

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY THROUGH REPRESENTATION AND SOCIAL RELATION IN ZADIE SMITH'S SWING TIME NOVEL

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Abstract

This study discusses how identity is constructed through representation and social relations in Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* (2016), focusing on issues of race, social class, friendship, and personal ambition. This study uses Stuart Hall's theory of representation and identity, which views identity not as something fixed or essential, but as a process that is continuously shaped and negotiated through practices of representation and social relations. The research method used is descriptive qualitative with a literary text analysis approach, through close reading of the narrative, relationships between characters, and social patterns that are repeated in the novel. The results of the analysis show that identity in *Swing Time* is shaped through unequal power relations, particularly in the context of friendship, class structure, and the racial experiences of the characters. This novel represents identity as the result of difference, visibility, and marginalization, rather than as a purely individual choice. Furthermore, personal ambition is depicted as being greatly influenced by social structures that limit access to recognition and social mobility. This study concludes that *Swing Time* functions as a cultural text that critiques the formation of identity in contemporary society through the lens of representation and power relations.

Keywords: identity, representation, social relation, race, class.

Introduction

Literature can no longer be viewed merely as a static aesthetic artifact, but must be understood as a dynamic cultural practice. As an integral part of culture, literature functions as a space where values, norms, and social anxieties are produced and negotiated. According to Wiyatmi (2020) in the study of the sociology of literature, literary texts serve as social documents that represent the dynamics of community life, including power relations and social class changes. In this context, the author acts as a cultural subject who captures the surrounding

phenomena and transforms them into a narrative form that allows readers to reflect on their own reality.

As a medium for the representation of meaning, literature has the ability to construct identity and give a voice to certain groups. Meaning in literature does not emerge naturally; rather, it occurs through a process of representation that often involves identity politics. Research by Mubarok & Sani (2021) in *Jurnal Poetika* shows that contemporary novels today have become an arena for the contestation of meaning regarding religion, ethnicity, and gender. Literature does not only reflect who we are but also shapes perceptions of how those identities should be understood in the public sphere. Through the use of symbols and metaphors, literary works are able to challenge old stereotypes and offer new perspectives on cultural diversity.

Entering the contemporary era, cultural practices in literature have undergone a significant shift alongside massive digitalization. Literature is no longer limited to print media; it has migrated to a more democratic cyberspace. Nurhidayah & Setiawan (2019), in his study on cyber-literature, emphasizes that digital media has changed the way meaning is produced; now, readers are not just passive consumers, but active participants who help shape the meaning of the text through interaction on digital platforms. This transformation proves that literature as a cultural practice continues to adapt to technological developments, while simultaneously maintaining its function as a primary medium for representing the complexity of human meaning amidst the flow of changing times.

In the map of contemporary literature, identity is no longer understood as a rigid genealogical heritage, but rather as a construction that is constantly changing through social interaction. Literature becomes the primary medium for exploring "hybrid identities," where characters in narratives often exist between two or more cultures as a result of migration and globalization. According to Budianta (2007) study on the dynamics of literature in Southeast Asia, literary works today tend to shed the grand narratives of nationalism and focus more on micro-identities, such as an individual's struggle to maintain local values amidst the current of modernity. This cultural practice in writing demonstrates that literature is a navigational tool for modern humans to understand their position within an increasingly complex and borderless social structure.

The social relations depicted in contemporary literature have also undergone a shift, moving from traditional hierarchical relationships toward relations that are more equal yet vulnerable to conflicts of interest. Literature frequently raises the issue of "the other" (the *liyan*), where racial, class, and gender prejudices become barriers to social communication. Research by Suryadi & Kurniawan (2022) in their sociological analysis of contemporary literature emphasizes that literary texts function as a critique of the social segregation

occurring in the real world. Through dialogue between characters from different backgrounds, literature attempts to offer models for conflict resolution and empathy that transcend primordial identity boundaries, making the text a social simulation for its readers.

Finally, the presence of digital media has given birth to a new form of social relation called “cyber-sociality,” which has now become a central theme in many recent works of fiction. The meaning of identity in digital literature is often linked to anonymity and performativity on social media. Nugraha (2023), in his article on the development of digital prose, states that contemporary literature now records how technology changes the way humans relate to one another, creating a simultaneous sense of connectedness and alienation. This phenomenon proves that literature remains the sharpest medium for representing meaning in capturing the essence of humanity, where identity and social relations are constantly renegotiated in line with the times.

