The Feminine Voice of Zadie Smith

I always go on about not writing political dogma in books, but I don’t mind feminist fiction. I don’t mind hanging on a bit when I’m feeling pissed off. It’s not the worst thing in the world. People are too sensitive about that shit.¹

Zadie Smith

Introduction

Looking for a female voice in contemporary British literature, Zadie Smith is one of the more obvious choices though she is not at all a feminist author. She has, however, become an instant celebrity due to the miraculously advantageous contract for her then as yet unfinished first novel: something that would not have happened in a similar way to a balding middle-aged, slightly overweight male accountant from Milton Keynes. Age, race and gender have all played together to create this continuing celebrity status. Zadie Smith has received so many prizes and honours for her first novel alone that it fills a whole page just to list them all in Claire Squires’s "Reader’s Guide" to White Teeth (2000). After her first novel, Zadie Smith began to take part in all sorts of events of the literary and cultural establishment. What started as a reaction to the hype surrounding a young and beautiful woman writer has now become the professional routine and involvement of a soundly established author.

Zadie Smith as a woman author is an immensely interesting phenomenon of the literary marketplace because she is the icon of the more recent developments in marketing strategies and changes in the social, political and aesthetic status of literature: even serious literature has become part of the entertainment industry. There are effects and manifestations of media convergence which make the written word on the page only one spark in the medial fireworks forming the halo of a celebrated author. What used to be the hallmark of exclusive phenomena like European Byronism, is now the standard fare of any bestselling author. Authors are just the nucleus around which the media persona grows. There are websites and innumerable documents in the net: interviews, pictures, youtube videos of readings or lectures, blogs, fan sites and so on. Together with the printed product there usually is the audio book and the e-book. The filming of the novels for the cinema or TV is only a question of time. The amount of attention a book receives – in Smith’s case even before it was finished – depends on strategic decisions of the marketing management and not on the readers. Rarely is a commercial success produced by the customers: exceptions like Stieg Larsson only confirm the rule. The marketing strategies are not always successful, but without them success is usually absent. The start of Zadie Smith’s career is a textbook example for such procedures and it is to be wondered if her resistance to the market forces, her at times rather rude and ‘unfeminine’ behaviour at marketing events and

¹ Zadie Smith in an interview with Jessica Murphy Moo (2005).
her later criticism of the system of literary prizes from which she has benefitted so bountifully are not also fuelling her success by making her even more "authentic."

Zadie Smith's novels, particularly White Teeth (2000), are easily put into the tradition of Dickens's social novels.\(^2\) They take the family as the nucleus of society and topicalise social, racial, religious, cultural, and gender politics at a grass roots level. Great political controversies are shown through the prism of everyday life and language. On this battlefield, Zadie Smith does not fly the colours of feminism or political correctness. Quite on the contrary, she gives gender stereotypes and political incorrectness a lot of scope and creates a space of ambivalent and contradicting voices making it difficult to identify a reliable author/narrator position. Quite aptly, in view of the ambivalence of the narrators' rôles in her novels, her 2009 collection of essays is entitled Changing my Mind: there, Smith is, "forced to recognize that ideological inconsistency is, for me, practically an article of faith" (Smith 2009, n.p.).

This explicit statement about her characteristic lack of a dogmatic ideology corroborates the impression from the novels. Her writings are not devoid of positions but they function rather as starting points for possible debates than as concluding statements. In this way, her feminine voice might be identified as a negotiation of positions and an undermining of patriarchal positions. Neither her fictional work nor her essays give occasion to place her in any theoretical feminist camp. It is rather a kind of post-feminist sensitivity which runs through her writings: Smith is aware of gender questions and politics but she does not treat them as the most important points on her artistic agenda. In her books there are many strong and wise women who, however, never aspire to the heroic. It is rather in the form than in the content or the outspoken opinions that the feminine voice of Zadie Smith can be heard. There seems to be a late echo of Hélène Cixous’s idea of écriture féminine in the looseness of the narrative thread.\(^3\) Despite all the formal scaffolding,\(^4\) the narrative of Smith's novels is often rather flowing, growing rhizomatically in all directions – resisting all the pruning that is, admittedly, also done by the author. This overgrowth has often and explicitly been criticised by the author herself in the case of White Teeth. So, there seem to be two sides to this 'organic growth' of words: it resembles the structure suggested for feminine writing by poststructuralist feminism and it provokes ambivalent feelings concerning an alleged lack of structure.

