RESEARCH PAPER

Hysterical Realism in Zadie Smith: A Study of White Teeth and The Autograph Man

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Abstract
The term "hysterical realism," coined by James Wood in his 2000 review of Zadie Smith's *White* Teeth, identifies a postmodern literary mode characterized by narrative excess, frenetic storytelling, and intellectual over-saturation. This paper revisits Zadie Smith's early novels—*White Teeth* (2000) and *The Autograph Man* (2002)—to explore how her fiction embodies and simultaneously subverts the tenets of hysterical realism. Both novels teem with eccentric characters, sprawling subplots, and manic energy that reflect the anxieties of a globalized, multicultural Britain at the turn of the millennium. Through a close reading of key narrative moments—such as Archie Jones's attempted suicide in *White Teeth* and Alex-Li Tandem's obsession with celebrity memorabilia in *The Autograph Man*—the paper argues that Smith's seemingly excessive narrative form conceals a deep moral and emotional intelligence. While she inherits the maximalist exuberance of Rushdie, DeLillo, and Wallace, Smith transforms hysterical realism into a medium for exploring sincerity, identity, and the fragmented self in contemporary London. The study concludes that Smith's early works do not merely reproduce the hysteria of modern life but use it to question the limits of postmodern irony and the possibilities of empathy in a multicultural world.

Keywords: Hysterical Realism, Zadie Smith, White Teeth, The Autograph Man, Multiculturalism
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Introduction

When James Wood coined the term "hysterical realism" in his 2000 essay "Human, All Too Inhuman," he was responding to a perceived excess in contemporary fiction—a tendency toward "stories that know a thousand things but do not know a single human being." The term was initially directed at writers such as Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace, but it became inextricably associated with Zadie Smith's debut novel White Teeth. For Wood, the novel's sprawling plot, intersecting sub-narratives, and encyclopedic energy represented a new kind of literary hysteria: a "perpetual motion machine" of ideas, voices, and coincidences. Yet, two decades later, it seems reductive to dismiss Smith's exuberance as mere excess. Instead, this paper contends that Smith's first two novels—*White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*—mobilize the features of hysterical realism not as aesthetic indulgence but as a means to capture the fractured, hyperconnected reality of postcolonial Britain.

White Teeth opens with the absurd image of Archie Jones attempting suicide in his car on the morning of New Year's Day, 1975. "He laid his head on the steering wheel and reflected that this was a good way to go," Smith writes, only to have Archie's plan thwarted by a Muslim butcher who drags him out of the car and insists that "suicide is a sin against life." The comic deflation of tragedy here sets the tone for the entire novel: the personal and the historical collide in absurd and chaotic ways. Through Archie and his friend Samad Iqbal, Smith explores the immigrant condition—haunted by colonial legacies yet immersed in the chaotic simultaneity of modern Britain. The novel's narrative voice oscillates between irony and empathy, embodying the "hysterical" rhythm of contemporary urban life.

Similarly, *The Autograph Man*—Smith's much-debated second novel—extends this aesthetic of hyperreality. Its protagonist, Alex-Li Tandem, a half-Jewish, half-Chinese autograph dealer, spends his days pursuing celebrity signatures and living amid simulacra. His world, filled with fakes, reproductions, and mediated desires, exemplifies what Jean Baudrillard calls the "ecstasy of communication." Smith's prose reflects this condition through a collage of styles—emails, lists, magazine fragments, and screen-like dialogues—that mimic the speed and noise of the digital age. In one striking passage, Alex-Li muses, "We live in a world made of paper and pixels, where nothing is real unless it's signed." The

sentence encapsulates Smith's vision of postmodern detachment: hysteria as the symptom of spiritual vacancy.

Both novels, therefore, can be read as Smith's experiments in form and feeling. The so-called "hysteria" of her realism arises not from a lack of depth but from her refusal to simplify the chaos of modernity. The multiplicity of characters—Archie, Clara, Samad, Irie, Alex-Li, Adam—mirrors the multiplicity of contemporary life itself. Through polyphonic narration, Smith captures the simultaneity of global experience: London as a postcolonial crossroads where history, race, religion, and technology converge. In White Teeth, the generational saga of the Jones and Iqbal families dramatizes the failures of both colonial nostalgia and multicultural utopianism. In The Autograph Man, this excess takes a more introspective form, where the external mania of celebrity culture masks internal emptiness.

