

*On Beauty*

Zadie Smith

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The Penguin Press, New York.

Reviewed by Laila Amine, Indiana University

Black British writers such as Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi, and Bernadine Evaristo propose through their novels a reexamination of citizenship, race and plural nationalism. Smith's latest novel, *On Beauty*, addresses a similar theme but falls considerably short of the accomplishment of her great debut. The discussion of identity politics is central in Black British literature, and Zadie Smith's widely acclaimed first novel, *White Teeth*, is an insightful and balanced exploration of assimilation, cultural differences, and diverse representation. Part of its appeal is the fresh and humorous way it deals with race relations in Britain through the long friendship of an unsophisticated British man and a conservative Indian man. As the two journey through World War II, marriage, and parenthood, their friendship transcends not only their different cultural, racial and religious heritages but also their unequal status as British citizens. Smith revisits loaded historical moments to expose "the effects of racism both in its relationship with nationalism and in relation to the nationalist historiography" (Gilroy 63). Her second novel *The Autograph Man* (2002), a slower, more somber text, portrays Alex Li-Tandem, a young Jewish man who has been raised to worship TV shows, and now collects autographs of famous people for a living. Smith continues to present a multicultural London, but the focus this time is on the deification of celebrities and its detrimental impact on youth. The author suggests that fame becomes "the opium of the people" which corrupts human relationships.

With her latest novel, *On Beauty* (2005), Smith continues to explore the gap between the family to which one belongs and the home (a metaphor for culture and values) with which one identifies. Frank Rich, in his *New York Times* review, calls it a "rare comic novel about the divisive cultural politics of the new century likely to amuse readers on the right as much as those on the left." Indeed, "liberal" professor, Howard Belsey (a 57-year-old white British man living close to Boston), and "conservative" visiting lecturer Montague Kipps (a black Trinidadian living in London), are both depicted as arrogant and selfish, and stand out as gate-keepers of values for their respective families. Their wives, although different in personality, are rather similar in their sacrifice to husband and family.

In fact, Smith's female characters are least developed in this novel, and this weakness of characterization relegates them to archetypes whose

only purpose is to shed light on their husbands' complex personalities. The novel stages a conflict between Mr. Kipps, a Humanities visiting scholar to an American elite campus who advocates for the withdrawal of "liberal" from Liberal Arts (a "stand in" for David Horowitz) and Mr. Belsey, an Art Historian, who teaches his students "to imagine prettiness as the mask that power wears, to recast Aesthetics as a rarefied language of exclusion" (155). Smith intimates that despite the ideological dispute between these two scholars, both their work and teaching mirror a similar rigid view of life, which their actions inevitably cannot uphold.

In this medley of personalities and political stands, the element that ties these two men, two families, and much of the plot structure together is the characters' desire for beauty. Inspired by Elaine Scarry's lecture "On beauty and being just," the author seeks to develop a network of character relations which all evolve around perception and desire. Howard explains to his wife that his infidelity with Professor Claire Malcolm was "a man's response to beauty" (207). Later, Howard desires Victoria and in the process reifies her to a "work of art" which reflects light, shadows, colors and shapes, "a dangerous commodity" (156-7). Howard's infatuation with Victoria's looks is paralleled by his daughter Zora's infatuation with Carl, a young talented poet/rapper invited to audit Zora's poetry class although he cannot afford college. For the middleclass liberals such as Zora, Professor Claire Malcolm, and Levi, the disadvantaged individuals like Carl, Chantelle, and Felix serve as fetish objects that fulfill their avidity for "accounts of ghetto life" (215). Yet while Smith's objects of fascination are explicitly "black" and desired by a white or mixed-race middle class, this issue of racial commodification is muffled. The repeated mentions of the presence of Haitian cleaners, waiters, and later strikers that run through the text remain a mere backdrop, a sort of "couleur locale."

Maybe the failure to integrate meaningfully different subplots is a result of Smith's endeavor to do too much. Also in conversation with E.M. Forster's *Howards End*, *On Beauty* opens on the announcement of a short-lived engagement between members of quite different families followed immediately by an awkward break-up. Jerome, the son of Howard, feels more at home at Montague Kipps' London-based family house, where he falls in love with their incredibly beautiful daughter, Victoria. But Smith's novel relies overly on a long set of coincidences: Jerome finds an internship in London where he is supervised by his father's worse enemy Mr. Kipps who then invites him to live with his family. Later on, the Kipps family moves to the United States, right into the Belseys' neighborhood in "Wellington," near Boston. Mr. Monty Kipps is invited to lecture in the university where Howard Belsey teaches, while his wife inexplicably strikes a friendship with Howard's wife, Kiki. When Mrs. Kipps dies of cancer (the reader does not feel sorry since there is no time to get attached to her character), the Belseys happen to be visiting friends in London, and are able to attend the funeral where the climax of the novel happens.

The reliance on coincidence to patch the plot together demonstrates a rushed and artificially constructed edifice, with a lack of character development. The subplot of the Belsey offsprings' coming of age develops unevenly and leaves the reader with characters too quickly drawn, nearly caricatures. Among them, Howard's gullible religious son, Jerome, is impressed by the Kipps family's values: namely their religious devotion, their seeming unity and harmony made possible by Monty's home-bound wife, Carlene, "a kind of angel" who "floats above" her family (4). Levi, the youngest son, also rejects his middle-class parents' home, and is a ghetto "wannabe," who romanticizes Roxbury, the nearby black neighborhood. This ghetto is for Levi, an "authentic" black America, even though he will never have to share its acute destitution. Finally, Howard's daughter, the self-centered Zora, is an overly ambitious girl who uses her father's position in the university to advance her own goals (111).

Joan Acocella in her review of *On Beauty* in the *New Yorker* claims that Zadie Smith, coming from an "ethnic stew, can talk about that world without self-consciousness and without seeming racist." I would argue that Smith's background does not guarantee that her work will not fall into an essentialist representation of blackness, and in fact, it does. The text suffers from an irreconcilable tension as it simultaneously discloses the subservient position of blacks in the United States, the fetishization of the black body, while it reaffirms stereotypes of blackness. The reader might notice Kiki's clownishness, Carl's and Levi's street gear and unpersuasive speech, and clearly the oversexual portrayal of black characters,<sup>1</sup> but what seems most improbable is their lack of humanity and individuality. Indeed, they represent familiar racist types in the American imagination: Kiki shares the traits of the forgiving, nurturing mammy, Levi aspires to be a thug, Erskine is an anachronistic black activist, and Carl and Chantal are representatives of the ghetto (the rapper and the oversexed). Unlike other novels which focus on mixed race marriages and cultural differences and reuse stereotypes on blackness (or other minority group) to better discredit them, Smith's latest novel seems to suggest that to a large extent, African Americans perpetuate these stereotypes and make them real. It is surprising that only a few years ago in *White Teeth*, Smith constructed multifaceted characters from minority groups in London, only to produce now disappointingly narrow depictions of African-Americans in the United States.

#### Works Cited

Gilroy, Paul. *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. New York: Serpent Tail, 1993.

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<sup>1</sup> The novel mentions that Levi's room reeks of sperm, Victoria sleeps with both Jerome and his dad and possibly Carl as well, sends pornographic pictures of herself via the internet, Kipps cheats on his wife with a student, Carl slept with his geography teacher in high school, and Erskine is portrayed as a vulgar womanizer.

Smith, Zadie. *On Beauty*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2005.  
—. *White Teeth*. London: Penguin, 2001