Race and class function as cultural apparatuses used to map human hierarchies within social structures. In contemporary literature, both concepts are understood as the results of discursive constructions that are continuously reproduced by social institutions. According to Hall (2017) study on racial cultural theory, race is not a biological fact, but rather a “floating signifier” whose meaning is determined by historical and political contexts. Literature uses narrative to demonstrate how racial labels are attached to individuals to legitimize marginalization. Through the depiction of characters trapped in racial prejudice, literary authors dismantle the notion that racial identity is often a projection of the collective fears or desires of a dominant group toward another.

In line with the issue of race, social class in literature is represented not only through material possession but also through “cultural capital” such as language style, taste, and education. Contemporary literature frequently highlights how class is constructed through everyday performances that distinguish between elite and marginalized groups. Tyler (2020), in her study on class stigma and cultural inequality, states that class is a process of “class-making” carried out through social stigma. In many recent novels, we see how characters attempt social mobility but remain hindered by unwritten cultural codes. Literature becomes a highly effective medium to show that poverty or wealth is not merely a figure in a bank account, but a culturally constructed worldview.

The intersection of race and class creates a deeper complexity of meaning, where an individual may experience double oppression due to both their racial position and economic status. Cultural practices in contemporary literature attempt to deconstruct these formations by presenting narratives that re-humanize those who are marginalized. References from Modood (2023) in the journal *Ethnicities* emphasize the importance of viewing identity through the lens of “political multiculturalism,” which acknowledges that race and class are

results of constantly shifting cultural negotiations. Thus, literature does not only represent reality but also functions as a cultural laboratory to reformulate more just social relations, where race and class are no longer permanent barriers to human dignity.

In the perspective of cultural studies, *Swing Time* is relevant due to its ability to map how racial identity and social class are intertwined in determining the course of one's life. This novel illustrates that artistic talent is insufficient to guarantee vertical mobility if it is not supported by cultural capital and social access. According to Kovala (2021) analysis in the study of contemporary sociology of literature, Smith's narrative shows that "time" and "rhythm" in *Swing Time* are not merely musical elements, but metaphors for those living in the diaspora; those who always feel "out of sync" with Western cultural dominance. Through the unnamed narrator, Smith represents the voice of the Black working class that is often erased by illusory neoliberal success narratives.

Another relevance of *Swing Time* lies in its critique of "celebrity philanthropy" and cultural neocolonialism in Africa. The novel deconstructs how the meaning of international aid often becomes a narcissistic form of self-identity representation for Western society, without truly understanding local cultural practices. Research by Saini (2022), which dissects the diaspora narrative in Zadie Smith's work, asserts that this novel challenges the Western perspective of poverty in Africa as merely a backdrop for the character growth of white figures. This makes *Swing Time* an essential text in decolonization studies, as it demonstrates how class and race remain tangible boundaries even in a world claimed to be globalized.

Although research on racial identity and class in contemporary literature has been extensive, there is a research gap regarding the aspects of digital intersectionality and the commodification of suffering in works such as *Swing Time*. Most prior studies focused more on the search for physical identity and the historical roots of the diaspora. However, there is still limited research that deeply dissects how "cyberspace" and the "global philanthropy industry" currently create new forms of class construction that alienate Black women from their original communities.

Furthermore, there is a need to examine how bodily performance (such as dance in *Swing Time*) is no longer merely a matter of cultural preservation but has become a global market commodity that often obscures the original meaning of racial resistance itself. Further research is required to see whether contemporary literature truly provides space for "authentic voices" or if it is instead trapped within the standardization of "trauma" narratives demanded by the international book market. Taylor (2022), in "The Commodity of Care: Neoliberalism and Black Female Identity in Contemporary Prose," highlights how Black female identity is often "sold" as a trauma narrative within the creative

industry, a point that is rarely addressed in traditional literary criticism. Therefore, this study presents the following research questions, how is identity constructed through representation and social relations, particularly race, social class, friendship, and personal ambition, in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*?