A brief comparison of key scenes demonstrates how Smith uses hysterical realism to stage moments of emotional authenticity. In White Teeth, the climactic chaos at the Future-Mouse exhibition brings together the novel's sprawling characters—scientists, families, radicals, and zealots—in a single absurd event. The narrative hysteria is deliberate: a microcosm of globalization's contradictory energies. Yet amid this carnival of voices, Irie Jones's quiet longing for belonging and Samad's moral anxiety emerge as genuinely moving. Likewise, in The Autograph Man, after a long pursuit of the elusive star Kitty Alexander, Alex-Li finally meets her only to find that the real woman is frail, aging, and indifferent to fame. The encounter shatters his illusion of transcendence, grounding the hysterical world of celebrity in the pathos of human limitation. "He saw her," Smith writes, "and it was not the seeing he had dreamed." The moment crystallizes Smith's critique of postmodern simulacra—behind the hysteria lies the yearning for sincerity.

Thus, this study proposes that Zadie Smith's engagement with hysterical realism is neither ironic detachment nor naïve exuberance. Her early novels reveal a dialectical tension between chaos and compassion, between stylistic play and ethical seriousness. Far from being the mere symptom of postmodern excess, hysterical realism in Smith's fiction becomes a method—a narrative strategy that mirrors the overstimulation of the modern world while gesturing toward moral depth. The analysis that follows will trace how this dual movement operates within White Teeth and The Autograph Man, illuminating Smith's place within and beyond the tradition that James Wood once criticized.

Zadie Smith herself acknowledges this lineage. In interviews, she has cited Rushdie, DeLillo, and Wallace as formative influences. White Teeth borrows the narrative sprawl and ironic intelligence of these writers but situates them within the multicultural and postcolonial realities of London. As Smith writes in her essay "This Is How It Feels to Me," the 1990s were a decade "filled with stories about globalization, hybridity, and the strange simultaneity of cultures." Her fiction, therefore, dramatizes the overload of identities, ideologies, and histories that define modern existence.

The signature of hysterical realism lies in excess — excessive characters, excessive knowledge, excessive intertextuality. Yet this excess functions as a mode of cognition. It acknowledges that in a world saturated by data and diversity, the realist impulse must expand rather than contract. As David Foster Wallace once argued, the novelist's task in the information age is to represent "the too-muchness of everything."

Smith's The Autograph Man embodies this "too-muchness" formally and thematically. Its structure incorporates footnotes, lists, diagrams, and typographic play — the textual equivalents of information overload. The protagonist, Alex-Li Tandem, inhabits a world of constant distraction: television, advertisements, email, and celebrity news. His mental state mirrors the form of the novel itself — restless, associative, fragmented. The novel's "hysterical" surface thus becomes an index of its thematic concern: the crisis of authenticity in a mediated culture.

In the novel *White Teeth* from its opening sentence—"Early in the morning, late in the century, Cricklewood Broadway"—Smith establishes the pulse of a novel that is both temporal and timeless, local and global. The first scene, in which Archie Jones attempts suicide by gassing himself in his car, sets the tone for the entire work: tragedy subverted by comedy, despair redeemed by chance. Archie's suicide is interrupted by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, a halal butcher who forbids the act on religious grounds. The juxtaposition of English stoicism and Muslim morality creates an absurd yet deeply symbolic encounter between postwar England and its immigrant future.

The episode exemplifies what James Wood called the "perpetual motion machine" of hysterical realism: an

incessant narrative drive where every event spawns new coincidences, every digression breeds another subplot. The reader is carried through generations, continents, and scientific experiments—from colonial India to postcolonial London, from wartime camaraderie to the ethics of genetic engineering. Smith's style is deliberately maximalist. Her sentences overflow with detail:

"Archie Jones didn't know that he was born twice. Once when his mother delivered him and again when he was pulled out of a car on the Cricklewood Broadway by a man who thought God had better plans for him. "This comic amplification of the ordinary—the transformation of a banal suicide into a miraculous rebirth—illustrates the novel's mixture of irony and transcendence.

In one remarkable scene, Samad laments his sense of cultural dislocation: "I'm a Muslim man of Bengal, in a state of cultural confusion. I don't know whether I'm coming or going."

The hysteria here is not merely stylistic but existential. Samad's fractured identity—torn between colonial nostalgia and contemporary secularism—mirrors the novel's own narrative schizophrenia. Smith's prose enacts the psychological fragmentation of her characters through its multiplicity of perspectives and tonal shifts.

