

# The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Identity in a Globalized Context: An Analysis of Community in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*

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**Abstract:** Zadie Smith's works aim to comprehensively depict the living conditions of ethnic minorities within multicultural contexts. Her latest novel, *Swing Time*, explores the divergent life paths of its two female protagonists and the uncertainty and confusion surrounding the unnamed protagonist's construction of self-identity. Set against the backdrop of the globalized era, the novel reveals the identity dilemmas and challenges faced by ethnic minorities in modern society. By depicting the emotional connections and sense of belonging among members of different community identities, Smith illustrates how individuals seek self-identification and establish connections in a world marked by diversity and globalization. In this process, the protagonists not only confront racial and cultural differences but also navigate the challenges posed by social structures and power relations. The novel's exploration of the deconstruction and reconstruction of communities offers new literary perspectives on the issues of identity and community formation for ethnic minorities in the context of globalization.

**Keywords:** Zadie Smith; *Swing Time*; globalization; identity, community construction

## 1. Introduction

In the context of contemporary literature, Zadie Smith is renowned for her profound depiction of the lived experiences of ethnic minorities within multicultural societies. Her recent novel, *Swing Time*, continues this thematic exploration by delving into the complexities of identity construction among ethnic minorities in the context of globalization, as illustrated through the friendship and interactions of two female protagonists and the unnamed protagonist's multifaceted social experiences across time and space. Smith utilizes the emotional connections between characters in *Swing Time* to unveil the identity crises and challenges faced by ethnic minorities in modern society. These dilemmas arise not only from racial and cultural differences but are also deeply intertwined with social structures and power relations. By depicting the interactions among members within various social communities, the novel illustrates how individuals seek self-identity amidst the loss and reconstruction of identity in an environment characterized by diversity and globalization.

This paper aims to examine the issues of identity and community construction for ethnic minorities in *Swing Time* from the perspectives of "The Deconstruction of Community" and "The Construction of Community." It begins by analyzing the power dynamics within the familial community and exploring the complexities and fluidity of the social community, thereby revealing the internal logic behind the deconstruction of community. The discussion then shifts to an analysis of power and class differences within the social community, as well as the processes of identity and community construction within the cultural community. The study seeks to provide a new literary perspective on identity and community belonging for ethnic minorities in the context of globalization. This research not only deepens the understanding of Zadie Smith's work but also offers valuable insights into the challenges and strategies of identity negotiation for ethnic minorities in the globalized era.

## 2. The Deconstruction of Community

In *Swing Time*, Zadie Smith profoundly revealing the struggles and confusion faced by ethnic minority individuals as they navigate multiple identities within the context of globalization. The concept of "community", as articulated by Raymond Williams in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* [1], is understood as a "network of relationships and emotions". However, as social cohesion gradually erodes and the process of globalization accelerates, the traditional notion of community has become increasingly complex. Its structure and internal relationships are now subject to the dual challenges of deconstruction and reconstruction. Analyzing how power, class, and cultural differences influence the identity and self-perception of ethnic minority individuals is essential for understanding the process of deconstructing familial and social communities in Smith's work.

### 2.1 Power Dynamics within the Familial Community

The role of community in the construction of personal identity is immeasurable, particularly for women, whose identity

formation is often “closely linked to the long-term influence and nurturing of female elders within the community”[2]. In *Swing Time*, the familial community emerges as the initial sphere for identity formation, yet it is fraught with power conflicts and oppression, most prominently reflected in the mother-daughter relationship. The protagonist’s mother, a passionate political activist, actively participates in community affairs, advocating for social justice and Black rights. Her unwavering belief in social justice and strong values deeply influence the protagonist, as she attempts to shape her daughter’s identity by instilling ideals of racial equality and social justice.

However, this power asymmetry leads to tension between the mother and daughter. Smith depicts the protagonist’s struggle between her mother’s expectations and her own interests: “She was always telling me what I should do, not asking what I wanted to do” [3]. This power dynamic not only exacerbates the conflict between them but also contributes to the protagonist’s identity confusion and ambiguity. As Michel Foucault points out in *The History of Sexuality*, power is not merely exercised through overt control but is embedded in everyday interactions and language [4]. In the novel, the mother exerts ideological control over her daughter’s thoughts and actions, leading the protagonist to develop a conflicted self-perception when confronting the outside world. On one hand, she yearns to break free from her mother’s control; on the other hand, she is unable to escape her mother’s profound influence. This power imbalance ultimately causes the protagonist to lose her cultural roots within a multicultural context, weakening her control over her own identity and plunging her into an identity crisis. As J. Hillis Miller states, “the dislocation of community implies the severance of bonds and connections, unable to maintain the original state of union” [5]. In this context, the power dynamics within the familial community become increasingly complex, and the protagonist’s identity gradually disintegrates under the weight of these pressures.

