



Conviviality Vis-à-Vis Cosmopolitanism in Zadie Smith's Short Stories "Sentimental Education" and "Downtown"

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to open a new direction of research into selection of short stories from Zadie Smith's last collection of short stories entitled "Grand Union" (2019) by highlighting her focus on contemporary young second-generation immigrants' experience. The paper argues that by placing this generation at the forefront, these stories represent a pivotal moment in Smith's fiction, namely her concern with the new emergent concepts of identity and community, particularly second-generation immigrants in the context of Britain and the USA's postcolonial legacy and African American history. By her focus on self-observant young educated women, Smith's fiction provides a chance to monitor the changing perception of identity and community form first generation to second generation immigrants. While the narrative of first-generation immigrants locates the stories in the terrain of postcolonial history, the life experiences of the young generation locate the stories in the multicultural present in twenty-first century London and New York. My contention will be that far from adopting the old generations approach to community and identity, which highly underlined the prevalence of racial and gender inequalities, these new generation is moving beyond this disabling ideology and is creating new individualistic notions of identity and community that align with cosmopolitan ideals.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan conviviality; Meritocracy; Oxbridge; Zadie Smith; Paul Gilroy.

1. Introduction

In her first short story collection *Grand Union* (2019), Zadie Smith further establishes herself as one of the most critically minded contemporary writers. With her brilliant observation of contemporary multicultural settings, such as London or New York, she captures the complexities of modern life, writing utterly original stories about love, relationships, race, class struggles, and the desire to feel free. Without having to use complexities of plot to move the stories forward, Smith feels a great sense of liberation to adopt various means of storytelling, points of views, geographies, and ideas into her narrative. She channels this feeling into several of her stories, especially, "Sentimental Education" and "Downtown". Both stories center on a female protagonist seeking freedom to live a life that she enjoys. In "Sentimental Education" Monica, now in her midlife, looks back over the course of her life at Oxbridge college and examines her love relationships and the sexual experiences that have been in the center of her attention then. In "Downtown" a Jamaican American bohemian artist, living

in Greenwich Village town, New York, tries to become a real artist among all the socio-political chaos of New York City. Accordingly, the present study examines these two short stories to demonstrate how in her portrait of this multilayered and multivocal atmosphere of urban localities Smith speaks about individuals seeking to enjoy a life of freedom, reflective of their cosmopolitan orientation which overcomes the driving forces of the dominant racial, cultural and social differences.

2. Literature Review

In her fiction and non-fictional works, Smith exhibits a deep awareness of the complexity of identity, the intensity of ethnic diversity, and the alterity that one encounters in global and local spaces in the daily experiences, owing to the forces of globalization. Most of the characters in her novels experience a split in their identity due to migration and the racial, sexual, class, and cultural differences that they encounter in their life, mostly found in the multicultural space of London. The initial common feature of most of her fictions is the shared space of the interconnection of differences. In her critical essay "Exploring Hybridity and Multiculturalism: Intra and Inter Family Relations in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*" (2009), Irene Perez Fernandez argues that space in Smith's fiction should best be considered as "a set of social relations" since Smith's portrayal of space "develops around the networks of relations created with the encounters and dis-encounters of such a variety of characters" (144). What comes to the fore in her novels is the pain suffered by immigrant characters from different cultures with their sense of belongings or cultural attachments as they struggle to integrate into or detach themselves from the host culture; in some cases, a new consciousness able to balance their paradoxical situations is developed.

In her debut novel *White Teeth* (2000), Smith starts to play with deconstruction of the idea of pure or authentic identity, especially when racial, national, and ethnic identities are considered. The novels that have been published after *White Teeth* have continued emphasizing the idea of authenticity. While *The Autograph Man* (2002) mostly deals with the idea of the original and the authentic, in her third and fourth novels, *On Beauty* (2005) and *NW* (2012), Smith goes further to explore the issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender relations. In her latest short story collection "Grand Union" (2019) she elaborates on generational differences especially those established on intergenerational communications of the first- and second-generation immigrants with diversity. Smith scrutinizes the characters' capability and adaptability to existing diversity. Her innovative handling of space, time (history), and dominant discourses in multicultural spaces aims to investigate the process of self-transformation and self-problematization and proposes cultural issues in the ever-increasing era of globalization. Further, the way Smith employs both the fracturing of national identities and the blurring of national boundaries, brings her narration close to post-millennial narrations. She undertakes the task of telescoping a cosmopolitan space, which disrupts the notion of Englishness and makes it possible for her characters, mostly immigrants, to question their ethnocentric acts, practice of Englishness, and cultural belongings and affiliations. Smith interrogates the experiences of the locals, elites, and non-elite mobile and immobile characters exposed to the conditions of contemporary globalization. Hence, her fiction renders a very realistic view of contemporary multicultural spaces and the current globalization.