Gender Aspects of Zadie Smith as Media Persona

Zadie Smith in a sense is a self-fashioned persona. She changed her name from "Sadie" to "Zadie" at the age of fourteen, accentuating her strangeness in the British context. Her family background is mixed English and Jamaican – which is reflected in the character of Irie in White Teeth – and Smith sees herself as black but not as an

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2 See, e.g., Matt Hill (2011) in his politics blog: "I could write a thesis on how Smith is updating the Dickensian social novel for our times."

3 "She [woman] doesn't revolve around a sun that is more star than the stars. That doesn't mean that she is undifferentiated magma; it means that she doesn't create a monarchy of her body or her desire. Let masculine sexuality gravitate around the penis, […]. Woman does not perform on herself this region-alization […]. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconsciousness is worldwide: her writing also can only go on and on, without ever inscribing or distinguishing contours […]" (Sellers, ed., 1994, 44, originally in Cixous, The Newly Born Woman).

4 "Each time I've written a long piece of fiction I've felt the need for an enormous amount of scaffolding. With me scaffolding comes in many forms" ("That Crafty Feeling," Smith 2009, 105).
immigrant. In one of the perhaps superfluous and certainly very loquacious digressions in *White Teeth*, the narrator explains:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks. It is only this late in the day, and possibly only in Willesden, that you can find best friends Sita and Sharon, constantly mistaken for each other because Sita is white (her mother liked the name) and Sharon is Pakistani (her mother thought it best – less trouble). Yet, despite all this mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other’s lives with reasonable comfort (like a man returning to his lover’s bed after a midnight walk), despite all this, it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English. (327)

"Zadie," a variant of "Zaida," is originally an Arabic name, meaning "prosperous," whereas "Sadie," as a diminutive of "Sara," has become popular in the 20th century in Britain and the United States.\(^5\) Thus, the combination of "Zadie" and "Smith" is comparable to the names in *White Teeth* and creates an identity which has, however, nothing to do with the Jamaican roots of the author but destabilises the Englishness of "Smith" in a way which "Sadie" did not. "Zadie Smith" as author and media persona, thus, represents *in nuce* what the writer stands for, particularly in the early reception: a female immigrant, hybrid identity in a postcolonial context. Interestingly, this invented identity has begun to have its own peculiar influence: on a website specialising in baby names, Zadie Smith's change of name is commented on: "When aspiring writer Sadie Smith decided to change her name to Zadie at the age of fourteen, this attention-magnet name was born."\(^6\) So, today, babies are apparently named after the author Zadie Smith. The original act of self-invention through the changing of her name can retrospectively be linked to the creation of the media persona of the young black female writer which has become a trademark connected to ideas of postcolonial writing and politics. The historical person Sadie Smith is caught up in this production, circulation and negotiation of a media-identity forming a persona which to a large extent is independent of the historical and empirical person. Even her own resistance against the commercialisation of her persona is part of the system. There is no escape.\(^7\)

The pictures of Zadie Smith available on the Web clearly show the lengths to which the publisher and the marketing strategists have gone in constructing this persona. One unexpected example, however, tops everything and almost makes any comment superfluous: on Joanna Maxham’s\(^8\) fashion website professional women are

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\(^7\) Her media status becomes obvious in the affair triggered by an interview she gave in 2005 which is commented on in the *Londonist*: "The Short Version: [...] Zadie Smith says all this awful stuff about London and England while in the States and apparently thinks no one over here will find out about it, perhaps because of the 'general stupidity' in her home country. But of course everyone in London has the Internet. Maybe that slipped her mind" (London 2005).

\(^8\) The blurb on the website owner reads: "Joanna Maxham is a passionate designer of stylish, luxury accessories for modern women. After a career in international marketing, she partnered with a small, esteemed atelier in Italy to design and produce fine leather accessories [...]" (Maxham 2001).
presented under the heading "Real Women With Style in Arts, Culture & Books, Fashion Lifestyle on May 20, 2011" – amongst them is Zadie Smith. There are two photos, one showing Smith at a desk in a stylish office and using her laptop, the other a more official picture presenting her as Professor Smith. The caption above the first picture reads:

[…] writers are rarely seen, in fact many of them prefer it that way. The often solitary process can breed quirks and rituals, like using a favorite pen, writing at a specific time of the day, or wearing lucky pajamas. Jamaican-British novelist Zadie Smith might very well don an Oxford sweatshirt and Wallace & Gromit socks, but in public, her style is au courant. (Maxham 2011)

