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Abstract

In Zadie Smith's short story "The Waiter's Wife" (1999), her female characters use public spaces to discuss and dispute private matters, subverting tradition and creating their own space in which to reframe their personal stories, allowing them to understand and navigate their own identities as women in an alien and often hostile country, trapped in unbalanced marriages. Smith's characters, Alsana and Clara, meet as young wives to men far older than they are and form a friendship which allows them room to explore their identities. Smith overturns the binaries of public/private and male/female to show how the women's friendship blossoms in public spaces and creates room for them to develop their own control and identity outside of the control of patriarchal husbands.

Keywords: *literature, gender, intersectionality, migration, identity*

As Western society develops and borders blur, the traditionally upheld binaries such as us/them, white/black, good/evil, male/female, or public/private shift as emerging voices declare atypical narratives. Unheard stories are exploding onto the literary scene, and the notion of a universal experience is fading alongside those fixed binaries. In many cases, the female voices of the present, voices from all backgrounds, subvert the spaces once dominated by the white male voices of the colonial past and rewrite the common European narrative. Modern female-written fiction often unwinds the binaries of *male/female* and *public/private* as female characters claim more space as their own. The public space becomes wholly different within the sphere of the female experience. In Zadie Smith's short story "The Waiter's Wife" (1999), for example, her female characters subvert the traditional public spaces with their private matters, creating a space of their own in which to reframe their narratives, allowing them to control and explore their identities.

Some female-authored works seek to undermine patriarchal structures; some seek to advocate for and perpetuate that same system. "The Waiter's Wife" is such a work that undermines patriarchal thought, unearthing the hairline cracks in the foundation. I aim to analyze how Smith's work "undermine[s] patriarchal ideology" by subverting the traditionally held spaces of the public and the private, giving power to the women themselves rather than the men who have created and maintained the patriarchy (Tyson 114). According to Colleen Mack-Canty, the separate spaces created by the fixed spatial binaries, such as the public/private dichotomy, "[were] significant to the political analysis of…second-wave feminists" (157). Smith's work, published in the late nineties and early 2000s, takes place amid the third-wave feminist movement which uses the crest of second-wave feminism as a beginning, with a new generation of women continuing the work of understanding gender and its effects.

As feminist criticism evolved past second-wave feminism, third-wave feminists "developed their explanations from well-established Western political theories such as liberalism, Marxism, socialism, and psychoanalytical theory" (Mack-Canty 157). Zadie Smith writes about women of color of all socio-economic statuses, adding a layer of intersectional complexity to the themes in her work; thus, critics must examine how her portrayal of gender interacts with the characters' race, sexuality, and economic backgrounds. Due to the migrant status of Smith's female characters, critics must understand the cultural implications of women from countries such as Jamaica and Bangladesh living in England alongside husbands enmeshed in English culture. The clash of cultures between the wife and the husband works in tandem with the patriarchal assumptions of both Western and Eastern cultures to create a whirlwind of expectations the female characters must navigate. Therefore, the space in which the characters exist requires analysis. The spatial nature of the public and the private necessitates further examination through material feminism. Material feminism inspects the physical implications and effects of a patriarchal society on women; rather than examining solely the psychological or relational effects, material feminists use Marxist theory to understand the socio-economic effect of patriarchy on the material and financial states of women's lives.[1]

Zadie Smith is the daughter of a Jamaican mother and an English father, and she replicates this clash of colonial and colonized cultures in her writing, weaving narratives of immigrant women navigating the space, or lack therof, in the modern world of postcolonial countries. A number of Smith's novels and short stories explore the lives of these women, often positioning colonized countries against what was once the most significant colonial power in the world: England. In her writing, immigrant women marry, work, and react to tragedies the men in their lives cause. Smith brings these women who were once invisible, dismissed from the eyes of the white men and women who felt themselves superior, and makes them visible, creating a literary space in which she revitalizes narratives that have always existed. "The Waiter's Wife" is a short story selected from Smith's larger work, *White Teeth*, which continues to explore the families that "The Waiter's Wife" introduces.