In his review on Smith "Grand Union" Johanna Thomas-Corr believes that in most of the stories in this collection Smith artistically channels various aspects of her persona as the storyteller in "The Canker" and "Blocked", the educator in "Now More Than Ever" or the mother as illustrated in "The Lazy River". This synthesis of roles is particularly effective in her exemplary narrative, "Sentimental Education," where a beleaguered mother, contemplating the onset of menopause, reflects on her tenure at an Oxbridge institution. (2019) In "What We're Reading: Language and Metaphor in Zadie Smith's *Grand Union*" Natanya Biskar elaborates on the diversity of forms in *Grand Union* as a vivid reflection of the multiplicity of our lived experiences. The collection encompasses a wide range of narratives, offering an "eclectic" mix that is rarely found within a single volume. While some critics have perceived this diversity as a weakness, it is posited here that this is precisely Smith's intention. The lack of a singular form to represent our varied conditions underscores the thematic message of the work: the heterogeneity of human experience necessitates a corresponding diversity in narrative forms since "there is no one form to match our condition; the variance is her message."

(2019). Like the style that she has mainly practiced in her essay collections: “Changing My Mind” (2009) and “Feel Free” (2018) in “Grand Union” Smith writes in a free style, one that is less omniscient and more fluid, capable of being everywhere-at-once. Her introspection and criticism have a lively and airy excitement that feels like the counterpart to the tightly constructed narrative drive of her novels, while retaining her characteristic stylishness.

3. Oxbridge College: An Entrenching Academic Elitism

“Sentimental Education” reveals the tensions in terms of intersecting gender, class and, racial perspectives in human relationships focalized through Monica, the candid protagonist, who contemplates retrospectively about her time at Oxbridge College and her relationship with her boyfriend Darryl. The story reveals some autobiographical elements since Monica’s college life experiences resemble Zadie Smith’s own academic and artistic life back in her twenties. In Cressida Leyshon’s “This Week in Fiction: Zadie Smith”, Smith acknowledges the conscious knowledge of different social spheres that underpin much of her own creative work: “every time I write a sentence, I’m thinking not only of the people I ended up in college with but my siblings, my family, my school friends, the people from my neighborhood” (2012). “Sentimental Education” articulates the entangled tale of race, class, education, and sexuality. The story hinges on the inconsistencies created by the juxtaposition between the retrospective eccentric young black girl who “unnerved men” then and the more knowing narrative perspective of a mother of two children in her midlife (Grand Union 14). The story focuses on its three main characters— Monica, Darryl and Leon, all studying at Oxbridge college, and investigates their contrasting attitudes towards race, class, and human communication. Monica and Darryl, both from “African roots”, are friends of Leon the white boy from the streets who, although not enrolled in Oxbridge, lives in Darryl’s dormitory room. Their daily experience as the only working-class attendants of this prestigious college offers a glimpse into the discriminatory policies and the encroachment of liberal policies institutionalized in Oxbridge college. Smith assesses some of the ways the intercultural setting shapes the characters’ everyday interaction, while also exploring how discriminatory politics and racism are mediated in the multicultural space of the story.

Oxbridge is originally “a fictional” university regarded as a portmanteau of Oxford and Cambridge universities and refers to them collectively and describes their characteristics as the wealthiest and elitist universities with superior social and intellectual status in the United Kingdom (Oxford University press 2005). As Carole Cadwalladr assumes in “Education: It’s the Clever Way to Power” the term Oxbridge implies “elite” that “continues to dominate Britain’s political and cultural establishment”, universities that rarely open their gates for “normal people” since social class is a significant criterion in selecting the students (2008). The discriminatory approach of Oxbridge College resets on an idea of binary alterity that establishes a hierarchy of unequal power as the pattern of social relationships within the multicultural context of the college. As it appears in the story there are only four students of color in Oxbridge College both of whom are Darryl and Monica, growing up in the same working-class neighborhood but have not meet each other until the time that “the college as an organism was adamant that they meet” as the “black faces” on the campus (Grand Union 15). This organism can imagine neither Darryl nor Monica having relationships with students of other races or elite class. Smith’s depiction of the college reflects the microcosmic image of the larger discriminatory atmosphere that has been institutionalized in the educational system of British society. By doing so she, indeed, questions whether minority subjects maintain a sense of agency in their own lives or are in some manner constrained to only perform certain destinies conditioned on them because of their racial background and the boundaries and circumstances induced by national institutions.

