

Exploring the Inner Turmoil and Crisis of Identity in Zadie Smith's "Hanwell in Hell"

C. Madhumitha

Research Scholar (Full Time), Ph.D. Register Number: 23211204012007,

Department of English and Research Centre,

Sri Parasakthi College for Women, Courtallam,

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli - 627012), Tamil Nadu, India.

Email: madhuchelladuari01@gmail.com

Dr. M. P. Anuja

Associate Professor and Research Supervisor

Department of English and Research Centre,

Sri Parasakthi College for Women, Courtallam,

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli - 627012), Tamil Nadu, India.

Email: dranujamp@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Zadie Smith holds a significant place in the contemporary British Literature. Her works revolve around multicultural background, its complexities, and the exploration of identity, race, and class. In the short story "Hanwell in Hell", Hanwell is the central character who undergoes emotional isolation after the death of his wife and estrangement from his daughters. He is unable to overcome this emotional suffering. His emotional suppression leads him to preserve the photographs of his daughter, and he hopes for their

return. He tries all the possible ways to rebuild his life and his identity. Smith presents Hanwell as a father whose mind is filled with the memories of his past life with his wife and daughters, which causes him pain and mental suffering in the present. This paper aims to deal with this inner turmoil of Hanwell and his crisis of identity in “Hanwell in Hell.”

Keywords: Isolation, Identity, Emotional suffering, Memory, Absence.

Zadie Smith is a well-known British writer whose works deal with the multicultural exploration and contemporary issues in the society. As a female writer she addresses the issues of intersecting identities and how they are portrayed in the society. Smith belongs to the mixed-race background and some of her characters are of same descent. She has depicted the hurdles of being a biracial female in the multicultural land through her characters. Her first novel *White Teeth* brought her a great fame. She is not only a novelist but also an essayist, has written many short stories and published them as a collection. The story *Hanwell in Hell* was published under the collection *Martha and Hanwell*.

In the story *Hanwell in Hell*, Smith presents Hanwell as a man who undergoes emotional isolation and struggles with his life. It is known only through the character Clive Black. Smith sets this story as a form of response by Clive Black to the advertisement which is posted by one of the daughters of Hanwell. Clive has explained Hanwell's situation in the letter after he meets him one night in the Barry Frank's restaurant. Clive has not spent many years with him but just a whole night, and he is able to connect with him. That is so because Clive's life is also the same when they meet each other. The two men's failures, their internal suffering and emotional suppression are exposed in *Hanwell in Hell*. Through Clive's narration about

Hanwell, the readers not only know the sufferings of Hanwell but also Clive's unsaid identity crisis and sufferings.

In Barry Frank's Italian restaurant Hanwell serves him French crepes, stuffed with a creamy prawn and mushroom mixture (Smith 1067). When Clive is eager to appreciate the chef, he realizes that Hanwell is not a chef but the one who washes dishes. Clive wants to have a talk with him but he is busy in his work. At last when the restaurant closes Clive accompanies Hanwell to his flat. During the way to his flat they come across various things, being in the park, getting caught in the rain, and encountering an injured fox. While in Hanwell's flat, he admits the suicide of his wife and how as a result his daughters are with their uncle. They are not aware of what Hanwell undergoes in his life. And he prepares room for them by painting it red but he thinks it is yellow as he is colour blind.

Hanwell hopes to reunite with his daughters. His life is so unexpected, that once he was in Paris but at present, he is washing dishes. As Clive guesses, he has the lowest level of job. His identity in the society has been broken into pieces; he strives hard and till the end he hopes for betterment. His wife's suicide leads to great trauma in his life; his flat is still with the things which his wife made. Merriam Webster dictionary defines turmoil as a state or condition of extreme confusion, agitation or commotion. Inner turmoil refers to a person's emotional conflicts within their self which results in anxiety, emotional instability and fragmented thoughts. Hanwell finds difficult to accept the absence of his wife. He still preserves the things and there is no detachment from the past memories.