In "The Waiter's Wife," Smith offers a brief glimpse into the lives of two couples living in Willesden, North London: Samad and Alsana Iqbal, and Archie and Clara Jones. Alsana is a Bangladeshi woman married to Samad, who works as a waiter in an Indian restaurant, and Clara is a Jamaican woman married to Archie the

[1] While I acknowledge that Marxism is a typically patriarchal political theory, I use it here as a method to understand how the current economic structures prevent women from gaining material wealth equal to that of the male population.

Englishman, a dynamic that mirrors that of Smith's parents. Samad and Archie fought together in the second World War and, when Samad moves to England with his wife, the two pick up their friendship easily, leaving their wives in forced proximity. At first, the friendship between Clara and Alsana is of convenience, but, given time, the women develop a bond free from the influence of their husbands.

Rather than building their relationship in the typical domestic domain of women, Clara and Alsana break into the public. The private and the public domains traditionally correspond with the two sexes: Western society has often classified the private as belonging to women with the domestic, while the public has belonged to men with matters of business and politics (Kerber 11). Zadie Smith subverts these tropes as her stories deal with private matters taking place in public spaces between men and women alike. From the first meeting of the women, Clara breaches the boundaries of the public and the private as she is "wearing red shorts of a shortness that Alsana had never imagined possible, even in this country" (Smith 1235). While I acknowledge that Clara's body is her own to cover or reveal, Alsana's reaction shows that, for her, the length of Clara's legs is private, and it is unusual for them to be shown in such a public space as an airport. Yet Clara chooses to display that which is private in public, claiming ownership of her limbs with a garment she sewed herself. Furthermore, Alsana notes the shorts are quite short, "even in this country" (Smith 1235). Thus, Clara can be seen to represent England while Alsana represents Bangladesh. The women then uneasily hover beside each other, watching their husbands greet each other enthusiastically, leaving their wives to converse awkwardly. Samad and Archie's utter disregard for their wives' discomfort is a telling display of how distant the spouses are. This marital distance underscores Alsana and Clara's need for true companionship which is not found in their marriages. Therefore, this awkward meeting is one of the last moments of loneliness before Clara and Alsana's friendship begins in earnest, and with it, the evolution of their cultural and personal identities as their influence over one another begins. It is a moment of transition for the two women. Once they leave the airport, they will have a chance to rewrite their stories through their friendship.

It is notable that this transition takes place in an airport, itself a place of public transition, a liminal space between arrival and departure, inhabited only during a time of travel. The clash of the public and private mirrors the liminality of the physical space and begins the evolution of self the women trigger for each other. According to Homi Bhabha, "these 'in-between spaces' provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration". Bhabha describes the intersection between the "subject positions—of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation" as these "in-between spaces" in which identity is navigated, but I argue that Smith creates material spaces in her story in which Alsana and Clara negotiate their identities through Smith's subversion of the public and the private (765).

In one scene in the short story, Alsana abandons the private space after a row with her husband. She is angry about their financial circumstances, angry about the fact that they moved to the United States without money, and angry that she is pregnant without financial security. After Samad comes home without a promised raise and criticizes her penchant for purchasing British food stuff like "prepared meals, yogurts, and tinned spaghetti," Alsana rips off all her clothing with the "small mound of her pregnancy in full view" and leaves the house wrapped only in a coat, leaving Samad standing in the kitchen (Smith 1243).