The first picture, portraying Smith presumably at work, contradicts the sweatshirt and socks statement, though. The second photograph is commented on as follows:

Smith's three novels (White Teeth, The Autograph Man and On Beauty) explore family, ethnicity, and cultural tradition. Often photographed with hair pulled back and tucked under a headscarf, this sultry beauty's Vogue-worthy look exudes a sensibility that is as richly textured and layered as her writing. Her style could be described as ethnic romance – simple silhouettes complemented by culturally-inspired accessories, natural and fresh make-up. Even when she is dressed as a "professional" (she is currently a tenured professor at a New York university), she favors soft uncomplicated hair, vintage classics and accessories with a poetic twist. (Maxham 2011; emphasis in original)

The gendered aspect of Zadie Smith as a writer is here exploited for commercial and fashion interests. Her bodily looks – "sultry beauty's Vogue-worthy look" – are compared with her writing which becomes an *écriture féminine* of the more vulgar brand "exuding" a "richly textured and layered" sensibility. Funnily, the next sentence can be read at first glance as referring to her writing as "ethnic romance" – only the complete sentence reveals that her clothing style is meant! This sort of web presence shows the media *persona* of Zadie Smith as an image commodity which can be used for all sorts of purposes. It is strongly gendered, equating her femininity and her writing on the level of the surface of the media *persona* represented in the images which are fed into the eternal circulation of the Web that never forgets.

The highly-gendered presentation on Maxham's fashion website appears in stark contrast to the impression that Smith has given of herself in interviews. Indeed, she herself does not make a great deal of her sex or gender. The crucial feature for her self-image seems to be that she is a writer, literature being the most important thing in her life. The success of her own work, she feels, has come far too early to her and her public presentations at times have clearly shown that she did not particularly like the hype she had created with her first novel. In all this, it becomes evident that Smith does not only work hard on her writing but also on her public image.

As far as the latter is concerned, particularly in the first years after her debut, she was extremely concerned with correcting false assumptions resulting from her publicity. So, on the one hand, there is the self-fashioning impulse aiming at an ungendered bookish *persona* living literature intensely, and, on the other hand, there is the media *persona* created by the book industry, the media and – no matter how unwillingly – the author herself. Reviews in particular have done a great deal to

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9 Cf., e.g., David Stevens entertaining report on a panel with a "disgruntled" Zadie Smith (Stevens 2008).
mould this writer's persona. The recent trend of marketing and perceiving literary texts no longer as organisms with a life of their own but as being 'authentic' documents of an exceptional creative genius whose whole life feeds into the literary product has found a stubbornly unwilling but most suitable subject in Zadie Smith.

In her essay on "The International Marketing of White Teeth," Katarzyna Jakubiak contends that Smith's multicultural vision of Britain was seen as “optimistic” in order to defuse her sarcasm and criticism.

Interestingly, marketing industries' need to control the text of White Teeth results also in media attempts to regulate the authorial persona of Zadie Smith herself. This happens because [...] the authorial persona is always a "paratextual element", which although located outside of the proper literary text, creates meaning and influences readers' interpretations. [...] Even a casual glance at White Teeth's reviews makes it clear that the international popularity of the novel's optimistic interpretations depends greatly on the marketing of the author. (Jakubiak 2008, 211)

Jakubiak contextualises the paratextual quality of the "authorial persona" in order to explain how the critique found in the text of the novel could be turned into an optimistic view of multicultural Britain. It is the "success story of a working-class Jamaican immigrant's daughter" (211). Thus, the autobiographical background to a character like Irie helps wrapping up a package including the personality and the looks of the author: "Smith's physical attractiveness, age, and ethnic origins get exploited in a similar way," writes Jakubiak and quotes The Guardian calling her “the perfect demographic: young attractive, black female” (211). One of the journalists actually "expresses regret that Smith decided to discard her Afro and wore straight hair to her interview" (211). This happened right after the publication of White Teeth, but it does not seem to be very far from the "ethnic romance" of 2011. The persistency of the gendered and sexualised media persona seems to be very hard to overcome and must seem a burden to the person to whom the representations allegedly refer.