Literature Review

Swing Time has been researched and analyzed in depth by several previous researchers. Previous studies generally place this novel as a text that represents issues of identity, race, gender, and social inequality in the context of contemporary multicultural society. These previous researches have made important contributions to understanding the position of this novel as a literary work that is laden with issues of identity and social relations. However, most previous research tends to focus on identity as a relatively fixed category or as the individual experience of the characters, without examining in depth the process of identity formation through everyday social relations. Aspects such as friendship and personal ambition are often treated as supporting narrative elements.

A relevant research study was conducted by Xiong Li (2020), who analyzed *Swing Time* with a focus on the issue of identity crisis in the context of a multicultural society. This study discusses how the experiences of the diaspora, family relationships, and the social background of the characters influence the formation of their identities. Li emphasizes that identity in *Swing Time* is often marked by tension between the desire to assimilate and attachment to one's cultural background. Although this study provides a comprehensive understanding of issues of identity and race in the novel, the discussion of friendships and personal ambitions is still limited. Friendships between characters are treated more as narrative background rather than as an arena of power relations that help shape identity. In addition, identity tends to be understood as a state of crisis rather than as a process of representation that is continuously negotiated through everyday social relations.

Another research was conducted by Romina G. Muse (2022), who examined *Swing Time* from the perspective of female identity in a postcolonial context. Muse highlighted the experiences of gender, memory, and the inner journey of female characters in facing social and cultural pressures. This research positions identity as the result of historical and emotional experiences, especially in relation to diaspora and gender relations. The main contribution of this research is that it reads identity as a subjective experience influenced by social and cultural backgrounds. However, the study doesn't specifically discuss how identity is represented through concrete social relationships such as friendship and personal ambition. Furthermore, the theoretical framework used focuses more on a postcolonial approach, so that the aspect of identity representation as a

cultural process, as formulated by Stuart Hall, has not been the main focus of analysis.

Based on the two previous researches, it can be concluded that there are many researches on *Swing Time* that discuss issues of identity, race, and gender from various perspectives. However, there is still limited research that specifically places friendship and personal ambition as an integral part of the identity formation process. Furthermore, Stuart Hall's approach to representation and identity within the framework of cultural studies has not been optimally utilized to interpret the dynamics of social relations in this novel. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing how identity is constructed through representation and social relations in *Swing Time*.

Literary works, such as novels, are not only used as reading media or evaluated aesthetically, but also as a space for the representation and negotiation of social and cultural identities. Cultural identity in literary works is constructed through characters, settings, and intercultural conflicts that reflect the social experiences of global communities. Literature, in this case, is understood as a dialogical space where identity is not fixed, but rather continuously reconstructed through interactions between the text and the reader (Lestari, 2025). Thus, it can be concluded that the representation of identity in literary works is closely related to the social context and cultural experiences of the reader.

According to Semiyeva (2025), literary works serve as a mirror of culture that not only reflects the collective identity of a society but also shapes the way society understands itself. Through symbols, narratives, and story structures, literature presents cultural identity constructions that are influenced by history, social values, and power dynamics. Thus, identity in literary works is understood as the result of an evolving social construction, not as an essential or natural entity. Literary works are often used to construct boundaries between "self" and "other," revealing how identity is constructed through social relations, cultural differences, and dominant discourses. Thus, literary studies contribute significantly to understanding how identity is represented, debated, and negotiated in society.

Cultural studies place literature as a cultural practice that does not stand autonomously, but is closely tied to social relations, history, and power (Barker, 2004; During, 2005). Within this framework, literary works are understood as spaces for the production of meaning that represent certain values, ideologies, and social identities. Cultural studies rejects the view of literature as a neutral reflection of reality, and instead sees literature as a meaning that is produced, debated, and negotiated. Therefore, the cultural studies approach becomes a relevant analytical framework in examining how literary works represent

individual and collective identities in specific social and cultural contexts (Hall, 1997).

One of the key concepts in cultural studies is the theory of representation developed by Stuart Hall. Hall (1997) explains that representation is not merely a process of displaying reality, but rather a constructive practice that shapes the way humans understand the world. Meaning is not natural or fixed, but is produced through language, symbols, and sign systems that operate within culture. In the context of literature, representation is formed and viewed through the characters, plot, dialogue, and setting used in literary works so that they can construct a certain image of identity, social norms, and power relations (Hall, 1996). Thus, literary works not only describe identity, but also help shape the way readers interpret that identity.