In this moment, Alsana and Samad have traded roles. Samad, the husband, is standing alone in the kitchen in front of a pile of frozen meats while Alsana is striding down the street. She has left her husband in the small, cramped space of their kitchen in their house, and she walks free in the open air. Alsana has created her own space as she storms from her home towards her niece's workplace. As a naked pregnant woman fresh from a domestic battle, she carries with her the intimacy of the private, yet she is clearly exposed to the public while being covered in just her coat. This creation of an in-between space mirrors the space created by all pregnant women. As the body expands, forging a physical space for the child inside, a similar hybrid space forms around the mother. The creation of life and of birth is a highly private matter, yet pregnancy makes the woman inherently public property in the eyes of society. Strangers feel emboldened to touch a mother's pregnant belly and to inquire after the due date and expected sex of the child. Pregnancy itself exists on the border between public and private as Alsana herself does, walking naked yet covered in the park.

As she walks, Alsana considers the park and her "deep-seated belief that living near green spaces was morally beneficial to the young" (Smith 1243). The remark sets up a public park as a type of nursery to children, a place where morality is taught and childhood is golden, subverting multiple expectations surrounding an English park; Alsana is Bangladeshi, and so too are her children. The eyes of the public watching her march up the street other her as a "tiny Indian woman," yet she rejects this othering as she knows she is from "a respected old Bengal family and [has] read her English history" (Smith 1243). Her confidence in the green space of England, "a park without fences," asserts her right to be there, despite any murmurings of the Brits about her ethnicity. Furthermore, the rearing of children is typically a private affair, but insisting upon the value of their nurturing in a public space makes it a public matter where the control still lies in Alsana's hands.

Smith uses Alsana to undercut patriarchal Western expectations of East Asian women. Before Samad delivers the news of his failed pay raise, he thinks of his wife and how he "assumed a woman so young would be easy. But Alsana was not…It was, he supposed, the way with young women these days" (Smith 1242). It is Samad's questioning of Alsana, his criticism of her lack of traditional domestic activity, that drives her from the house, naked. While he himself is equally othered in Britain—working at a restaurant where white tourists mispronounce names of dishes and the walls are covered with the "atrocious wallpaper" expected of a British Indian restaurant—he has been indoctrinated into the patriarchal expectations for women. Chris Weedon asserts that "patriarchal power structures cut across the colonizer/colonized divide," consequently separating Alsana from her husband despite their shared homeland. These patriarchal expectations constrain Alsana within her own home, and instead of submitting, Alsana charges into the public space of the country of those expectations and carves out a space for herself, creating her own intimate narrative by covering her nudity with a "long sensible coat," but existing in her own personal state of rebellion (Smith 1244).

The bulk of Smith's story takes place during an outing for Clara, Alsana, and Neena, Alsana's niece who is two years younger. The three women sit on a bench in Kilburn Park. Clara and Alsana both are heavily pregnant. During their lunch on the bench, the women discuss the naming of their children, the roles of the husband and wife in a marriage, and abortion. They air out these deeply personal matters, commenting on the plans of the others unhesitatingly with Alsana criticizing *Irie* as a potential name for Clara's daughter. Her issue with the name comes from the patois meaning of "OK, cool, peaceful" which seems tacky to Alsana, and she encourages Clara to go with the name Archie likes, "Sarah" (Smith 1245). Through this suggestion, Smith shows Alsana's inoculation via the Western patriarchal mindset of submission for peace. Like Samad, the remnants from Britain's colonization of Southeast Asia have shaped her perspective of gender roles. Yet after some teasing by Neena, Alsana displays that she is very much aware of the truth of the dynamics in the relationship, exclaiming that she liked her husband more when she knew him less (Smith 1246). Smith shows how Alsana understands how she must navigate her own identity within a suffocating marriage.

