

## An Interpretation of Fatou's Identity Transformation in the Embassy of Cambodia

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**Abstract:** Zadie Smith is one of the most famous British women writers. Most of her novels focus on immigrants from the Third World and their descendants' living conditions and searching of their cultural identity in Britain which is under a kind of multicultural and multi-ethnic environment. This paper focuses on the issues of identity, which is one of the most main themes of Smith's novels, and discusses the transformation of Fatou's identity in the short story *The Embassy of Cambodia*, in which the identity of Fatou is divided into three stages: maidservant (identity loss), Catholic (searching of identity) and swimmer (the true self).

### 1. Introduction

Zadie Smith is one of the most popular female writers in the British literary world today, whose literary works have received readers' great welcome and favorable comments from western literature critics all the time because of its rich themes, innovative literary style and deep thought. As a descendant of a black immigrant from Jamaica who was born in England, Smith concerns more about the issues of survival situation and identity of the immigrants from the third world who are living in the developed western country. Most of Smith's full-length novels, taking the British multicultural society after the Second World War as backgrounds, highlight the psychological trauma which caused by culture disposition and loss of self-identity in the background of the multicultural society by depicting the survival situation of the immigrants and their descendants.

Due to Smith's literary works are focused on discussing the issues about races, the loss of identity, post-colony and Britishness, a large amount of literary critics have made comments on her novels under the perspective of post-colonialism. Smith's debut, *White Teeth*, talks about the vicissitudes of life of three British families. *White Teeth* depicts a metropolitan life in London under an environment which is a large melting pot consisted by multifarious cultures, religions and races. In her debut, Smith aims to criticize the conflicts and contradictions in the multicultural society. Pilar Cuder-Dominguez have commented on the Britishness in the *White Teeth* under the context of post-colonialism. Pilar put forward that the traditional White Britishness would be replaced by the new Britishness which is mixed by various cultures. What's more, Pilar suggests that Smith's mixed-blood background contributes to explain and intensify the concept of the new Britishness so that she can show her caring for the weak (Pilar 2004). Smith's second full-length novel, *The Autograph Man*, tells a story about a Jewish Chinese young man who specially lives on buying and selling the signatures of the celebrities. There are lots of scholars have commented on this novel from the perspective of the identity of the protagonist. Most literary critics, using Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory, explore Alex's doubts about identity construction and analyze the uncertainty of immigration status in multicultural society. Moreover, Smith's *On Beauty* was published in 2005, which shares some similarities with the first two works. What the difference *On Beauty* and the first two novels is that Smith focused on universities and academic circles in *On Beauty*. The novel tells the story about two totally different families which were mutually contradictory in the beginning of the story, but built a deep emotional connection with each other in the end. Like *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*, most critics highlight the identity issues in the novel. In a word, one of the main themes of Zadie Smith's literary works is about the loss and reconstruction of the immigrants' cultural identity.

Besides, the newest short story of Zadie Smith, named *The Embassy of Cambodia*, also

highlights the theme of identity dilemma of immigrants who are living in London. The novel tells a story about a woman from Ivory Coast, who called Fatou. She worked for the Derawal family in London. Every Monday's morning, Fatou would go to the health center to swim. And on Sunday, she would meet her church friend, Andrew Okonkwo, in Tunisian café. In the novel, the embassy of Cambodia, having no connection with the plot, actually goes throughout the whole story. The author depicts the badminton game several times, which is carried on every Monday's morning when Fatou passed by. The badminton, to some extent, may symbolize the erratic identity of Fatou. "At one point it seemed to Fatou that the next lob would blow southward, sending the shuttlecock over the wall to land lightly in her own hands. Instead the other player, with his vicious reliability, caught the shuttlecock as it began to drift and sent it back to his opponent-another deathly, downward smash." In the novel, Fatou's identity keeps changing: she is a maidservant in her master's house; she is a woman who has hers own thought in Tunisian café with Andrew, and she is also a confident and energetic woman as a swimmer. Just like the erratic badminton which always hangs in the air.

Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the transformation of Fatou's identity so that highlights the theme of the loss of identity of immigrants who are living in London.

## **2. Interpretation of the Cultural Dilemma**

Abdallah Laroui, a scholar in Morocco, suggests in his *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectuals* that "when the non-Westerners encounter with the West, they often show two kinds of alienation from the status: either to evade the past through westernization, or to admit their historical or cultural lag and to reaffirm it" (Laroui 54). Culture dilemma is a literary term, which belongs to the category of post-colonialism, widely used in today's literary criticism. It refers to a kind of perplexed feeling about one's cultural identity, which especially refers to the immigrants from the Third World who are living in other countries far from their hometown. So, not everybody would experience such a kind of cultural dilemma during his or her life. The cultural dilemma is a feeling mostly felt by those weak groups who migrate to a western world from the Third World. When people live in their hometown, they can acquired a sense of belonging both in the aspect of materials and spirits. It helps the subjects identify themselves with the world where they are born. What's more, it also brings them a sense of stability and security in the culture where they grow up. However, when the subjects leave their homeland and settle in a new environment with different cultures, especially when they can't get respect from people in that environment, they will feel lonely and perplexed.