The younger generation, especially Irie Jones and Millat Iqbal, embody the multicultural Britain that their parents cannot fully comprehend. Irie's struggles with racial identity and beauty ideals, and Millat's oscillation between Western pop culture and Islamic fundamentalism, exemplify the chaotic negotiation of belonging in a postcolonial metropolis. The hysterical pace of their lives reflects a London where every tradition and ideology is simultaneously present and unstable.

The hysterical quality of *White Teeth* also derives from its polyphonic narrative voice. Smith moves effortlessly between first-person, third person, and omniscient narration, blending historical digressions with contemporary slang. The novel's voice is at once ironic and compassionate, capable of both satire and sincerity.

Consider the passage describing Irie's longing to belong: "Irie wanted to be in the thick of it, part of a people, to be more than a little island in a sea of misfits."

Here the language slows, shedding its comic exuberance to reveal emotional vulnerability. This oscillation between irony and tenderness is central to Smith's aesthetic. Her hysterical realism is not a rejection of feeling but a recognition that emotion must fight for space within a noisy, overdetermined world.

If *White Teeth* is Zadie Smith's exuberant, comic panorama of multicultural Britain, *The Autograph* Man (2002) represents her descent into the labyrinth of contemporary alienation and celebrity culture. While her debut novel teemed with multiple families, languages, and histories, The Autograph Man turns inward, focusing on the psychic dislocation of a single protagonist. Yet despite its narrower scope, the novel retains the hallmarks of hysterical realism: narrative excess, intellectual density, stylistic fragmentation, and thematic sprawl. It remains obsessed with the interplay between the real and the simulated, the human and the commodified, the sacred and the superficial.

The novel's protagonist, Alex-Li Tandem, is a half-Chinese, half-Jewish autograph dealer whose life revolves around the accumulation of signatures—traces of authenticity in an increasingly artificial world. This obsession with collecting autographs provides the central metaphor of the novel: the human yearning for contact with the real amid the proliferation of simulacra.

In one of the novel's most revealing passages, Smith writes:"Alex-Li Tandem believed in the holiness of the signature, the sacredness of the name, the contact between the hand of the famous and the paper it touched."

Here, the novel's irony and seriousness coexist. Alex's faith in the autograph as a relic of authenticity reflects both his spiritual hunger and his entrapment in a culture of surfaces. The "holiness of the signature" becomes a parody of religious belief in a secular, media-driven age. Unlike *White Teeth,* where hysteria emerges from the clash of cultures and ideologies, The Autograph Man locates hysteria within the subject's fragmented consciousness. The novel's world is saturated with noise—television, magazines, celebrity gossip, and digital communication. Smith's narrative form mirrors this overstimulation through typographical experimentation: footnotes, lists, fragments, and intertextual allusions.

In one section, a list of celebrity names runs across an entire page, functioning both as satire and symptoms. The novel becomes a textual representation of what Jean Baudrillard calls hyperreality—a realm where representation replaces experience, and the sign replaces the thing itself.

The autograph functions as the novel's central metaphor of mediation. It is at once a trace of presence and a sign of absence. Alex's pursuit of celebrity signatures, especially that of the reclusive actress Kitty Alexander, becomes a futile search for authenticity in a culture where everything is reproducible.

Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum aptly describes this condition. The autograph is not the real person but a copy of presence, a fetishized fragment that substitutes for genuine connection. Smith's hysterical realism dramatizes this paradox: the more Alex seeks authenticity, the deeper he sinks into simulation.