Hanwell is not a social man; he keeps his life private. Before knowing Clive well he says, "My wife's in London" (Smith 1069). He doesn't want the stranger to know about his life or feel pity for him. After moving to his flat, Hanwell says that his wife hung herself. Clive is totally shocked and asks him why he

didn't utter this before. Hanwell has no answer. He says "It was a terrible thing" (1072). He is emotionally isolated due to the suicide of his wife. Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucination and other intrusive phenomena (Caruth 181). Hanwell's words about the incident holds no emotion or breakdown of serious grief. This denotes his repressed trauma which he has been holding all through his life.

Clive can relate with Hanwell through their shared failure. I spent just one night with your father, in Bristol, thirty-four years ago. He was down on his luck at the time, as was I. We had both suffered dramatic reversals of fortune and recognized immediately that we had failure in common--- a rare example of masculine intuition (Smith 1066). Both the men in the story were once in higher standards before their failure. Hanwell was involved in war but is reduced to washing dishes. He seems to hold a polite manner and addresses Clive as 'Sir' in a respectful manner even though Barry Franks restaurant is not known for its good atmosphere. There was something so compelling to me about him; I had the sense that he came from better things than this but that his fall had not debilitated him or made him as bitter as mine had made me (1068).

The internal suffering which Hanwell and Clive face is evident in the narration. Clive is cheated by one of his business partners and he confesses that the betrayal is due to his carelessness. He is now reduced to work as a salesman and this situation in his life haunts him. He is not able to overcome the trauma. He is not satisfied in his new job. On the way to Hanwell's flat, they come across a park called "Cabot Square." Hanwell says that his owner Barry Franks lives there and shares his thought that it would be nice to live with families in those houses, without knowing Clive's past. Imagine living with your family in one of these huge buggers. I thought it very strange, that addition---- "with your family." I hadn't the heart or

will to tell him that a house very like one of these “huge buggers” has recently been mine; that I has had the run of the place all for myself; that a life like that was possible (Smith 1069-70).

Clive is emotionally lost and doesn't think of good fortunes as Hanwell does. He is at the urge of extreme frustration that good things shouldn't happen to anyone, cause his life is full of bad fortunes. The incidents of his past have created a huge impact in the life of Clive. But Hanwell's thoughts are contrasting with that of him. He wishes for good fortunes in his owner's life. During their conversation in the park, one man from his house switches the lights in his house on and off, trying to tell the man in the street that he is still awake. These sort of things irritate Clive, because it makes him feel that he is someone who wanders in the street without any place to stay. This portrayal creates a sense of crisis in Clive. In the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity. (Erikson 130)

Hanwell's life and that of his owner's, are shattered. Barry Frank's restaurant is a popular one and the profits should be high but due to his drinking habits all his profits are washed away and he is in severe debt. Even though Frank is an owner, his debt creates an unresolved problem. The companion of Hanwell, Clive is also unsuccessful while his owner Frank is struggling with economic decline. Their life represents disappointment and downward mobility.

On their way to the flat, Hanwell and Clive hear a cry. At first, they think it to be a child's cry but later on find that it is the sound of a fox, which is hurt on its knees. It is screaming and doesn't stop due to its pain. Hanwell uses his boots and kills the fox. His intention is not really to kill the fox, but to end its suffering. He doesn't want the fox to suffer and he feels it is better to end life without bearing the pain. This connects with his life. He lives with the pain and so he knows how it will be. Therefore he kills the fox. Hanwell's pain is due to his separation from his daughters. The fox's pain is external and death ends the

excruciating pain. But Hanwell's pain is internal and there is no end or relief to his pain. He just hopes all through his life and the memories of his family acts as a driving force. He recalls the past good memories and imagines for his future life.

Hanwell's inner turmoil leads to his identity crisis. He has lost his role as a husband and a father. His role collapses after the suicide of his wife. He imagines his life with his estranged daughter that one day they will visit his house and they will watch him while he is at the work. But all these things have only been as a thought and it didn't hit the reality. When Clive asked "Are you sure they'll come, Hanwell?" (Smith 1073). He is not sure about their return, but he hopes. Clive confesses about their generation's men. We made people unhappy because we ourselves were made unhappy in irrevocable ways.... We kept blame close; we held it tight.... I think you are too hard on him... Hanwell had a beautiful way of hoping. (1073). Though Hanwell experiences isolation, he doesn't hold on to it. He rather attempts to rebuild his fatherhood's identity. Smith presents hope as a strategy to restore Hanwell's identity.

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