In Zadie Smith's novels, the non-white characters migrate to a western society from the Third World and live in an environment which is filled with new ideas, cultures and customs. The new environment is totally different from the original ones that they have used to. Therefore, cultural dilemma in such a situation will enter their lives in all aspects, confusing their self-identities and values. Cultural dilemma will result in dilemma of identity. Identity is an important issue in individual's development. It basically refers to individual identification to a particular social culture, which is also the answer to who I am. In postcolonial times, British transnational capitalism weakened and disintegrated the national consciousness of local inhabitants by transplanting the Western way of life and cultural practices to the original colonies. At the same time, it also consciously cultivate the local aristocratic intellectual groups, so that they agree with the culture of the colonists, unconsciously apply the theory and standards of the colonists to look at things. In result, the cultural relationship of white and non-white is like subject and object (Li 56). This kind of simply binary structure confines the construction of identity or ethnical identity.

In "The Embassy of Cambodia", the cultural dilemma is fully embodied in Fatou's identity transformation. Therefore, it is necessary to interpret Fatou's identity transformation.

## **3. Fatou's Identity Transformation**

### **3.1 Fatou as a Maidservant**

By close reading the text, it's not difficult to find that "The Embassy of Cambodia" profoundly reflects the racial discrimination issue. As a maidservant, there is no respect for Fatou, even the children often laugh at her. "Sometimes she heard her name used as a term of abuse between them. 'You're as black as Fatou.' Or 'You're as stupid as Fatou.'" Although she worked for the family, they pay nothing for her, because the employer thinks that Fatou's salary should be used to afford her living costs here. What's more, when the youngest girl got stuck by a marble in her throat, she even asked for help by attacked Fatou, which indicates her unmannered attitude. "Before Fatou could understand, Asma punched the huge pile of clothes out of her hands. Fatou stooped to retrieve them. While she was kneeling on the floor, another strike came, a kick to her arm." After Fatou saved the youngest child, instead of expressing their feeling of gratitude, the other two children even laughed at Fatou impolitely. "'Oi, she saved your life,' said Julie, the eldest child, whom Fatou generally liked the least. 'Fatou saved your life. That's deep.'" Moreover, although Mr.Derewal expressed thanks to Fatou, he was not respect her enough for "he spoke not to her, exactly, but to a point somewhere between her elbow and the sunburst mirror behind her head." What's worse is that Mr.Derewal and his wife even asked their neighbor to keep watch on her so that she had to carry misleading Sainsbury's bags and walking toward the health center. At last, Fatou was fired for some absurd and illogical reasons. When Fatou asked Mrs.Derewal for her passport, Mrs.Derewal just got angry to her. All treatments Fatou received in that family indicate that the concept of color prejudice is deeply rooted in people's mind, even children.

In part 0-7, Fatou read a story from newspaper, which is about a Sudanese "slave" living in a rich man's house in London. After reading this story, Fatou wondered that whether she is a slave or not. She compared herself with the girl in the story. She insisted that herself is not a slave, because it was her father brought her here, rather than a kidnapper. Besides, she does not like the Sudanese slave who just is a prisoner, she can leave the house for the health center or meeting her friend. It seems that she is trying to convince herself to believe that she is not a slave. In fact, Fatou is in a puzzle about her identity which means that she has lost her identity.

In a word, Fatou, serving as a maidservant in the Derewal family, did not respected by anyone. She just do what her master asked her to do. In the house, she felt confusion about her identity. On the one hand, she refused to regard herself as a slave; but on the other hand, she is treated as a slave. Fatou's identity as a maidservant imposed by the White, just like the badminton which is staying in the highest point in the air, is far away from her root or her true self.

### **3.2 Fatou as a Seeker and Quizzer**

Every Sunday when Fatou met Andrew in the coffee house, she asked Andrew all kinds of questions. Fatou is a thoughtful woman as Andrew said,"You're not like the other girls I know, just thinking about the club and their hair. You're a person who thinks." Fatou cares about history, the disasters of every nation and her African compatriots. She feels sad for the experiences of her race. "Are we born to suffer? Sometimes I think we were born to suffer more than all the rest." The painful experiences of the African people left a deep trauma on Fatous' heart. She can't understand why the African people have suffered much more than other nations. They suffered being enslave, being slaughtered. That's why Fatou always can't help standing outside the embassy of Cambodia, which can make her associate with the painful history about her race.