Aspects of Feminization in Smith's Work

The prominence of the media persona is alleged to be so much in the foreground that the very books of Zadie Smith often seem not to receive the kind of attention they deserve. Matt Hill in the Green Wedge politics blog writes in March 2011:

I sometime use Zadie Smith as a simple way of discovering if someone's bullshitting about literature, because, with her looks, trendy subject matter [...] and, let's say, saleable ethnic profile, she seems like a marketing man's dream. So when somebody says something along the lines of: "Oh, Zadie Smith can't really write, she just looks good on a dust jacket", it's a very plausible-sounding load of shit – just the kind of thing somebody who's too canny to buy into the media hype du jour might say – but a load of shit nonetheless. (Hill 2011)

Matt Hill makes a strong point in favour of reading Zadie Smith instead of just looking at her. In terms of the feminization of literature this can mean analyzing a number of aspects ranging from the content and arguments of her texts on the one hand to more strictly formal questions. Zadie Smith's novels have a very strong penchant for the comic and for satire, On Beauty being a comedy of manners in the tradition of the campus novel. This comic and satirical vein leads to a strong stereotyping of most of the characters, be they men or women, black or white. This treatment of characters is mostly a formal requirement in order to achieve the desired
effect. Tracey L. Walters, however, quotes a *Vogue* interview with Zadie Smith in order to suggest a further reason for the particularly prevalent tendency to stereotypical character development in the case of Smith's women: "Women are a very complex sex [to write about]. Men are much simpler" (quoted by Walters 2008, 126). As usual for Smith, her answer is a technical one rather than an ideological one. Walters shows that the three main stereotypes for black women are used in abundance: there's the matriarch Hortense Bowden in *White Teeth*, the jezebel Honey Richardson in *The Autograph Man*, and Kiki, the mammy in *On Beauty*. It is particularly the latter character that is allowed to grow from a stereotype into a round character, becoming almost a heroine, while the other black woman characters stay within the narrow confines of the stereotypical image. Smith's use of stereotypes is certainly not motivated by her wish to reinscribe them. Smith has an unwavering view of herself as a moral author with a clear idea of the ethical function of art. In a perhaps post-postmodern fashion, Smith believes that it is the task of the author to tell the truth. The last of her ten golden rules for writers is: "Tell the truth through whichever veil comes to hand – but tell it." Smith's "veil" often is a caricature which entices the reader to look behind the act of estrangement inherent in the distorting mirror used by the author. At the same time, Smith is quite averse to the idea that belonging to a certain social group involves being closer to the truth. In her essay on Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) Zadie Smith wants to defend Hurston against the critical "fetishization" (Smith 2009, 9) which sentimentalises "black female protagonists" who "are now unerringly strong and soulful" (9). Smith identifies herself with the black female writers whom she wants to be judged not on the basis of any race or gender agenda, but on the basis of literary merit:

> The truth is, black women writers, while writing many wonderful things, have been no more or less successful at avoiding the falsification of human experience than any other group of writers. It is not the Black Female Literary Tradition that makes Hurston great. It is Hurston herself. (9)

We can see Smith's awareness of female topics. She is, however, equally clear about the independence an artist needs to accomplish the task of telling the truth. In this respect, one might put her in a post-feminist position. There is the specific sensitivity to female perspectives and the feminine world, but first of all there is the world of the word: this affinity to the verbal is characteristic also of her female characters when they have to stand up for their views. In *White Teeth* there are at least three instances when a character stops speaking: Hortense stops speaking to Clara because she married Archie, Alsana stops speaking directly to Samad because he sent one of their twins to Bangladesh, and one of the twins stops talking to his father. Each of the cases is differently motivated, but speaking to each other seems to be the most important quality of being a family. Cutting this line of communication is paramount to cutting the life-line of the family which is traditionally the realm of the feminine.

10 This term is used here in the sense of Ina Schabert's "post-poststrukturalistisch" for which she argues: "Die Sinnsetzung wird, nachdem sie als *Setzung* erkannt ist, als pragmatisches und v.a. ethisches *Postulat* wieder zugelassen" (2004, 174, emphasis in original). "The positioning [in a philosophical sense, P.N.] of meaning, after it has been recognised as a positioning, is permitted again as a pragmatic and most of all an ethical postulate" (my translation).

Despite Samad's incessant preaching, the word is the world of the women in the cosmos of Smith's novels. Samad's talking is just as void as the academic waffling of Howard in *On Beauty*, all his verbosity being far way from the truth.