According to Hall (1996), identity cannot be understood as something that is merely attached to individuals, rather, identity itself is a process that is constantly being reshaped as social and cultural contexts change. Identity is formed through practices of representation and discourse, and is always in the process of becoming rather than being. In literary works, characters often represent identities that reflect social tensions in society, which are then turned into conflicts in the literary work. This view allows for the analysis of literary works to see identity as the result of interactions between the subject and social, historical, and cultural structures.

The concept of identity as a social construct is also closely related to the representation of race and class in literary works (Barker, 2004; Hall, 1997). Cultural studies views race as a cultural construct that is produced through discourse and social practices. The representation of race in literary works, for example, is often shaped by stereotypes, the process of othering, and power relations that place certain groups as dominant and other groups as subordinate. Similarly, social class is represented through material symbols, lifestyles, language, and work relations that reflect specific social structures. Analysis of the representation of race and class in literature helps to reveal how dominant ideologies work in shaping understandings of social identity.

Therefore, the cultural studies approach, particularly Stuart Hall's theory of representation, provides a strong conceptual framework for analyzing the relationship between literature, identity, and power (Hall, 1997; During, 2005). Through the analysis of representation, literature can be understood as a cultural space that both reshapes and challenges the construction of social identities, including racial, class, and cultural identities. This approach emphasizes that identity in literature is not a passive reflection of social reality, but rather the result of a constantly changing construction that is open to interpretation (Hall, 1996; Barker, 2004).

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach. This approach is considered appropriate as the research focuses on interpreting literary texts, particularly in examining the representation of identity as constructed through narrative, characterization, and discourse in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*. Qualitative research enables an in-depth understanding of social and cultural phenomena embedded in literary works. This approach aligns with Stuart Hall's theory, which views representation as a process through which meaning is produced and exchanged within culture.

The object of this research is the representation of identity, specifically related to race, gender, and cultural identity as portrayed in the novel *Swing Time*. The data sources of this study are divided into two categories: Primary data source, which is the novel *Swing Time* (2016) by Zadie Smith. Secondary data sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journals, and scholarly articles related to Stuart Hall's theory of representation and identity, as well as studies on contemporary literature and Black women's representation.

The data collection technique applied in this study is library research. The researcher conducts close and repeated readings of *Swing Time* to identify textual evidence such as narrations, dialogues, and descriptions that reflect issues of identity and representation. Additionally, relevant theoretical and critical sources are collected to support the analytical framework of the research.

Data analysis is conducted through a qualitative interpretative analysis using Stuart Hall's theory of representation and identity. The analysis follows several steps: Identifying and classifying textual data related to representations of identity in the novel. Interpreting the selected data using Stuart Hall's theoretical framework to examine how identity is constructed, negotiated, and represented in the text. Contextualizing the findings within the broader social and cultural background of the novel. Drawing conclusions based on recurring patterns of identity representation found in *Swing Time*.

Results and Discussion

Representation of Identity

In *Swing Time*, the main character's identity is represented through his life experiences as a teenager, especially in the context of social relations shaped by class and race structures. The narrator describes how friendship circles at school "began to form and harden" based on categories such as skin color, class, money, and neighborhood, as in the quote:

"I, meanwhile, was caught completely unawares by adolescence, still humming Gershwin songs at the back of the classroom as the friendship rings began to form

and harden around me, defined by color, class, money, postcode, nation, music, drugs, politics, sports, aspirations, languages, sexualities . . ." (Smith, 2016:146).

This description shows that identity does not arise naturally from individuals, but is constructed through social systems that classify and differentiate subjects. According to Stuart Hall, this kind of representation confirms that identity is formed through the practice of difference, that is, through social labeling that determines who is included and who is marginalized (Hall, 1996). Thus, the main character's life experience serves as a medium for the representation of identity that has been placed in a certain power relationship from the outset, rather than as a free expression of self.

The representation of identity in this novel also appears through social metaphors that describe exclusion and the instability of the subject's position. The narrator expresses this in the quote:

"In that huge game of musical chairs I turned round one day and found I had no place to sit." (Smith, 2016:146).

This metaphor represents identity as a position in a competitive and unequal social structure, where not all individuals have equal access to recognition and success. Identity, in this context, is not something that is permanently attached, but rather depends on constantly changing social dynamics. This is in line with Stuart Hall's view that identity is not fixed, but is always in the process of formation and shift according to the social and historical context (Hall, 1990). By representing identity as "not getting a seat," *Swing Time* emphasizes that identity is formed through structural relations, not through individual will alone. The most reflective awareness of identity appears in the quote:

"A truth was being revealed to me: that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own. I experienced myself as a kind of shadow." (Smith, 2016:12-13).