Studying in Oxbridge is a way too high standard for Monica and Darryl and much proper for students from private schools which is very evident in the intimidating way the discretionary students are admitted to Oxbridge college. Both Monica and Darryl are recognized as a “social experiment” for the college which views them “much the same”, categorizing them according to the contingent events, especially, their color, race and class. Even the assessment system of the college offers them “similarly low conditional grades—she some Bs, he some Cs—to demonstrate how deserving

they were or how little was expected of them or how liberal the college was" (Grand Union 15), meanwhile, highlighting the manners in which presuppositions are effectively cruel reminders of the institutional racism that maintains a presence in British society. Thus, the meritocratic attempts of the university at presenting its welcoming disposition against social inequalities does not render new opportunities for minority subjects, while indicating that British academia is still under the monopolizing control of an elite minority. Jo Littler believes that meritocracy has become a means of "cultural legitimation" by which "plutocracy" or the wealthy elite "perpetuates, reproduces and extends itself" (17). Considering meritocracy as a political system that invests in individuals due to their talent, effort or successful performance, Oxbridge system runs contrary to this thought in evaluating individuals according to their financial wellbeing and social class. The pronounced lack of equality in its structure has made the language of meritocracy an alibi for continuation of segregation.

In a retrospective thought about her own educational life, Smith acknowledges the free education that was provided for her as a "situation in England which at the time was considered more or less meritocratic" however she believes that "simple fact of a free education, for instance, is no longer true at the university levels" in England. Accordingly, part of what Smith reflects in "Sentimental Education" is a "nostalgic portrait of community and with the knowledge of how it has changed" (2017). The liberal thought has been teased out through the perspective of Monica in ways that highlight how her understanding of meritocracy has conditioned her perception of individual success. The relationship between Monica and Leon crystallizes the persistence of meritocratic logic and exemplifies Smith's concern regarding racial inequality as the dominant pattern of everyday life in Oxbridge College. She is jealous of Leon's "liberty", his "laying on the Backs blowing smoke into the face of a cow, or in a punt with a crowd of freshers and bottle of cava", while she must write and rewrite her thesis on eighteenth-century garden poetry. Monica imagines Oxbridge as a garden and Leon as a "hermit figure" at the center of a maze who like a real "homeless man" sits in a grove while "the house and garden were all about hard work, about labor and capital", for Monica, Leon is like "the lord of Misrule. Or the college duppy" (Grand Union 20), he is a case of "lack [...] a matter of inconvenient surplus" (Grand Union 14). She is on the side of "law and order" and very committed to the idea of meritocracy, as the narrator reveals meritocracy is "the fundamental principle underlying her life. Some part of her always expected any nearby adults to be spontaneously applauding her efforts in all areas" (Grand Union 20).

Monica is greatly distressed by her boyfriend Darryl's enduring relationship with Leon. Darryl and Leon had been friends since they were three. They come from the same street life, Darryl from African roots and Leon a "White youth". They do everything together. While Darryl welcomes Leon in his college room with an airbed that he deflates every morning to protect their secret from cleaning ladies. Leon believes that he is paying his debt by supplying them, Darryl and Monica, with the cheapest coke when the three of them adjourn every evening to the college bar, to the river or the chapel to get high. Nevertheless, Monica believes that Leon is exploiting her affectionate partner as she expresses her concerns to Darryl "I don't like the idea of a young white man dragging a young black man down into the mud. It is utterly grotesque" (Grand Union 22). Monica's ethnic absolutism avoids her from recognizing Darryl and Leon's friendship as a "race-friendly" mechanism. As Paul Gilroy argues "race thinking [...] (has) sanctioned gross brutality in many diverse settings", (2004: 33). Her color-coded pattern of friendship has been established on a hierarchical system of mutual benefit. Despite being subject to economic and racial inequalities, as it is reflected in Oxbridge college, Monica fails to understand the reasoning behind Darryl's empathy for Leon, questioning Darryl's hospitality towards Leon. Eventually, Monica's bipolar antagonism against dualistic pairing of black/white erases any chance of cultural intermixture and cosmopolitan combination. Darryl believes that "you're allowed friends to visit" while Monica is upset about this nine month long "visiting" (Grand Union 22).

Smith puts in contrast Monica's expressed ethnocentrism with Darryl's cosmopolitan hospitality in the narrative of Darryl and Leon's friendship, to indicate how ethnocentric attitude undermines and impedes intercultural engagement with otherness. For Monica the racial differences between Darryl and Leon should avoid the possibility of any allegiances between them. Yet, for Darryl

