom for me to understand what my classroom really was”. The moment when the narrator attends a public school and Tracey goes to private dance academy, their roads drift apart. When she attends the new school without Tracey, she feels that she was a body without a distinct outline. The firm bond between the narrator and Tracey as best friends seems to wither away in adulthood. Tracey goes on with her dance career. She has three children and gets into a life which contains lot of struggles. On the other hand, the narrator goes off to college and became one of Aimee’s personal assistant.

Smith gracefully describes the narrator’s struggle with the relationship with her mother. She is a Jamaican immigrant always her ideals and principles do not overlap with the narrator. She was extremely concerned with education and political causes and did not seem to enjoy motherhood. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator tells about her mother as: “My mother was a feminist”(Smith,9). The narrator’s mother used to be more involved in political causes. She cares only for bettering herself. She deliberately speaks and performs in search of other people’s approval for herself. She has a stereotypical anger towards white people. She is a black woman in the land of white and has no shame in her skin colour. “She had the anger but not the shame” (Smith,42).As a courageous and ambitious woman, she works for the better future of the black race. She begins the novel as an autodidact and ends as a Member of Parliament.

The narrator has a complicated relationship with her mother. She feels that her mother dislikes motherhood. It is evident from her statement that: “My earliest sense of her was of a woman plotting an escape, from me, from the very role of motherhood” (Smith,18). She has an impatient attitude towards all the common domestic duties which all other women engage in. Instead she spends as much time in reading, educating herself and developing social projects. She feels that her husband is not involved in her pursuits and so she divorced him when the narrator was a teenager but they continue to live together under one roof. “My parents had broken up. I only knew it myself because my mother told me it was so. They still lived in the same flat and slept in the same room” (Smith,200). Though she was portrayed as a strong woman, her touching vulnerable side comes out when her partner’s children from a previous marriage arrived to their apartment one day.

The narrator was failed to meet her mother’s expectations regarding education and achievements. Unlike the other mothers in the London, the narrator mother holds her daughter to high and demanding standards. This places a considerable amount of pressure in the minds of the narrator to meet those standards, contributing some tension in their relationship. She is angered by the dance which was performing by Tracey and her daughter. When her mother wants her to go to the best schools, the narrator fails her entrance exam and pushes herself towards the audition for a dance school, like Tracey. Similarly when her mother wants her to settle down in a concrete life, she travels around the world without knowing the meaning of life.

The narrator's mother is on the opinion that the duty of every black people should move forward and to get respectable position in the land of whites. She feels that education too has fallen as a victim to the racism in the white dominated society. Being highly educated women, the narrator's mother complains to the teachers to include more black people in the teaching position. At that moment, the narrator felt proud of her mother: "These children deserve more! Not me in particular – these children. How I remember her doing that, and how wonderful she looked, like a queen! I was proud to be her child, the daughter of the only mother in the neighbourhood free of shame" (Smith,42). The narrator's mother stresses the importance of education as a means of upward mobility. It is evident through her hatred towards her daughter's interest on dance. She hates Tracey and also her mother. Once the narrator tells her mother that Tracey has four dolls and asked her mother to buy one doll to her. She replied that she should let Tracey plays with the useless dolls because she has been raised in that way. But she advised her daughter to get education and should do her duty for the welfare of black people.

'When you're with that girl,' explained my mother, 'it's a kind thing to play with her but she's been raised in a certain way, and the present is all she has. You've been raised in another way – don't forget that. That silly dance class is her whole world. It's not her fault – that's how she's been raised. But you're clever. Doesn't matter if you've got flat feet, doesn't matter because you're clever and you know where you came from and where you're going.' (Smith, 31).

Zadie Smith portrayed the elements of racism through the words of the narrator's mother. She shows that at this age children are innocent and don't know much about the issues of racism. Through the character of narrator, the author shows the innocence of children regarding the serious issue of race. On the other hand, the author focuses on the maternal love of the narrator's mother towards her daughter. Her efforts to provide opportunities and better life to her daughter express the complexities of motherhood. At the end of the novel, she urges her daughter to take care of Tracey's children to provide them a better life. Her accomplished and successful mother makes feel guilty about her lack of direction or ambition.

Aimee is the important white character in the novel *Swing Time*. She is a famous pop – star and philanthropist who becomes the narrator's employer. She has a strong belief in her ability to make decisions and the role she has played in her own success. She serves as a mentor, providing guidance and advice on various aspects of life, to the narrator. "You need to be comfortable in yourself to work for me." (Smith, 103) Her philanthropic activities take the narrator on journey to different part of the world. Aimee decides to use her considerable wealth in building up a school for girls in rural Africa. The narrator spends a lot of time there in that village where she have a good relationship with Hawa, a local unmarried woman and without children like herself. "Still no baby? She whispered in my ear, and I whispered the same back, and we hugged yet more tightly and laughed into each other's neck. It was very surprising to me that Hawa and I should have found a bond in this, across continents and cultures, but that's how it was." (Smith,303) In Africa, she looks for herself and her mother in the faces of those native people.

The narrator's relationship with Tracey and Aimee have created a tremendous impact on her search of her own self. "When our society, in its time of upheaval in standards and values can give us no clear picture of "what we are and what we ought to be,"... we are thrown back on the search for ourselves" (May, 7). At one point of time, Smith's narrator faces the same issue, she is in search for her own identity but she could not find it. She appears to have devoted ten years of her life to the pop - star Aimee. The narrator is fired from her job when Aimee learns that she slept with Lamin. Her affair with Lamin presents as an attempt made by her to break away from the restrictions that Aimee has layered over her. But the narrator still feels dissatisfied. She thinks that the attempt made by her does not help her in forming her identity separate from Aimee. Only after she loses her job, she realized that she has been living beneath Aimee's shadow. Without Aimee, she feels like she is no longer staying in any kind of shades but still she does not value her own perceptions. No matter how much she desires to move on after she is being fired from her job. All around her makes her to feel that still she is in the control of Aimee.. The narrator describes it as:

I feel I was losing track of my physical location, rising above my body, viewing my life from a very distant point, hovering over it...saw all my years at once, but they were not piled up on each other, experience after experience, building into something of substance – the opposite. A truth was being revealed to me: that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own. I experienced myself as a kind of shadow. (Smith,4)

Conclusion:

The novel *Swing Time* reflects the journey of the unnamed narrator and her understanding of self. The narrator, in all her stages of life, has been depend on others or someone. She has never done anything for herself and has never lived for herself. In her childhood days, she follows the way of Tracey irrespective of her likes and dislikes. Zadie Smith provides us both the perspectives of narrator as the small child and the grown up adult. Spanning some decades of narrator's life, the story follows her as she grows under the shadow of other women characters who rule over different aspects of her life. Only after the lose of her job, she came to know that she has never lived the life of her own. She can't find her own way without the influence of all these women characters such as Tracey, Aimee and her mother. Thus the study focuses on how the narrator is emotionally dependent on others and how she realized it. At the end, she wants to create her own identity and don't want to stand on other's shadow.

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