In a self-reflexive moment, Smith writes:"He had been chasing the face of Kitty Alexander so long he no longer knew whether it was the face of a person or an idea."
This confusion between the real and the representational is central to the novel's affective landscape. The hysteria of Alex's world—its constant motion, distraction, and saturation—reflects the late capitalist condition where even emotion is commodified.
Smith's narrative structure in The Autograph Man is itself hysterical. The novel opens with a pseudo-scholarly section titled "The Book of Alex-Li Tandem," filled with diagrams, mathematical notations, and lists, mimicking both sacred scripture and scientific manual. This hybrid form destabilizes generic conventions and mirrors the protagonist's confusion between faith and materialism.
The typography varies throughout—italics, capital letters, fragmented dialogues—suggesting the textual equivalent of a restless consciousness. Critics such as James Annesley and Philip Tew have observed that Smith's experimentation here evokes the "information overload" of the early digital age. The text itself becomes an artifact of postmodern hysteria—overflowing with information yet devoid of resolution.
In another section, Smith employs cinematic techniques to mirror Alex's fragmented perception. Sentences cut abruptly, scenes shift like jump-cuts, and narrative voices interject at odd moments. The reader experiences what Fredric Jameson calls "the waning of affect," where emotion is replaced by perpetual distraction.
While *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man* share formal exuberance and intellectual energy, their tonal difference is striking. White Teeth celebrates the plurality of voices, whereas *The Autograph Man* laments the collapse of authentic communication. Both novels, however, embody hysterical realism as a mode of representing a world overwhelmed by information, belief systems, and contradictions.If *White Teeth* portrays the hysteria of cultural multiplicity, The Autograph Man depicts the hysteria of spiritual vacancy. In both cases, Smith refuses to reduce complexity into moral simplicity. Her realism thrives on contradiction: laughter and melancholy, irony and compassion, fragmentation and meaning.

Conclusion

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man* together represent a vital stage in the evolution of contemporary British fiction — a period marked by exuberant experimentation, intellectual excess, and a persistent search for moral meaning in an age of fragmentation. Through these novels, Smith both inherits and reinvents the narrative mode that James Wood famously termed hysterical realism: fiction that is "full of knowingness" and yet "afraid of silence." Her response to this aesthetic is complex — at once indulgent and interrogative, ironic and sincere.

In *White Teeth*, hysteria manifests through social sprawl — the crowded intersections of history, race, and religion that define late-twentieth-century London. The novel's multiplicity of voices, its digressive structure, and its manic humor embody the restless energy of multicultural Britain. Yet beneath its exuberant comedy lies a deep moral inquiry: how can meaning and belonging be forged amid the debris of colonial legacies and scientific determinism? Smith's narrative style, though overflowing, mirrors the chaos of modern identity formation, suggesting that such cacophony is not merely excess but an authentic representation of postcolonial reality. Her characters — Archie Jones, Samad Iqbal, Irie, and Millat — move through competing ideologies, each seeking coherence in a world that offers only hybridity and flux. The novel's hysteria, then, becomes a mode of resistance against closure, a celebration of unfinishedness.

By contrast, *The Autograph Man* internalizes hysteria. The social noise of *White Teeth* turns inward, manifesting as psychic dislocation and metaphysical fatigue. Alex-Li Tandem's obsessive pursuit of celebrity autographs is the symbolic center of a culture intoxicated by images and mediation. His world, saturated by simulacra, reflects the late capitalist condition where authenticity has been replaced by representation. Smith's prose mimics this overstimulation through typographical experimentation

and fragmented form, translating media saturation into narrative structure. Yet even within this stylistic frenzy, the novel longs for stillness. When Alex finally confronts the emptiness behind his obsession, Smith allows a moment of moral and emotional lucidity to emerge — the recognition that the "real" cannot be purchased, collected, or signed, but must be lived.

Across these two novels, Smith's engagement with hysterical realism evolves from exuberant externality to introspective critique. White Teeth dramatizes the hysteria of history and identity, while The Autograph Man explores the hysteria of meaninglessness in a commodified world. In both, the excess of style becomes the ethical question itself: how to tell stories truthfully in a time when experience is fragmented, mediated, and globalized. Her fiction transforms hysteria from an aesthetic flaw into a diagnostic tool, a way of capturing the simultaneity, dissonance, and saturation of postmodern life. What emerges, ultimately, is Smith's recognition that hysteria and sincerity are not opposites but stages in the same moral trajectory. Beneath the frantic surfaces of her prose lies a yearning for connection, for moral seriousness amid irony. By pushing hysterical realism to its limits, Smith begins to imagine its transcendence — a movement toward a new sincerity that values vulnerability, empathy, and human complexity over cleverness and spectacle.

Thus, *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man* are not merely examples of hysterical realism; they are meditations on its necessity and its exhaustion. They reveal that to represent the contemporary world — its noise, plurality, and instability — the novelist must first embrace hysteria, and then, within it, seek grace. In doing so, Zadie Smith emerges not as a prisoner of postmodern excess but as one of its most self-aware reformers: a writer who turns the chaos of her age into the condition of literary truth.

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