racial differences are of no concern. Darryl's hospitality emphasizes the intersectional feature of cosmopolitanism whereby the ethnic rootedness does not negate openness to cultural differences or the fostering of a universalistic civic consciousness and a sense of moral responsibility for cultural others. As Jeremy Waldron identifies, the idea of cosmopolitanism is against the "idea of belonging to or devotion or immersion in a particular culture" (1). A cosmopolitan sensibility is reflected in Darryl's peaceful cohabitation with Leon that not only has acted as a powerful motive to transform the relation between him and Leon as a racial other, but also, has developed his self-awareness to transform his exclusive attitudes towards racial and ethical paradigms. Whereas, by adhering to a meritocratic and racially absolutist perspective, Monica reinforces already existing social and racial divisions, preventing the development of a more inclusive and harmonious social environment, Darryl's cosmopolitan approach facilitates social cohesion and intercultural dialogue. His openness and inclusivity promote understanding and collaboration between individuals from diverse backgrounds. Darryl's bond with Leon exemplifies the positive potential of cultural intermixture, fostering a more cosmopolitan and interconnected social fabric.

Darryl's hospitality towards Leon echoes Smith's own concern about ethnicity wherein she argues that ethnicity is not the sole concern regarding multiculturalism as a "reality" of contemporary moment "I don't see the racial differences as the big difference [...] I am much more interested in the way people behave to each other, their personal ethics [...] of course, race is a difference, but it's small difference" (Webb 2012). Paul Gilroy's view of cosmopolitan culture of conviviality will be an apt perspective to consider in the context of Smith's portrayal of Darryl. In Gilroy's term cosmopolitan conviviality is "the process of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" (2004: xi). Gilroy invokes cosmopolitanism as a stimulus to "multiculturalism" which is distinguished "by some notable demands for hospitality, conviviality, tolerance, justice, and mutual care" (After Empire 108).

Leon's presence in Darryl's college room displays the progression of intercultural relations in multicultural setting of Oxbridge. The strength of their friendship is reflected in Darryl's sense of responsibility and care towards Leon in that he cannot disconnect from Leon because Leon "has faith on him (Darryl)" (Grand Union 23). One of the key features of Darryl's friendship with Leon is reflected in their friendship ties. Cosmopolitan solidarity has been considered as a "social bond" that connects diverse social groups together. In terms of this definition, Darryl and Leon's friendship is a form of "civic friendship" that binds them and has been imbued with a sense of "equality and fraternity" or brotherhood (Honneth 1996, Brunkhorst 2005, Delanty 2009). In *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004) Gilroy writes that contemporary society needs to explore "what sorts of insight and reflection might actually help increasingly differentiated societies and anxious individuals to cope successfully with the challenges involved in dwelling comfortably in proximity to the unfamiliar without becoming fearful and hostile" (3). Darryl's cosmopolitan stance helps him to foreground their basic sameness as they both come from the same streets and same class against their differences related to their race or ethnicity. In this manner Smith imagines a peaceful accommodation of otherness where the conceptions of sameness and strangeness are altered in relation to communal identification in the demanding contemporary setting of multicultural social relations.

Leon is a means of Darryl's communication with the diverse inhabitants of Oxbridge College. The narrator describes him as the embodiment of the phrase "White youth" with a "conventional face" that "did not look like anyone else, yet at the same time did not stand out" (Grand Union 19). Although Leon is not enrolled in the college, by the end of first "Michaelmas" term he is known and loved by everybody in Oxbridge college. In the multicultural context of Oxbridge, as a person who can "talk to anyone", Leon can easily communicate with cultural others, he can speak the same way to "posh girls, the choral scholars, the nat-sci Northerners, the working-class geniuses [...] the Jewish North London intellectuals" (Grand Union 18). His openness to diversity and his "liberty" at sociability that welcomes engagement with differences marks a tacit acceptance of vernacular sociability, one that is also seen as a cosmopolitan stance. His engagement in civil dialogue with diversity is consistent

with the way Jennie Molz imagines cosmopolitanism “as cultural or aesthetic disposition towards differences— a sense of tolerance, flexibility and openness towards otherness that characterizes an ethics of social relations in an interconnected world” (2). Leon’s openness facilitates connectivity by enabling him to transcend his class-specific identity as a White boy from the streets, thereby creating new networking opportunities. This openness also contributes to the credibility of the “vernacularization” of cosmopolitanism, offering avenues for empowerment (Roumford 248). His cosmopolitanism is characterized by a “contradictory” nature, as it merges opposing dichotomies such as Self/Other, Black/White, and elite/working-class (Werbner 496). While most of the students in Oxbridge college are members of wealthy class, “The Great British Taxpayers” (Grand Union: 25) who appear to lack the kind of cultural openness and sensitivity normally associated with cosmopolitanism, Leon’s free flâneur in this highly exclusive and homogenized setting reflects his inclusive cosmopolitan consciousness that recognizes in equal validity other cultures and other classes. Such itinerancy challenges, the best efforts of discriminatory structure by claiming the right to move freely and to speak freely in defiance of class differences. The best chance for the peaceful coexistence of diversity as Gilroy expects is attainable only in societies that render individuals with greatest freedom, meaning that there must grow mutual recognition rather than opposition among the members of that society. As it appears, it is Oxbridge’s exclusiveness that hinders the freedom of its members inconsistent with the freedom of others which in the case of Leon is not able to impose its world-closing perspective and practices. Major constraints on excluded characters in the story exist because of their association with Oxbridge college; by comparison, Leon’s independence from the college’s evaluation leads him to behave as he pleases. In contrast to the constrained existence faced by many within Oxbridge College’s exclusive milieu, Leon’s independent engagement and cosmopolitan openness defy the institution’s restrictive norms, embodying a vision of societal coexistence grounded in mutual recognition and freedom.

