

# Impediments of Hyphenated Identity in Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*

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## Abstract

Zadie Smith is a reputed young British writer famous for her novels, essays and short stories. *The Autograph Man* (2002) the second novel by Zadie Smith has established a fantastic Universal outstriks in North West London, which is ridiculously known as Mountjoy. It is a version of loss, delusion, mixed-race and won that 2003 Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize for fiction. *The Autograph Man* is a sentimental novel than any other works of Zadie Smith. The character Alex, a Chinese-Jewish-British hero resembles a Jewish and a Chinese in his eyes and relatively British belonging and not associated to any humanity or culture as a whole. This novel confronts barriers of identity escalating between Jewish, British and Chinese identities. It is investigated as the course to an exalted sense of self-knowledge and valued in an affirmative tone. Alex will consistently have his Chinese eyes, but not a kitty Alexander Obsession. He used to follow Jewish rituals when it is necessary but not assuming in them. On the basis of Smith's humorous consequence the text portrays a specific sentiment towards the future and not giving a solution for approaching cultural riots

**Keywords :** Chinese – Jewish – British identities, Hyphenated identities, Multiculturalism.

Richard Lane in *Contemporary British Fiction, Cambridge* : polity," maintains that hybridity is not simply an issue of migration, but of plural cultural identities (143). Global culture in Britain leads to questioning geography, community and identity within the opportunity of what is Britishness.

The Contemporary Writer Zadie Smith of Jamaican and English origin, dares to depict the cultural hybridity in *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man* by approaching the threefold traditions of a Chinese - Jewish - British hero.

Being a mixed cultural writer, Zadie Smith roles an extraordinary topic, the Chinese - Jewish -British experience, ironically in *The Autograph Man*. Smith's concentration on a topic is more hyphenated than her own cultural environment. She introduces African -American -

Jewish- British characters in her novels as one should point out that alternately of requirement. Smith's threefold cultural experience seems to dispel a disunited cultural construction.

Smith's problematic structure interpret Alex - Li - Tandem who has a Chinese - British father, Li - Jin and a Jewish- British mother Sarah . Alex- Li's identity proposes Chinese and English hyphenated name titled to a hyphenated identity. The aim of this paper is to propose Smith's hero Alex – Li with hyphenated identity ,struggles to survive the crisis between multiple cultures.

Alex was twelve years old when his father dies of brain tumor at the age of thirty six. After fifteen years Alex – Li becomes a successful autograph trader. He was using drugs periodically, having a girl friend and troubled with the idea of attaining kitty Alexander's autograph . Kitty Alexander is not a celebrity but a bygone star who acted as Chinese girl in 1940's film, “ The Girl from Peking “. Alex – Li, his mother Sarah and his Jewish friend utter Kaddish prayer for his dead father. Alex succeeds in meeting kitty Alexander and he becomes familiar with kitty. He flies to New York and then he goes to Mountjoy to sell kitty's autograph and get profit from it. On his arrival to London he saw the death news of kitty in the newspaper. Finally Alex leaves for NewYork to recite kaddish for his dead father Li – Jin.

The absence of delegate Chinese culture and identity, exclude Li- Jin who dies when he was very young, it constitute a dominant crisis point in Alex's identity ,as his philosophy of Chinese part of his identity is ignored. Still, ironically religious rivalry is expressed in Li- Jin's delayed death ceremony. In addition to that the conflict has been continued for fifteen years and so it leads the major conflict for the story and Alex 's identity crisis. His nursery Jewish friends hinted him into performing it .So Caddish inclined the signifier of Alex Jewishness and his reluctance and avoidance of consequiting it, forms the confusion that emerge because of his hyphenated identity

A collusion of race, gender and class is a hard experience to acknowledge . It crests a discriminated treatment and has reasons to become more concious of their “hyphenated identity”. It paves way to negotiate the negative experiences they had gone through years. Joseph Klein in particular, hailed from a European Jewish family and at the same time Alex becomes a qualified skillful autograph man .Joseph goes on dealing with the autograph business at amusement art. Joseph always suggest's Alex the integrity of the autograph business. Joseph avoids Alex from the stereotypical qualities of the "Jew" . In social life, Alex exposes stereotypical characters when he convinces Kitty Alexander to dispose her personal articles. The typical ways of the notion of counterfeit and real autographs signifies Alex -Li's forged and real identity considering with in the Jewish society.