The importance of the communication they have with one another cannot be underestimated. It is through conversation with each other in these public spaces that they renegotiate their own identities as migrant wives and mothers. After Alsana walks out on her husband in her coat, she goes to Neena, ostensibly to pick up Samad's shoes, but there she is reminded that she is not alone. Lourdes López-Ropero explains how the "relationships between women in Smith's works emerge as important […] plots, adding that the different forms of female bonding, characterized by being supportive and nurturing are related to 'mother-daughter affiliation'" (28). In reference to another work by Smith, López-Ropero argues that the "exploration of feminine identity…[must take place] in relation to other women" (127). For Clara and Alsana, their relationship with each other is almost more formative than their relationship with their husbands, for while they are economically dependent on their husbands as young pregnant wives, in this moment, Alsana takes the role of the provider, acting almost as a surrogate mother as she passes out homemade food, encouraging Clara to "[s]tuff [herself] silly!" for the growth of Clara's baby (Smith 1244). Neena doesn't have a husband to depend on financially, providing for herself instead by working at an old-fashioned cobbler's shop; interestingly, during the conversation between the three women, Neena acts as the radically British representative. She laughs at her aunt's prudery, suggests abortion since her aunt is having sons, mocks Alsana's distant relationship with her husband, and attempts to

"rid Clara of her 'false consciousness'" (Smith 1247). During the bench conversation, each of the women has her own indivisudal role to fill. Neena is the radical, Alsana is the conservative, and Clara is torn in the middle. Yet none of them dominate the conversation or refuse to consider the points of the others. Neena apologizes to Alsana for her harsh words, and Alsana reconsiders her point, admitting that "[Neena] maybe right about Samad…about many things…" (1248).

These women cannot find their identities within their ethnicity in Britain but must search within themselves and their relationships with other people. The hybridity of cultures that is Britain in the postcolonial age is shown clearly through the ethnicities of Smith's characters in the park scene. Neena and Alsana are Bangladeshi, Clara is Jamaican with an English-Jamaican child in her belly, and Sol Jozefowicz—the park keeper who briefly converses with the women—is Jewish and Eastern European. Neena has accepted the Western feminist perspective of men and marriage, while Clara struggles between what she knew and what she is coming to know; thus, the individual women are "multicultural due to the cultural influences (and biological heritages) that are at play in contemporary Britain" (Bentley 53). Britain is a contradictory combination of cultures. Neena has become almost wholly British, while Alsana feels out of place in the British world, not belonging to its culture. Bhabha deems this "estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" as "unhomeliness" and argues that the "'unhomely' [cannot] be easily accommodated in that familiar division of the social life in the private and public spheres" (772). It is this unease that I suggest Smith uses to frame the women's search for identity, blurring the lines between the topics and the conversations that take place in the public and the private domains.

Smith's choice to center the United Kingdom, and more specifically England, for this conversation emphasizes the influence of colonized versus colonizing nationalities. England was the foremost colonizing power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, leaving its indelible mark on Southeast Asia and countries such as Jamaica alike. With such a globalized world, there are few strict boundaries between culture, and the fabric of individual countries often struggles to maintain a solid national identity with Alsana and Clara. Louise Bennet, a Jamaican poet, suggests that the immigration of colonized peoples to Great Britain is a "willful and aggressive act" with her poem "Colonization in Reverse" (Dawson 3). The cities that once held the people who scorned the Jamaican, Bangladeshi, and Indian peoples now hold those very peoples, bursting with artists and workers who revitalize the country that sought to control them. As Alsana and Clara seek to discover their identities in Britain, so too does Britain seek to understand its national identity with the influx of colonialized peoples and its "long history of imperialism and racism" (6).

Thus, Smith's work examines the negotiation of identity for women in the changing modern world. Women are demanding space, leaving the home and the domestic workplace to forge new paths for themselves and the women in their lives. Smith's literature explores those women who create a significant portion of the population of the United Kingdom and how the cultural impact of migrant women continues to grow. Alsana and Clara struggle to understand who they are in a fast-changing world with strong influences such as Neena pulling against their long-understood cultures and traditions. Their appropriation of public spaces with their personal matters creates a space of in-between in which they can understand their own consciousness, mirroring the in-between state of the women themselves hovering on the boundary of cultural standards, working to understand their own place in Britain and the world.

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