4. Geographic Boundaries and Artistic Imagination in Greenwich Village Town

Many of the stories in *Grand Union* are set in Greenwich Village town where Zadie Smith, now a New York University creative writing professor, lives. In this collection, Smith draws so heavily on this neighborhood and narrates the stories so meticulously and creatively that only a local could repeat. She shifts her attention from the “situation” in London, especially northwest London, the setting of most of her previous fiction, to the “situation” in the US. “Downtown” may be best designated as a short story that first reflects the living together of diversity in a tight community of Greenwich Village town and second centers around this diverse population’s affiliations and citizenship rights. Smith reminds the readers how this multiethnic New York City neighborhood lays social discriminatory processes for the racial others who live in it.

Greenwich Village town has had an international reputation for being a center of artistic experimentation. The narrative’s delicate account of this place endures a challenging reflection of the multicultural urban setting of the locality, serving as an effort to understand contemporary American cities. “Downtown” seems to occupy a distinct corner of America in which conventional concepts of time and space do not apply. The narrator describes a large megaphone that has been installed at the crossroad of Greenwich and Sixth with buttons beside each “historic Greenwich Village writer’s name” and what happens when people press each button they hear the writers, who have lived in this place, reading a few lines of their writing” which affirms “the past cultural significance of the Village despite all present evidence to the contrary” (Grand Union 66). The unnamed narrator observes the socio-cultural changes occurring in the neighborhood where the cultural significance of the Village as the habitat of diversity is displaced by young rich men with “white jeans” and “fashion haircuts” all “whipping around in the breeze” (Grand Union 67). In her “Forward” to *Greenwich Village 1920-1930* (1994), Debora Moore writes that Greenwich Village is still globally known despite “the rise of such alternative neighborhoods as SoHo and the East Village” remarking the social changes that the city has gone through because of capitalism and gentrification processes (viii). In her ambitious investigation of Greenwich Village life Caroline Ware, as well, acknowledges the tension between the promise of pluralism and the reality of intergroup relations being threatened by homogenizing and discriminatory policies imposed by nation state.

She refers to the nationalistic discourse which is predicated on national values as an essential part of intergroup and individual identity. Ware's portrait of Greenwich Village lifestyle raises "real doubts about the possibilities of creating a viable urban culture in America" writes Moore (xii).

In "Downtown" Smith records the changes which have come over the city and evidence of the psychological confusion which has laid the foundation for its social diversity. As the narrator reminds, Greenwich Village has been the center of art for a long time, artists came in large numbers including writers, painters, journalists, sculptors, and novelists and Greenwich Village became a cosmopolitan habitat for a literary artistic crowd all of whom enjoyed an untrammelled freedom of expression. In the view of bohemian artists and cultural radicals the Village was an idealized kind of neighborhood, a "spiritual zone of mind [...] not tied to geographical boundaries" where the artists free from conventionality could find "a dense concentration of like-minded individuals for inspirations" (McFarland 216). Yet, New York City, a metropolis was rapidly becoming America's largest center and its financial and cultural capital as well. The process of building a community in this new modern urban neighborhood created a tension between a required social intimacy and cultural homogeneity from the state and the mutual respect and pragmatic cooperation existing among the diversity that lived in this area. As a result of the growing class and ethnic heterogeneity of Greenwich Village's population, the desire for homogeneity imposed by the nation-state created a much more ethnic and racial discrimination. The consequence of creating a symbolic barrier between ethnicities is division and fragmentation of the urban environment, thereby restraining the prospects of cosmopolitan imagination. In referencing New York City's diverse composition, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, whose tenure spanned the presidencies of George W. Bush (2002-2009) and Barack Obama (2009-2013), lauded the city as "the freest city in the world," shaped by migrants from over a hundred countries, speaking more than two hundred languages, and practicing various faiths (Yeoh and Lin 208). However, prevalent exclusionary politics, instances of racial violence, and escalating tensions, such as Post-9/11 Islamophobia, Immigration Debate, Racial Profiling and Police Brutality, such as the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014 (just after Bloomberg's tenure), sparked widespread protests and heightened racial tensions, particularly between African American communities and law enforcement and undermine the optimistic stance articulated by the Mayor. Multiplied at considerable length in "Downtown", all these intercultural conflicts and tensions suggest that the every-day reality of intercultural conflicts does not support the attitudinal optimism expressed by the mayor but that in the process of state-formation the modern societies are going through a process of "urban enclavement" exhausting the tendency towards cosmopolitanism that can emerge from the experience of living with diversity (Turner 196).