Beyond the mother-daughter relationship, Smith also reveals the power struggles within the family through the interactions among other family members. The father interactions with the protagonist often reflect resistance to the mother’s control, attempting to offer an alternative perspective to his daughter. However, this resistance fails to alter the protagonist’s identity perception, as she remains deeply entrenched in the mother-dominated family power structure. The complexity of familial power further intensifies her identity confusion, underscoring the profound impact of intra-familial power dynamics on individual identity formation.

## **2.2 The Complexities and Fluidity of the Social Community**

In addition to the familial community, Zadie Smith illustrates the identity crisis of minority individuals within a multicultural society through her portrayal of social communities. In *Swing Time*, Smith deeply explores the complexities and variability of identity recognition within social communities through the characters of the protagonist and Tracey, two mixed-race Black women. Despite both being mixed-race Black women, they exhibit significant differences in social status, upbringing, and racial identity. These differences not only affect their individual self-identities but also profoundly impact their positioning within the social community and their relationship with one another.

The theory of social community emphasizes that individual identity recognition is formed through social interactions, shaped by various factors within the community, including social norms, cultural values, race, gender, and class[6]. In the context of globalization, these factors intertwine, rendering individual identity recognition increasingly complex and unstable. In *Swing Time*, Smith reveals the intricacies of this process through the developmental experiences of the protagonist and Tracey.

The disparities in identity recognition and social status between the protagonist and Tracey are crucial factors in the divergence of their life trajectories and social standing. The protagonist grows up in a relatively middle-class household; her mother is an actively engaged Black woman in political and social activities, and her father is White. Surrounded by such an environment, she has access to abundant cultural and educational resources, broadening her perspective and choices. In stark contrast, Tracey experiences a more impoverished and challenging upbringing. With her mother being White and her father Black, she faces increased racial discrimination and economic hardship during her youth. Tracey’s experiences illustrate how class and race jointly influence an individual’s social status and identity recognition. Growing up in a deprived environment, lacking resources and support, her identity recognition becomes more pronounced yet constrained. She pursues her dream of becoming a dancer, a choice that superficially appears to challenge the bondage of social class while, in reality, underscores her confusion and powerlessness regarding her identity: “Dancing is my only way out, it’s how I become ‘myself’”[3].

Despite having grown up together and sharing many common memories and experiences, the life paths of the protagonist and Tracey diverge sharply. The protagonist opts for a relatively stable career, working in Aimee’s team, while Tracey remains steadfast in her pursuit of her dream of dancing. This divergence in choices not only reflects the differences in their identity recognition but also exacerbates the tensions and conflicts between them. Their friendship is marked by competition, jealousy, and betrayal, ultimately leading to its dissolution. The rupture of this friendship symbolizes the complexity and inconsistency inherent within social communities. Community theory posits that an individual’s identity recognition within

a community is influenced not only by internal members but also constrained by external social structures and cultural hegemony [7]. In *Swing Time*, Smith demonstrates how race, gender, and class interweave to influence individuals' identity recognition and the recognition they receive from others. Ultimately, their friendship cannot withstand these contradictions and conflicts, leading to an irreversible split.

This split not only reflects the contradictions between individuals but also symbolizes the deconstruction of social communities in the context of globalization. As Foucault points out, power dynamics permeate every aspect of daily life, influencing individual self-awareness and sense of belonging [4]. In this competitive and conflict-ridden social community, both the protagonist and Tracey's identities are affected by multiple power relations, ultimately resulting in their marginalization within the community and estrangement from one another.

### **3. The Construction of Community**

In *Swing Time*, Zadie Smith not only reveals the identity crisis faced by minorities in the context of globalization through the deconstruction of family and social communities, but also explores how individuals can reposition themselves and seek a sense of belonging within a multicultural landscape and power structures through the construction of community. Smith illustrates how the protagonists navigate the challenges of identity by reconstructing social and cultural communities within complex social structures and cultural backgrounds.

#### **3.1 Power and Class Differences within the Social Community**

Smith's depiction of the social community in *Swing Time* illustrates how power dynamics and class disparities shape individual identity and social positioning. The relationship between the protagonist and Aimee serves as a vital representation of power and class differences within the social community. Aimee, as a globally renowned celebrity, possesses considerable power and influence, which not only impacts her own life but also profoundly affects her surrounding staff, including the protagonist. Every decision made by Aimee directly influences the protagonist's life, who, despite having access to various resources and opportunities, remains in a subordinate position within the power structure, primarily fulfilling a service and supportive role.