The metaphors of light and shadow function as a system of representation that marks the hierarchy of identity, with "light" representing visibility, recognition, and symbolic power, while "shadow" indicates dependence and a peripheral position. This representation shows that the main character's identity is formed through continuous negotiation with the dominant figures in his life. In Stuart Hall's theory, identity is understood as a process of becoming, not as a fixed essence, and is always constructed through representation and power relations (Hall, 1996). Thus, identity as a "shadow" affirms that subjects do not fully control the formation of their identities, but are shaped by social representation systems that determine who can be at the center and who remains on the margins.

Race and Social Class

In cultural studies, the distinction between access and social opportunity often acts as a sharp divider that perpetuates inequality. Although they may appear similar at first glance, both have different dimensions when viewed through the lens of race and social class. The difference between access and social opportunity lies in the availability of pathways (availability) versus the actual ability to utilize them (capability). Access is often structural and formal, such as the existence of educational institutions or healthcare services in a region. However, for individuals from marginalized races or the working class, such access is often illusory due to "hidden costs" and systemic prejudice. According to Mijs (2021) in his study on perceptions of inequality, society is often trapped in the myth of meritocracy, which assumes that as long as access is available, an individual's failure is purely their own fault. In reality, race and class create a "social distance" that prevents physical access from automatically becoming functional access.

On the other hand, social opportunity is more closely related to the possession of cultural capital and social networks that allow an individual to truly advance. Someone may have access to the same university (access), but students from the upper class have far greater social opportunities through family connections, language abilities considered "standard," and financial support for extracurricular activities (cultural capital). References from Hasan & Al-Amin (2022) regarding social stratification emphasize that race exacerbates this inequality of opportunity; racial prejudice in the labor market often closes opportunities for individuals of color even when they possess equivalent educational qualifications. Contemporary literature, as depicted in *Swing Time*, captures this dynamic exquisitely through characters who have access to the same dance education but end up with different destinies due to differences in social opportunities and class backgrounds.

The intersection of race and class creates what is known as a layered "glass ceiling." In cultural practices, this inequality of access and opportunity is often normalized through media narratives and policies that turn a blind eye to individuals' differing starting points. Shapiro (2020), in his analysis of the racial wealth gap, states that class wealth (assets) is the key that transforms access into real opportunity. Without assets and cultural recognition of their racial identity, individuals remain trapped in qualitatively limited access. Therefore, understanding this difference is crucial in cultural studies to see how power structures work not only by prohibiting (exclusion of access) but also by hindering progress (narrowing of opportunity).

Education, employment, and social mobility are three intertwined pillars that determine an individual's position within the social structure. However,

through the lens of race and social class, these three pillars often do not operate neutrally; instead, they become arenas where systemic inequality is reproduced.

Education is frequently regarded as the "primary engine" of social mobility, but in cultural reality, the effectiveness of this engine depends heavily on the student's class and racial background. Individuals from the upper- middle class receive not only formal education but also a "hidden curriculum" in the form of cultural capital, such as social networks and communicative confidence, which are not taught in resource-strapped public schools. According to research by Tholen (2021) on the relationship between education and the labor market, there is a significant gap in how graduates from different class backgrounds navigate their careers. Students from lower classes are often trapped in education that only trains technical skills, while the upper class is trained for leadership roles, thereby making vertical social mobility for marginalized groups highly restricted from the time they are in school.

The transition from education to the world of work also reveals persistent racial barriers, known as "ethnic penalties." Even when an individual possesses equivalent educational qualifications, racial prejudice in recruitment and promotion processes often hinders their progress. Quillian et al. (2020), in their meta-analysis study on employment discrimination, found that racial barriers in the workplace have not changed significantly in recent decades in many developed countries. Employment is not just a matter of technical ability, but also a matter of "cultural fit", a term often used as a guise to exclude those whose race or class lifestyle is deemed inconsistent with the dominant corporate norms. This forces individuals from minority groups to work "twice as hard" to gain the same recognition as their counterparts from dominant groups.