Amidst these societal tensions, the protagonist, an unnamed narrator in the story, is depicted as a Jamaican American bohemian artist who embraces a lifestyle divergent from the constraints of Jamaican cultural norms and traditions. She assumes the role of a single mother raising two children, residing in Greenwich Village. Smith envisions her freed from any traditions of classifying America, especially because of its postcolonial history. She comes off as open, as if she does not have to bear the weight of otherness but can "like everyone else in America these days [...] stands in (her) truth" (Grand Union 64). Yet, her capacity to enjoy an existence beyond the bounds of collectivities, conventional practices, and intolerant worldviews is interrupted by other characters' behavior, choices and orientation, the socio-political tensions, and the historical-cultural significance of Greenwich Village town. The story symbolizes the tendency to feel free and the power of conviviality. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum lie characters that consider themselves to belong to specific communities or histories, individuals who refuse to go with the flow. "Downtown" revolves around one such example.

The story attests to the interrelation of different points of views, depending on the social context or historical situation of the Greenwich Village neighborhood. Every character in the story interprets socio-political issues differently and puts them in different uses. Thus, Greenwich Village appears as a site in which dialogic relationships are discerned as it can be traced in different ways offering several different accounts of the social reality of this specific space. It is a networked space of local, national, and global flows, a site of exchange and dialogue which swings between

opposition and accord, visualizing potentialities for new connectivities and new awarenesses. There are varying voices that speak out the colonial history, about injustice, violence, sexual abuse, or the current overwhelming political issues around immigration. The story monitors those times of “mass hysteria” in 2018 when President Donald Trump nominates Brett Kavanaugh for Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. Closely after which, on September 27, Dr. Ford is testifying that Judge Brett Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her some 36 years ago. Political issues are predominant in the narratives which are reechoed in the emotional responses of the characters to these issues and their concerns with ethics and justice based on shared history of sexual and racial violence.

Two of the narrator’s aunts come to Greenwich Village town “just in time for Brett to make his case” (Grand Union 68). During their walks in the town the aunts enjoy every time that they see “a glorious individual from the Diaspora “ranging from conceptual artists to painters to musicians plus “John Legend, Hilton Als and Spike Lee himself”. As they walk through the streets they grow “high racial spirit” (Grand Union 69). For the aunts this flâneurism recollects the memory of their time in this area where, as they assert, was the place “we were made witches, but this beautiful, globe-stretching coven you’re a part of is what we did with what was done to us, it is our own blessed creation, and a mighty glorious business it is too”. The aunts’ perception of the socio-political situation of Greenwich Village is relating mostly to racial violence, discriminatory policies, and memory of Black American legacy embedded in this specific geography’s history. Their vision of the colonial history of the city is that of a brutal time, which blurs the lines between the reality of present multicultural life and historical reality. The aunts inform their nephew, the narrator, about the reality of rape as “common” in the history of their family which they hope to be the “last siege of a ruling class”; their historical narrative is further demonstrated as an ongoing reality of sexual abuse expressed in Dr. Ford’s serious allegations against Brett Kavanaugh (Grand Union 69). There are clear parallels between the aunts’ and Dr. Ford’s narrative of sexual maltreatment implying that sexual harassment remains subject to state and national institutions. As the aunts watch Brett Kavanaugh making his testimony, they describe Kavanaugh’s face as the face a “baby makes when you try and take his rattle away, we’ve had many babies so we’re familiar. America being the rattle in this analogy. He thinks he deserves to do whatever he wants with that rattle, and women are simply a subclause in that arrangement” (Grand Union 69). Smith orchestrates this historical narrative with Amiri Baraka’s poem “Our Nation is Like Ourselves” (1970) as the characters hear it when they press the button on the megaphone at the crossroads of Greenwich and Sixth. In the poem Baraka repeatedly asks the rhetorical question “what time is it?” to which the crowds respond, “it’s nation’s time”, in the same manner, Smith implicitly, asks the same rhetorical question to highlight an ongoing history of violence and the voice of those victimized African Americans in different epochs of American history. All these sounds serve as a reminder of all the political and social tensions that surround the nation’s life.