The protagonist's status reveals the deep-seated effects of class differences within the social community. Although she enjoys certain privileges in proximity to Aimee, these privileges do not alter her marginalized position within the social structure. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony offers a framework for understanding this dynamic: the ruling class maintains its dominance through culture and ideology [7]. Within this power structure, the protagonist must continually adapt and modify her behavior to meet Aimee's expectations, reflecting the inherent power imbalances present in the social community.

However, Smith also showcases the protagonist's journey of realizing her own agency and reconstructing her identity within this social community. Through her interactions with the local community, the protagonist begins to recognize her significant role in cross-cultural communication. Although her position within Aimee's entourage is modest, her cultural background and closeness to Aimee enable her to serve as a bridge in fostering cross-cultural dialogue. Her reflections and actions gradually transform her perception of her own influence. As articulated in the novel, "I started to understand that even within this unequal power structure, I could use my voice and actions to promote fairer and more effective communication and collaboration" [3]. This reconstruction of her self-identity not only enhances her self-esteem but also allows her to find a renewed sense of belonging within the social community.

#### **3.2 The Construction of Community and Identity within the Cultural Community**

The construction of cultural communities is another significant dimension in Smith's exploration of identity. In *Swing Time*, the protagonist engages in cross-cultural experiences that facilitate her exploration and construction of identity. These experiences not only influence her self-identity but also transform her understanding of cultural communities.

The temporal and spatial span of *Swing Time* provides possibilities for the nameless protagonist's identity construction, with her navigation between Britain and Africa being a crucial aspect of this process. Growing up in Britain, she constantly struggles between school and family, endeavoring to find her place within different cultures. Her mother, an active participant in political and social activities as a Black woman, exerts a considerable influence on her. However, the protagonist's self-identity is troubled by family and social cultural conflicts, reflecting how identity construction within cultural communities is shaped by the multiple constraints of race, class, and gender. Through the exploration of these conflicts, the protagonist gradually realizes that identity arises from the long-standing inherited differences of her ethnic identity, and that there is no unchanging, fixed identity; rather, it is an ongoing process that evolves through cultural interaction and community construction [8].

Her experiences in Africa further deepen her understanding of cultural communities. After accompanying Aimee to

Africa, she attempts to establish connections with the community through participation in local cultural activities. The racial identity of British Jamaicans engenders an innate empathy towards West African minorities, as for British Jamaicans, the notion of “the motherland calling” possesses an empathy function that “stimulates emotions and channels feelings” [9]. The partial call of her own racial identity evokes a strong sense of community within the protagonist. Mike Featherstone points out, “Culture is a series of shared meanings, beliefs, and values that unify people as a collective whole. There once existed a communal culture... [10]”. She describes, “Here, I felt an unprecedented sense of connection; although I was an outsider, I gradually realized that this connection stemmed not merely from race but from a shared cultural identity” [3]. This cross-cultural community experience allows her to recognize her unique identity as a mixed Black woman in the context of globalization. Through her interactions with local people, the protagonist not only reevaluates her cultural roots but also becomes aware of her role and responsibilities in cross-cultural communication.

However, the protagonist’s construction of cultural community is not without challenges. It is essential to note that the empathetic mechanism of “the motherland calling” embodies the concept of “mutual understanding” as articulated by Tönnies, who writes, “Mutual understanding is based on a close acquaintance among people, which depends on an individual’s tendency to directly participate in another’s life, sharing joys and sorrows with them, and this, in turn, further promotes mutual recognition” [11]. In her attempts to integrate into the local culture, she faces challenges related to cultural differences and identity conflicts, and the unfamiliar cultural terrain hinders the protagonist’s construction of cultural identity. This challenge reveals the complexity of cultural community construction in the context of globalization and highlights the arduous process by which minorities seek identity in a multicultural society. Through the protagonist’s experiences, Smith examines how to reconstruct cultural communities within the framework of globalization, providing new perspectives for the identity construction of minorities in multicultural environments.

## 4. Conclusion

Through a constructive analysis of social and cultural communities, Zadie Smith intricately explores the ways in which minorities navigate the challenges of identity in the context of globalization by reconstructing communities in *Swing Time*. By depicting the protagonist’s experiences within power dynamics, class differences, and cultural conflicts, Smith illustrates how individuals search for self-identity and establish connections within diverse and globalized environments. This process of identity construction not only reflects the survival challenges faced by minorities in the era of globalization but also offers new literary perspectives for exploring how to reconstruct communities in a multicultural society.

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