Consequently, social mobility for marginalized racial groups and the lower class is often slow or even stagnant intragenerationally. Mobility is hindered not only by a lack of economic access but also by sociopolitical structures that perpetuate wealth within the same circles. References from Pfeffer & Waitkus (2021) indicate that the intergenerational wealth gap rooted in racial history creates "sticky floors" for the lower classes. Contemporary literature, such as in the narratives of Zadie Smith, often depicts the emotional exhaustion of individuals attempting this mobility; they must shed their original identities to be accepted into a higher class, yet they frequently remain regarded as "outsiders" in that new environment. This proves that social mobility is not merely a shift in income figures, but a traumatic negotiation of identity under the shadows of race and class.

Friendship and Power Relation

The friendship between the main character and Tracey in *Swing Time* can be understood as a relationship fraught with power imbalance since childhood.

This is evident in the way the narrative consistently places Tracey as a more prominent figure in the social context, particularly through recognition of her dancing talent and confidence in public spaces. Meanwhile, the main character is more often positioned as an observer who follows, supports, or adapts. This pattern appears repeatedly in their school experiences, dance practices, and social interactions, so that their friendship is not represented as an equal relationship, but rather as a relationship in which one subject is more symbolically dominant. The power relations in this friendship operate implicitly through routines and habits, rather than through open conflict. The narrative shows that decisions, the direction of activities, and the center of attention often follow Tracey's preferences and position, while the main character accepts these dynamics without much resistance. This acceptance is important because it shows how power can be internalized in emotionally close relationships. Within Stuart Hall's terms, power in representation does not always appear as direct domination, but operates through everyday practices that seem "natural" and unquestioned. Thus, the friendship in *Swing Time* becomes a discursive space where identities and social positions are negotiated unequally.

Furthermore, the power relations in this friendship directly contribute to the formation of the main character's identity. Because friendship continues to be built through comparisons and differences, the narrator's identity is formed as a subject in a secondary position. He learns to understand himself not through self-affirmation, but through his relationship with a more dominant figure. This is in line with Stuart Hall's view that identity is constructed through relationships and differences, and is always in the context of power and representation (Hall, 1990; Hall, 1996). Therefore, *Swing Time* shows that friendship is not only a personal relationship, but also an important mechanism in the production and reproduction of power and identity.

Ambition and Structural Constraints

In the novel *Swing Time*, personal ambition is not merely a desire for success but a battlefield where individual aspirations constantly clash with the thick walls of structural constraints. Zadie Smith portrays ambition as something that is never "pure" from the influence of race and class. Ambition in *Swing Time* is displayed through the contrast between the narrator and her friend, Tracey, who share similar dreams of becoming dancers but face different destinies due to the pull of structural forces. For individuals from the Black working class, ambition often strikes what Ray (2020) refers to as "racial structures" within organizations and creative industries, where individual talent is frequently defeated by a lack of social and economic capital. Tracey possesses greater talent, yet her ambition is hindered by an unstable family environment and a lack of access to elite networks, while the narrator manages to achieve mobility not

through her artistic talent, but by becoming an assistant to a white celebrity, Aimee. This demonstrates that in an unequal social structure, personal ambition must often be compromised or reshaped into service to dominant power so that one can "survive" socially.

These structural constraints become even more evident when ambition is taken into the global realm. Smith uses the character of Aimee as a representation of neoliberal ambition that feels capable of changing the world through philanthropy in Africa. However, Aimee's "borderless" ambition actually reveals a structural blindness toward local cultural realities. According to Saini's (2022) research on diaspora narratives, the personal ambitions held by the Black characters in this novel are always shadowed by the history of colonialism and systemic poverty that cannot be erased merely through individual hard work. Tracey's failure to escape her old environment and the narrator's alienation within London's elite circles prove that personal ambition is often trapped within the "sticky floors" of one's original social class. Literature here represents that agency is often powerless in the face of established power structures.

Furthermore, ambition in this novel is related to the performativity of identity, where characters must choose between pursuing ambition by "becoming someone else" or remaining loyal to their cultural roots while staying marginalized. Bristow (2023) emphasizes that structural constraints are not just about money, but about cultural "recognition." The personal ambitions of Black dancers in *Swing Time* are frequently limited by Western aesthetic standards that view them only as exotic objects or mere entertainers. Consequently, such ambition does not result in freedom, but rather a new form of attachment within a different social hierarchy. Through this narrative, Smith sharply demonstrates that without changes to social and racial structures, personal ambition for marginalized groups will always be an exhausting journey fraught with the loss of self-identity.