For Fatou, Andrew is the one who help her figure out the puzzling in her mind. "But I still think we have more pain. I've seen it myself. Chinese people have never been slaves. They are always protected from the worst." Then Andrew mentioned the Hiroshima and told her that every nation has its own hard times during its history. He tried to erase the indignantly resent in Fatous' heart. "Tell me, why would God choose us especially for suffering when we, above all others, praise his name? Africa is the fastest-growing Christian continent! Just think about it for a minute! It doesn't even make sense!" Andrew is a pious Christian who would give his life to the God, and he helped Fatou find her belief so that her heart will not be filled with resentment and unfairness anymore. In addition, Fatou has thought herself was sinful, because she had been raped by a Russian. And Andrew told Fatou that "When you're baptized in our church, all sin is wiped, you start again." At

last, Fatou became a Catholic, which made her feel that she like a new person.

During the time Fatou spent with Andrew, she was a seeker and quizzer, who was seeking her own identity. With the help of Andrew, Fatou transformed in to a person having her own faith from the person whose heart was filled with resentment and unfairness. Although when Fatou returned to her work in the Derewal family, she got loss again, becoming a Catholic was one step which got closer to Fatou's ture self. And this phase seems like the badminton which starts falling from the highest point, although it is not yet come into contact with the ground, it is getting closer and closer to the ground. Therefore, for Fatou, she was getting closer to her identity.

### **3.3 Fatou as a Swimmer**

In this novel, Fatou's identity kept changing. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is a source of history. Like all historical things, they undergo constant change. They are never eternally fixed in a certain essence of the past but succumb to historical changes (Hall 211). When Fatou was in the master's home, she refused to admit the slave identity. And in the coffee house with Andrew, she was a seeker who was seeking for her identity. However, both the two identities were not the true identity for Fatou, which made she feel lonely and confused. Fatou just like the badminton in the embassy of Cambodia which was always hanging in the air and never reach to the ground. Therefore, the lowest point the badminton could reach, which is also the closest place to the ground, symbolizes that Fatou came closest to her true identity.

By close reading the text, it is not difficult to find that Fatou loves swimming very much. She cherished every Monday's morning. Even when Mrs. Derawal and Mr. Derawal began to suspect her and asked their neighbor to monitor her, she still didn't stop swimming. "Because Fatou believed that the Derawals' neighbors had been instructed to spy on her, she would not let Andrew come to the house to pick her up on Monday, instead leaving as she always did, just before ten, carrying misleading Sainsbury's bags and walking toward the health center." Fatou loves swimming because when she was swimming, she could find her confidence which made her feel like she is a whole person. "When she spots these big men, paddling frantically like babies, struggling simply to stay afloat, she prides herself on her own abilities, having taught herself to swim, several years earlier, at the Carib Beach Resort, in Accra." What's more, swimming can also let Fatou see her past and future more clearly. In part 0-14, Fatou recalled many things in her past when she was in the warm water. She thought of Carib Beach in which there were some girls who were different from Fatou. Fatou hates their subdued attitude towards the White. Moreover, she also hated that her father ingratiated himself with the Whites who always have a sense of superiority complex. "Fatou hated to watch her father crouching to hand a burger to a man waist high in water". It was when Fatou swam that she felt the proper pride which exists deeply in her heart. In addition, in the end of the story, Fatou was fired by Mrs. Derawal and she took the rest of the guest passes from the drawer of the Louis XVI console. During the time waiting for Andrew, Fatou went swimming again. The author did not tell us what happened when Fatou was swimming this time. However, when Fatou came out of the health center, she refused to express her appreciation to the girl at the desk of the health club. "See you next time,' this same girl said, an hour and a half later, as Fatou strode past, still weighed down and still unwilling to be grateful for past favors. Gratitude was just another kind of servitude. Better to make your own arrangements." From these words, we can find that Fatou began to figure out her identity. She is not a maid anymore, which means a kind of liberation for Fatou. She will not be controlled by anyone and she decided to arrange her life by her own. "Walking out into the cold gray, Fatou felt a sense of brightness, of being washed clean, that neither the weather nor her new circumstance could dim." The author left some imaginary spaces for readers. However, from the ending of the story, we can find that Fatou has come the closest to her true identity.

### **4. Conclusion**

*The Embassy of Cambodia* just like Zadie Smith's other literary works, focuses on the issues of cultural identity of the immigrants from the Third World. Fatou, in this novel, also has her identity

crisis. She was discriminated by the White in London, however, she refused to regard herself as a slave. She kept struggling in searching her true identity.

This paper, focusing on Fatou's identity, interprets the transformation of Fatou's identity. Fatou represents the Third World women who are no longer synonymous with conservative, passive and ignorant. They pursue their identity bravely under the conflicts of two different cultures.

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