The aunts’ four-day journey to Greenwich Village which turns out “to be the exact length of the investigation” coincides with Brett Kavanaugh’s swearing in as the 114th Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States:

Brett had proved once again that whenever a young Brett is born in these United States, born with a dream, that dream can truly come true. Yes, sir, if your baby Brett really puts his mind to it—if he believes, if he has faith, if he is a he, and if his is called Brett—he can do whatever it is he puts his mind to, and that goes double for all you Troys, Kips, Tripps, Bucks and Chads. (Grand Union 70)

What ties these events together is the political chaos that hovers in the background of different stories of characters. This coincidence constructs a dialogue in which historical narrative meets the political reality of contemporary America, developing a dialogic relation that provides the context for articulation of all voices in the story. In the meantime, the polyphonic narrative of “Downtown” reflects the intensified socio-political discrepancies and histories of suffering in contemporary America. In Smith’s culturally attuned voice, their references are oblique rather than explicit. Like *White Teeth* (2000), *On Beauty* (2005) and *Swing Time* (2016), in “Downtown” Smith is not ignorant about the historical and racial oppression suffered by racial minorities within a longer

legacy of colonial exploitation. She cleverly interjects contemporary touches to acknowledge that racial violence is as much a reminder of the past as a marker of the present moment to remind that the more the world is transformed, the more it remains the same. Smith believes that it is important that Diaspora narrative is spoken loudly, written about and taken seriously in the USA in contrast to Diaspora in Britain that is still like silence. In her interview with Cain Sian she emphasizes the importance of historical narrative on the formation of the second-generation immigrant-self, because, to understand these histories is to understand one's "positioning". From a British perspective, she can feel that there are "counter voices, counter narratives" and an obsession with historical narrative as part of a very big community in America. Although the story is not fundamentally historic in terms of setting, yet, the past informs both the entrenched positions the characters adopt and the public policies that lie at the heart of the city. Smith reflects different ways history can be imagined and reimagined, not only, she attempts to highlight the ways that history reverberates in characters' private and public life, but also suggests a more practical way of debating historically rooted conflicts. A reimagining of slaying of African Americans is connected to the present antiracial actions, featuring the black lives lost for police brutality. Smith is very ambitious to tell the stories that must be told, to highlight the role of the artist and art in times of political turmoil and social transformation.

The narrator admits to the "certain authority" of the historical narrative told by her aunts; however, she relies less on moral introspection or historical research than on a flourishing and transforming historical consciousness to assert control over the events being narrated by her aunts or taking place in the present moment in the town (Grand Union 69). Her partial engagement with her aunts' historical narrative is in line with Smith's own belief that "part of historical writing is to remind oneself, no, things were different and therefore can be different again" (2017). For instance, during her prayer in Black Church for a young child who, according to the minister, "was shot because she was black" the narrator disagrees with the minister who, in her view, has "transformed an act of perpetrator into a characteristic of the target". She argues with historical hindsight that, considering the long history of police brutality on black people, the minister has actually "turned one person's action into another person's being" (Grand Union 68). The narrator believes that black threat is a collectively constructed reality incorporated into government law and institutions which the whole society of America is based on. Here, Smith clearly demonstrates how the idea of American democracy as a national ideal or the belief that same rights and values can be applied to all American society fails to include racial others. When the minister reminds the narrator that she is not "American" the narrator responds: "Minister, you're absolutely right, I am from the Caribbean side of things, and, like the pesky Africans, we haven't yet learned the catechism fully. It takes years and years of training to fully concede you are witch. But I'm amenable! I can be taught" (Grand Union 68). Therefore, while she maintains a strong awareness of her racial identity, it is her adaptable nature that enables her to navigate and endure within a challenging environment. Her openness to diverse perspectives fosters a cosmopolitan consciousness, allowing her to adopt an empathetic and relational approach when encountering the diverse voices and complexities she engages with. In *Changing my Mind: Occasional Essays* (2009) Smith writes "flexibility of voice leads to a flexibility of all things" while "hesitation in the face of difference" results in "caution before difference and ends in fear of it" (149). Instead of retrenching her cultural identity the narrator expresses a deep awareness of political injustice but develops her sociability to live a life free from the strains of bias and limited understanding.

For the narrator in "Downtown," concepts of race, ethnicity, social reality, and justice are not fixed or absolute; they are subject to interpretation and evolution. Her cosmopolitan stance, evident in her relationships with Greenwich Village, fellow artists, city residents, and family, is characterized by a dialogic engagement. This dialogic condition of cosmopolitanism envisions a transformative process wherein an individual's identity undergoes redefinition and evolution through a "dialogic imagination." In the words of Beck, she develops an "alternative perspective" (Beck 17), embracing a relative conception of truth akin to Marshall Sahlins's notion of "the provisional suspension of one's own judgments in order to situate the practices at issue in the historical and cultural context that gave rise to them" (ibid 21). In contrast to the "monologic" perspective prevalent among

those encountered in her daily life and within American society at large, characterized by Beck as a “monologic imagination” that “excludes the otherness of others,” the narrator cultivates a “self-critical cosmopolitanism.” This perspective acknowledges the inescapable particularity of Greenwich Village, its inhabitants, and their historical trajectories (ibid 18).