**Word, Words, Words, Male and Female Writing?**

In 2005, Zadie Smith published an interview with Ian McEwan in *The Believer*. In her brief foreword to this conversation, Smith characterised McEwan as "a writer as unlike me as possible" because of a number of points which she herself believes to be lacking. McEwan's prose is, unlike her own, "controlled, careful, and powerfully concise," the author is "eloquent on the subjects of sex and sexuality" and "he has a strong head for the narrative possibilities of science" (Smith 2005). The main point, however, seems to be that "his novels are no longer than is necessary." Being concise means being laconic, to the point, exact, precise. It implies an economy of words, time and labour. This seems to be quite the opposite of the flowing narratives which are not necessarily feminine. However, there is a strong tradition which connects the feminine and an excess of words, an unrestrained stream of words. In terms of real linguistic behaviour things are, of course, much more complex. Many of the gendered prejudices concerning linguistic habits ascribed to men and women cannot be confirmed in empirical studies. And yet, even in theories of *écriture féminine*, the flowing of words is one of the common and very basic tenets.

In a reported interview in *The Observer*, the overflowing of narration in her first novel is contrasted by Smith herself to a kind of parsimony of which she would like to have more in her own novel:

> Several times, she [Zadie Smith] mentions a desire to change the way she writes; admiring John Lanchester's *Mr Phillips*, which she has just finished reading, she says: "The best thing about it is that it's very sparse. I'd like a bit of that in my own writing." [...] She wants to continue to write fiction, though she swears she will never write such a long book again. "It was more than 700 pages at one point, and I think when a book gets that long, it's because you're not in control of it. Although publishers seem to like long books," she adds. (Merritt 2000)

This is a very early interview, but the tenor stays the same through the years. Smith feels very much that her novel writing in particular has something uncontrolled and even generalises this to include all novels. In an interview with Gemma Sieff from *Harper's Magazine* on occasion of Zadie Smith becoming a regular reviewer of new fiction in 2011, Smith said:

> Fiction is a completely different kind of terror. Like the thing I'm attracted to when I'm writing nonfiction is that you don't know, but you can know, right? There's a possibility of knowing. You can control the area in which you write. And to me it feels like a small formal garden and I can make it as nice as possible. Whereas novels are absolutely chaotic and messy and embarrassing. (Smith and Sieff 2011)

12 The third edition of Jennifer Coates's *Women, Men and Language* (2004) is very instructive in this respect, and it also shows how in research assumptions and prejudices clad in the scientific armour of hypotheses have changed from the mid-1980s to 2004.

13 Conley quotes the reductive concept of "masculine = retentive, limited ≠ feminine = flowing abundant" (xiii) and later says, "Once again it seems that the qualifiers 'masculine' and 'feminine' give way to the sexual bodies of man and woman, the more so as Cixous has recourse to traditional metaphors of women: diffusion, liquefaction, aerial swimming before the symbolic" (Conley 1991, 60-61).
The chaos, mess and embarrassment Smith associates with novels in general and which could be associated with her own novels' vicinity to some tenets of the theorists of écriture féminine can be put into context with two views which highlight the "accidentalism" and the "hysterical realism" of her novels. Fred Botting reads White Teeth with an eye to the apocalyptic tendencies which developed in British literature in the eighties:

> Apocalypticism, with its awful and desirable certitude, is countered by accidentalism in White Teeth's interlinked stories of imperial, cultural and generational movement, climaxing, in fatefuly aleatory fashion, on the second millennium's eve. Apocalyptic aspirations are, on the whole, reserved for the religious groups [...]. The apocalypse, in White Teeth's 1980s and 1990s, has become little more than a joke. (Botting 2005, 25)

Botting is quite right in his analysis when pointing to the loss of seriousness and a decline of doomsday expectations in Smith's first book as compared to earlier novels. Though Smith is very interested in ethical topics and is serious in the negotiation of many aspects of social and political structures and positions, the negativity of the eighties has been replaced by a joie de vivre and optimism for which she has been criticised particularly by post-9/11 commentators. What Botting calls "accidentalism" (cf. 27) in contrast to "apocalypticism" is not merely historical slapstick although Smith quite frequently exploits its comic potential. It is rather a shifting of the focus from big history to the life of the single character. In a way, this is retreating to a poetological position of modernism as it is proclaimed by Virginia Woolf in her essay on "Modern Fiction." But it is modernism without the formal experiment. Thus, one could argue that E.M. Forster's novels, which are to become so important in Smith's third novel, On Beauty, are already the blueprint for her first novel. Botting, however, does not take into account the formal side of accidentalism:

