

Swinging Identity in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*

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ABSTRACT. *Identity construction is one of the most sensitive issues immigrant groups need to face. Zadie Smith shows us a multi-dimensional scene of the status quo and crisis of immigrant groups' identity in contemporary British society from multiple perspectives in *Swing Time*. Through the analysis of the first-person protagonist's identity construction, this article see from different levels that the root of the identity crisis is that when the narrator is facing the multicultural society, due to the influence of the family and the deviation of personal understanding, she can never establish a tolerant and moderate attitude. From the standpoint of a diaspora individual, Smith emphasizes the importance of open mind and inclusive mind through the failure of the identity construction of the protagonist in this novel.*

KEYWORDS: *Zadie smith, Swing time, Diaspora, Community, Identity construction*

1. Introduction

Zadie Smith is one of the most influential writers of the new generation in England. *Swing Time*, published in 2016, tells a grand social story about race, class and gender. There are dozens of characters in the novel, including black, white, and black-and-white. Not only the racial relationship is complex, but also the class relationship is more subtle.

The main line of the novel brings the reader back to the narrator's childhood, especially focusing on the story that happened in London in 1982, and tells the narrator's association with Tracey, a mixed race girl. The sub line of the novel focuses on the present time and space, and describes the intriguing adventures of the narrator who, is interspersed with her ambitious mother's unusual dream pursuit journey. The whole story shuttles back and forth between childhood and adulthood, northwest London and West Africa, and the identity seeking of the narrator promoted by it is not only local, current, but also global and historical. In a sense, the original intention of Smith's creation of this novel is closely related to identity, especially the identity of the black diaspora in England.

2. Uncertain Identity

In Amitai Etzioni's theory, "We suggest that free individuals require a community, which backs them up against encroachment by the state and sustains morality by drawing on the gentle prodding of kin, friends, neighbors, and other community members" (15). The necessity of forming such a community lies in that it provides support for individuals. *Swing Time* seems to be about, more specifically, relationship and contrast, such as the opposite race, class, world outlook and ideology. Community helps individuals identify their identity reference points. Given that community helps individuals to "reestablish their ethnic identity and bonds" (Etzioni 120), the reason why the narrator's sense of belonging in *Swing Time* is always uncertain and lack of solid foundation is that her ethnic identity and bonds are affected and interfered by the following three aspects.

First of all, the appearance of father and his illegitimate son makes the narrator know clearly where she doesn't belong. When the white father, who is gentle in her mind, accidentally brings two white illegitimate children to the family, the image of the father turns into the embodiment of deception in her mind. When the narrator is forced to stare frankly at Emma, she clearly realizes that "we had no features in common at all ... How can two such different creatures emerge from the same source?" (44-45) While the narrator looks at his father's illegitimate son John, a more binary idea has emerged: "looking at the boy, I found I could not deny his essential rightness. It was right that he should be my father's son, anyone looking at him would see the sense of it. What didn't make sense was me... yes, he is right and I am wrong" (46). Through this experience, the narrator determines that as a brown girl, she is not only different from the white in color, but also the white group they form at home, which obviously excludes her and her mother, reminding her that she does not belong to the white society at all times.

Secondly, in the process of the narrator's growth, her mother's strong attitude towards the school system has a subtle impact on her. Mother's strong radical thoughts and behaviors make the narrator feel where she might belong. For example, when her mother goes to Parents' Evening, "I trailed behind her as she made her way round the room, hectoring teachers, ignoring all attempts on their part to discuss my progress" (42), which makes the narrator have a sense of pride and dignity. In her eyes, mother is "like a queen" and "triumphant" (42). If the school symbolizes authority for primary school students, then the mother can be superior to the authority, and the narrator will naturally have a sense of pride for her mother. Therefore, the narrator deeply equates this obscure vocabulary with authority in her heart, memorizes the mother's theory, and seems to understand where she should belong.

However, the paradox of mother's behavior and some views of the people in the society often shake the narrator's consciousness. For example, at Lily's birthday party, although she insisted that blacks and Asians should be united on race issues, she regards the accusation that Tracey ridiculed Pakistan's schoolmates from Lily's mother as "typical bourgeois morality" (82). And she shouts at the two girls: "You think you're one of them? Is that what you think?" (82) To a certain extent, mother's attitude of linking all issues with racial issues ignores the general principle of dealing with affairs unrelated to race. While emphasizing the importance of skin color, it inadvertently reduces the applicability of social behavior. As a result, the mother's comments lead to the narrator's vacillation of the ethnic consciousness.

Third, Tracey, another protagonist in this novel, is a shadow of the narrator. Many critics first notice the main line of the friendship between the narrator and Tracey in this novel. Tracey seems to have the potential of mirroring back to the narrator who she really is. This clue brings them back to their childhood in 1982, when the narrator first met Tracey. The narrator recalls that they became friends at once because "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" (9). However, the friendship between Tracey and the narrator is based on the color of skin, or race, and the common interests and hobbies of childhood-dancing, while the relationship between them breaks down in class differences. "They unite through their interest in dancing and performing, but as much as their similarities are emphasized, the narrator makes a point of sketching their differences just as pointedly" (Quabeck 465).

By contrast with Tracey's indifferent attitude, the narrator's effort to find the fulcrum is unsuccessful. Although they look the same, they are experiencing totally different lives due to different family backgrounds. The reason lies that mother always stresses that the narrator and Tracey are different, because Tracey comes from a special single parent family, and her father is always in prison. Moreover, her father's domestic violence and running away from home have become a nightmare for the family. The narrator's mother is ambitious, keeps studying and campaigning, and eventually become a Member of Parliament. Therefore, the narrator will be arrogant in front of Tracey and even despise her family. Because of this, Tracey doesn't thank us for our help, but "accused us both of kidnapping her, of trying to control her, we who have always been trying to control her..." (233). Tracey's so-called "kidnapping" not only shows that she does not agree with the ethnic identity that mother repeatedly emphasizes and exaggerates, but also shows that the group in which the narrator thinks herself is very vague, even illusory. Tracey's "resistance" obviously deepens the narrator's doubts about her identity.

Through the analysis of the above three aspects, it is not difficult to see that the narrator has not found out the "community" which belongs to her, nor can she determine whether she belongs to the "actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized" (Castells 8). Without the community of ethnic groups as the support, without a clear and stable ethnic identity and bonds, resistance identity will not be realized naturally.

3. Conclusion

Zadie Smith records the story in *Swing Time* with mingled strains of nostalgia, humor and pathos. This novel is related to identity of the black diaspora in England. At the same time, it also reveals the reason for her confusion of identity, that is, identity is not stable and single, but relative and pluralistic. "The narrator's ambivalence about her own life gradually calcifies into something approaching despair, which only the novel's playful treatment of time keeps suspended for a while" (Charles).

In *Swing Time*, Smith once again stands on the individual position of emigration, and emphasizes the importance of open mind and inclusive mind through the lessons of failure of the protagonist's identity construction. Of course, the formation of identity is "as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process" (Hall 222), which is not determined by one's past. I believe that the narrator who has experienced many setbacks will face the future with a peaceful and inclusive attitude. In this way, her "swing time" may be over.

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