Amidst all the dissonance of life in the city the narrator finds peace in the company of other artists coming together at Café Loup, the whole point of which is “it’s movable feast” where everyone tells everyone his stories without being judged (Grand Union 70). Cosmopolitanism needs a community of shared values to achieve consensus from the diversity it concerns. To live in such a society and to render cosmopolitan ideals possible, an individual needs a strong common identification. The narrator feels such a common identification through her connection and communication with other artists in the Café, yet she does not force herself to live in Café Loup’s micro-commune with other artists. In line with her cosmopolitanism, she prefers pluralism over consensus with homogenization or exclusion. As she reveals, in the coming month, she will “shed (her) green card and become a citizen” (Grand Union 71). She understands American society does not have emotional attachment at the cosmopolitan level. Regarding its postcolonial history, the violence imposed on its black inhabitants, and the institutionalized violence against women, as Smith approves in the story, American democracy is merely a legal form without support for diversity. Since the most embedded form of community is nation, individuals within this specific setting must become legitimate American citizens to have access to citizenship rights. Thus, for the narrator the importance of becoming an American citizen is not the “delicate matter of a new citizen’s eligibility for certain national art prizes” which she worries others would link to her becoming an American citizen, but the fact that the nation-state recognizes her artistic identity only if she becomes an American citizen (Grand Union 71). In his work “Two Conceptions of Cultural Citizenship: A Review of Recent Literature on Culture and Citizenship,” Gerard Delanty argues that traditional citizenship primarily concerns national membership within an established political entity, acquired by birthright and centered on rights, yet it often neglects the rights of minority groups (Delanty 60). This conventional understanding is increasingly challenged by the influx of migrants, cultural diversity, and ethnic blending, as evidenced in the cultural conflicts known as “culture wars” in American society (ibid 61). In the case of the narrator, to get an official recognition by the state as an American artist will pave the way for validation of her artistic identity. This aligns with Delanty’s concept of “cosmopolitan citizenship,” characterized as an active process enabling individuals to name, assign meaning, and construct personal narratives through control over information flow, goods, and cultural processes (ibid 64). In her engagement with diverse lifestyles, the narrator discerns, critiques, and synthesizes conflicting certainties, thereby reshaping her understanding of these monolithic rationalities. Unlike many characters in the narrative who seek to escape Greenwich Village life, the narrator endeavors to cultivate a harmonious approach to living that aligns with foundational national principles. Her aspiration to be recognized as an American citizen and an integral member of her community reflects a commitment to various forms of allegiance that foster a sense of cosmopolitan belonging.

5. Conclusion

In “Sentimental Education” Zadie Smith shows her newly developed writerly style as one that aims for more authorial freedom. Through an examination of daily experience of living in multicultural communities, Smith envisions individual capacity to live in different worlds and different imaginations of new ways of cohabitation of self and other. By examining various articulations of allegiances with otherness, Smith broadens the understanding of the concept beyond its conventional association with white, elite, or majority groups. She challenges the existing binary opposition of self and other by exploring this dynamic within the members of a minority groups, thereby demonstrating that exclusivist perspectives have also permeated the relational fabric of minority communities. In the contemporary context, individuals themselves play a crucial role in determining how they navigate differences; it is no longer solely the domain of dominant institutions to establish or perpetuate discrimination. Individual attitudes and interactions can significantly influence the creation of a more harmonious environment for the friendly coexistence

of diverse groups, as exemplified by the friendship between Darryl and Leon.

In "Downtown" Smith provides a transatlantic comparison to "Sentimental Education" by representing the urban city space of New York City. The story revolves around the situation of black minorities in contemporary America and questions the very nature of cultural empathy towards racially different ones. Smith pays attention to the role of discriminatory policies in impeding cross-cultural interaction and dialogue by interrogating the enforcement of nationalistic values of a failed democracy on diversity. She identifies different ways of imagining, remembering and reconstructing a society which is exclusively created upon a strong sense of nationalistic values. Smith assumes a realistic stance towards cosmopolitan engagement, recognizing that the globalizing condition of New York City besides the colonial history of the country necessitates an active implementation of a cosmopolitan vision via which individuals, especially, the first and second generation migrants who view themselves simultaneously as part of their local neighborhood and histories and a destabilized world, can reorient and redefine their life experiences, actions and choices in relation to local, national and global demands.

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