> Botting is alluding to the opening scene of White Teeth where Archie's attempted suicide is described. Archie is sitting in his "fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate" (Smith 2001a, 3) and is almost dead. "He was prepared for it. He had flipped a coin and stood staunchly by its conclusions. This was a decided-upon suicide. In fact, it was a New Year's resolution" (3). The decision whether or not to commit suicide, according to Albert Camus, is the most important philosophical issue. He argues in terms of his existentialist philosophy that suicide is a rejection of freedom. The revolt against the pointlessness of life lies in its acceptance and this is what makes Sisyphos triumphant over his fate and allows us to imagine him smiling as he is descending the hill for another round of pushing up the rock. In White Teeth, this fundamental question is settled by the flipping of a coin. The prominent position of this episode right at the beginning of the novel shows the programmatic status of uncontrollable chance in the fate of the characters. We can possibly also find here a reflection of
Stoppard's absurdist adaptation of *Hamlet* in his *Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) where coin flipping is an equally potent image of fate: however, in the play, chance absurdly does not obey the laws of statistics, the coin always only lands on the one side, never on the other. Beside the scope for literary and philosophical allusion, the accidentalism described by Botting on the level of content, also has the formal quality of counteracting the scaffolding used by Smith to keep her novel in shape. The patchwork of stories, sub-stories, and commentary which make up *White Teeth* has the sound of the music of chance. There is neither a teleological evolution nor an eschatology despite the background typology of the novel which suggests far-ranging historical correspondences which are, however, only as haphazard as the Jehovah witnesses' belief in the nearing end. The beginning of Smith's first novel is thus similarly accidental as the self-defeatingly embarrassing beginning of *On Beauty*: "[o]ne may as well begin with Jerome's e-mails to his father" (Smith 2006, 3). This is a technologically updated copy of E.M. Forster's beginning of *Howards End* – "One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister" (Forster 2003, 3) – and formally mirrors the accidentalism of Smith's first novel because it defies all suspicion of structure to state in a seemingly omniscient narrator’s voice that the story could begin this way or another way and it would make no difference.

James Wood (2001a), who – in the summer before 9/11 – coined the expression "hysterical realism," sees in this kind of narration the key problem of the "contemporary big ambitious novel." Because 'hysterical' is derived from the Greek word ὑστἐρα for 'uterus,' one could suspect that Wood wishes to signify a particularly feminine quality of writing. This, however, does not seem to be Wood's primary intention. He counts Zadie Smith as the only woman (and only British) writer amongst those suffering from this sort of hysteria: the other writers are Rushdie, Pynchon, DeLillo and Foster Wallace. So, "hysterical realism" is not gendered with respect to the authors included but it refers to specific structures of the writing. Wood sees at the core an excess of realism: "the conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted and overworked," argues Wood. It is "evasive of reality" by being awkward "about the possibility of novelistic storytelling." The characters live in stories which "defy the laws of persuasion." The reader cannot be convinced that these stories happen to the characters created in the novels.

Novels, after all, turn out to be delicate structures, in which one story judges the viability, the actuality, of another. Yet it is the relatedness of these stories that their writers seem most to cherish, and to propose as an absolute value. An endless web is all they need for meaning. Each of these novels is excessively centripetal. (Wood 2001a)

This is certainly not what Hélène Cixous or Luce Irigaray had in mind when they developed their ideas about *écriture féminine*, and yet, this excess is certainly the opposite of the novel as clockwork. Interestingly, Zadie Smith herself agreed with many of the points Wood made in his article. Still in shock after 9/11, she replied in *The Guardian* to Wood's second article on the topic of 6 October (2001b):

It [hysterical realism] is a painfully accurate term for the sort of overblown, manic prose to be found in novels like my own *White Teeth* and a few others he was sweet enough to mention. These are hysterical times; any novel that aims at hysteria will now be effortlessly outstripped – this was Wood's point, and I'm with him on it. In fact, I have agreed with him several times before, in public and in private, but I appreciate that
he feared I needed extra warning; that I might be sitting in my Kilburn bunker planning some 700-page generational saga set on an incorporated McDonald's island north of Tonga. (Smith 2001b)

Though the free flow of words is codified as a specifically feminine style, Zadie Smith is strongly averse to its implications of the loss of structure – working, therefore, more or less successfully against her "nature." In terms of the femininity of her authorial voice this may appear as one of the more obvious aspects, but it certainly is not the most important one. This function is rather fulfilled by Zadie Smith's post-feminist positioning.

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