Who would ever choose this life? Alex stepped out into the centre of town. In the curved black glass of superior clothes store he dropped his shoulders, placed his hands by his sides, itemized himself. No love, no transportation, no ambitions, no faith, no community, no expectation of forgiveness or reward, one bag, one thermos, one acid hangover, one alcohol hangover, one kitty. Alexander autograph, in pristine condition,

written in dark ink, centrally placed on a postcard, Look at this, If this is a man, Look at him. Never have I been more perfectly Jewish... (119).

Despite of his Far - Eastern uniqueness Alex- Li never feels discouraged about people's pun made by some of his innocent friends who cannot differentiate Chinese from Japanese and who do not know that she is partially Chinese as "Oriental ". Alex- Li's Far- Eastern appearance which shows vital part in Alex- Li's Chinese half of identity. It signifies as a crucial: matter he is not like "the sporty ,red - cheeked boys of some god forsaken distant era (3) .His point of view determines his confrontation with his Chinese identity just like his identity at a fanatic attack . Lovelear points out to this matter.

I'll tell you and I don't want you to take offence. The truth is, it's like, oh, I just had some Sushi.... I'm like this Jap businessman loser asshole and I haven't ever seen *High Soon*. I'm like this little yellow nip who can't ever pronounce, Cooper's name. No offence.

I'm Chinese.

'Right no offence meant'.

'None taken Lovelear, because I'm Chinese.

'Right, no offence, (107...

Hyphenated or compounded identity is compatible with hybridity which would enrich rather than weaken a character. Yet Alex is in a constant state of flux which he finds difficult to prioritized over the second culture and third culture .

Alex is in a position to handle his Chinese identity and Jewish identity. His Jewish identity is as sensitive as the Chinese in certain occasions where he tangles to manage himself . Alex has a number of girl friends :Adam's sister, Esther, his Chinese neighbour Anita and Boot the English girl .He started writing letter to them when he was fourteen, but not reciprocal. Smith portrays the metropolitan New York, with its coffee shops, hotels and yellow cabs, stereotype as in the movies, still mentioning multiculturalism and the newcomer parts of many people bringing, similarity between London and New York. Alex- Li sees kitty in New York, also seeking for his true self in addition to multicultural society.

Away from his fascination with Kitty ,Esther is the second influential woman in Alex- Li's life, though they have many break ups .Alex's intimate friend Adam's sister plays a significant part in Alex's life than Adam. Unlike Adam ,Esther dominate to neutralize her black and Jewish identities by living black in culture and Jewish in religion .The importance of the love between Alex and Esther is in Esther's selecting Alex as her soulmate. Alex does not understand the sense of the formality that as a Jewish man ,he should respect his father. Alex does not determine the crisis he is going through, it is acknowledged that Alex- Li copied his Chinese identity as her never experienced himself. When Adam analyse Alex's signature with Li- Jin's , Adam sees the relationship which turns out as a allegory for the logic of Alex's identity crisis.

Li - Jin's death guides Alex to follow his father's habits .He considered it as the part of Li- Jin's Chinese culture.The emptiness of additional Chinese drawbacks his intelligence related to

Chinese culture .Alex though resembles his father's identity, using mimicry tries to constitute his own Chinese identity and a Chinese oneness is standardized in his own personality. Since his uniqueness is ignored and created as a stereotype, he could not consolidate the Chinese and Jewish identities.

It must be noted that Smith requires in *The Autograph Man* is Jewish and Chinese traditions of which the Jewish traditions have importance, they are the key points of the Jewish identity. Smith may be purposely signifying the territory of the Western world, excluding the Non- Western traditions and fundamentals of cultural life and interpretation. However the novel examines fully the association with English society. Smith inscribes the prayer in English with ridiculous intersections , concluding with Alex's confusion.

This novel confronts barriers of identity exalating between Jewish, British and Chinese identity. It is considered as the course to an exalted sense of self - knowledge and valued in a universal world .Alex used to follow Jewish rituals when it is necessary but not believing in them on the basis of Smith's humorous consequence the text portrays a specific sentiment towards the future and not giving a solution for approaching cultural riots. Hence, Smith suggests that there is absolutely a cultural identity in hyphenated Britishness. This kind of identity will be forcing England to reconsider its own impression of national identity in globalised cultural environment.

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