In the novel *Swing Time*, the life choices of the characters are not the result of pure free will, but rather the products of layered structural constraints, ranging from systemic racism to rigid social class divisions. Zadie Smith brilliantly demonstrates that the environment in which a person grows up, along with the racial identity attached to them, acts as a "fence" that determines how far they are allowed to dream and where they can go. The first structural constraint shaping the life choices of the characters in *Swing Time* is social geography and systemic poverty. The narrator and Tracey grow up in public housing in London, a space socially constructed to limit access to cultural capital and elite networks. According to Tyler (2020) in her study on class stigma, physical spaces such as social housing often create "psychological boundaries" that make residents feel their life choices are limited to manual labor or high-risk artistic paths. Tracey, despite being highly talented in dance, lacks the economic "safety net" to sustain

her ambitions when technical failures occur. Her life choice to remain in her old neighborhood and eventually become trapped in a cycle of poverty is the result of a lack of adequate structural access to transform talent into stable social mobility.

Furthermore, institutional racism and Eurocentric beauty standards serve as structural constraints that dictate the success of the characters in the dance world. In the entertainment industry depicted in the novel, Black women's bodies are often valued only if they meet certain expectations of exoticism or if they are able to "adapt" to Western standards. Research by Ray (2020) on racialized organizations explains that these barriers are not just about individual hatred, but about unwritten rules that hinder the progress of Black people within dominant institutions. The narrator realizes this and chooses a structurally "safer" path by becoming an assistant to Aimee, a white pop star. This life choice reflects a survival strategy where Black individuals must suppress their original identity to gain economic security under the umbrella of white power.

Lastly, the structural constraint of colonial historical legacy influences life choices as the narrative shifts to West Africa. Aimee's school construction project in a Gambian village shows how the "choices" of local communities are often imposed through paternalistic international aid agendas. Saini (2022), in her analysis of *Swing Time*, emphasizes that poverty in Gambia is not an individual failure but the result of global structural constraints that place developing nations in a position of dependency. The life choices of the youth in the village to mimic Western lifestyles or work on Aimee's project are forms of adaptation to unequal global power structures. Thus, Smith asserts that the life choices of every character, whether in London or in Africa are a relentless negotiation against structures far larger than themselves.

Conclusion

This in-depth study concludes that contemporary literature, as brilliantly represented in Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time*, functions as a discursive arena that sharply dismantles the myth of meritocracy by exposing the powerful grip of structural constraints on individual agency. The life choices and personal ambitions of its characters are proven to be not merely manifestations of pure free will, but rather the result of a traumatic and continuous negotiation against rigid social class divisions, systemic racism, and the persistent colonial legacies within modern social structures. Through the lens of intersectionality, we can see that race and class are not just biological labels or static economic figures, but cultural apparatuses that actively create a wide "social distance" between the formal availability of pathways (access) and the tangible ability to navigate those pathways for life advancement (functional opportunity).

Furthermore, this analysis highlights the phenomenon of the commodification of suffering often found within the global creative industries and contemporary cyberspace. Here, diasporic identity and trauma narratives are frequently absorbed by the international book market and neoliberal philanthropic mechanisms, turning them into narcissistic aesthetic commodities that ultimately obscure the authentic essence of marginal cultural resistance. The phenomena of the layered "glass ceiling" and "sticky floors" illustrate the bitter reality that vertical social mobility for working-class Black women often comes at a steep price: the loss of an authentic self-identity or permanent alienation within a new social environment. This mobility often results not in true freedom, but in a new form of entanglement within a more subtle yet still exclusive power hierarchy.

In closing, literature acts as a crucial cultural laboratory and a tool for the decolonization of the mind in this digital era. It functions not only to passively document inequality but also to actively challenge established power structures and offer new perspectives on diversity. By re-humanizing the marginalized and giving voice to non-monolithic experiences, contemporary literature attempts to reformulate social relations to be more just and empathetic. Ultimately, understanding the complexity of human meaning amidst the currents of changing times means recognizing that without a fundamental transformation of social and racial structures, personal ambition for marginalized groups will remain an arduous and exhausting journey under the shadow of identity uncertainty.

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