

## Search for Authenticity: Simulated Reality in Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*

NEHA DUBEY

### ABSTRACT

The novel *The Autograph Man* is not much acclaimed widely as the first novel *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith but one cannot eschew the potentiality of Smith dealing not only with hybridity and multiculturalism but the contemporary phenomena of postmodern fiction that intensely conglomerates the plurality, self-reflexivity, discourses about popular fiction, cinematic and hyper-real aura affecting the contemporary social reality. In the age of globalization every work of art and system of cultural reproduction is highly dominated by the commercial and reified consumer capitalism. The reproduction has been made plausible through the mass media and technology that actualize itself in televisual identity, movies serving bourgeoisie and internet a new polyvalent form of reproducing social and cultural artifacts. Smith successfully articulates to the new forces of capitalist culture; an escape from his reality; an encounter of real and hyperreal; comprehension of the protagonist outside his real world. With new sincerity Smith holds an insight of dealing with 'critical' and 'cultural' aspect of postmodernism and represents Baudrillard's hyperreal theory in the context of her novel's protagonist spurious and apocryphal life, hollow referent between faith and fame. The paper analyzes here the 'authentic' and 'fake' self, the complexity in personal and professional life and an absence simply because s/he is not able to fit in either of the two and belies according to the lexicon of international gestures and we see the individuality melting in 'symbols'

**Key Words:** Self-reflexivity, cinematic and hyperreality, consumer capitalism, absence, and lexicon of International Gestures.

“Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce.” (Adorno and Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry”, 1)

The year 2000 is not only a commencing year of a century but a beginning of new phenomena in trends in social and cultural life. During the first decade we see a biggest fantasy film, *Lord of the Rings* by Peter Jackson, the fantasy not the truth is reproduced in the movie but still it makes you believe the ‘real’ behind the façade i.e. hyperreal or simulated reality. In one scene Gandalf one of the major characters says to Pippin that time has come to make history and write your name in history (Peter Jackson).

This making of history inadvertently is just a fantasy fiction of a writer but the audience believes to be true knowingly that it is just the fantasy that is recreated but unlike Disneyland and other wax museums of UK and USA; the other side of this hyperreality we see in the movies like *Jurassic World*(2015) where every creature who has been extinct is recreated as was in past, for fun and serves the capitalists when the spectators have an impression of involving in this reality and side by side they are propelled to buy products.

But much before these fantasy reproduction, Umberto Eco in 70's visited America and wrote his experiences of hyperreality that he named “Travels in Hyperreality.” He talks about American civilization that is exceedingly clutched to reality and to attain they produce absolute fake or perfect replica, more real than reality itself. He details the American states and cities like Florida and California, house of theme parks, haunted mansions, wax museum of Movieland Wax Museum and the Palace of Living Arts, Musée Conti, Miami Wax Museum unlike European (neglected and live) ecstatic, loud and sensational. There is a laundry list of such work in every place of America that in Eco's words:

“...they comment on the various scenes with long captions in sensational tones; they combine historical reconstruction with religious celebration, glorification of movie celebrities, and themes of famous fairytales and adventure stories; they dwell on the horrible, the bloody; their concern with authenticity reaches a point of reconstructive neurosis.”(13)

They create illusory effect on consumers and make them ravenous to buy. America is a suitable place to develop celebrity culture where holography and philography are professions. Alex Li- Tandem, Half Chinese, Jewish ancestry living in suburb of southern London, an imaginary place, Mountjoy is totally captivated by Hollywood movies and their culture, irrespective of his own ambience, society and culture like every other citizen of any country whom America is a big dream to actualize his own self, it attracts you to preserve the past and celebrate as the real facsimile and its movies are the biggest source of reproducing nostalgic, past-‘izing’ and futuristic utopias; unreality is seemed a perfect reality that creates ‘a network of references and influences that finally spread also to the products of high culture and the entertainment industry’(Eco7). That finally leads to mediate the understanding of the self since it subdues one’s own self and the person starts living in the constant flux and desires for perfection; there always hovers a need to fill the personal relations’ vacuity that movies and fabrication of fiction stimulate him and he seems enjoying it and he needs reality no longer.

The consumer culture wants people not to be their slaves but deflates them insidiously with their ‘lack’ and makes them relishing their kitsch, desiring to fill their ‘lack’ with replication of fake and changing their ideology through fabricated myths and utopias. They create a hollow ‘sign’ that ultimately removes difference between sign and its reference, not the image but the copy of the same thing is relished. Alex is irrevocably idolizes Hollywood actress Kitty Alexander, personal vacuity in his life is accosted and filled by unrealistic mechanism of replacement and

Kitty who substantially lurks in his life until untoward confrontation of real and fake in a quirky journey of America realized through Honey, a dealer of autograph collection, once a prostitute. Alex is a product of televisual identity, the time when computer was introduced and described in the book as the black box. iconoclastic, that gives personal freedom but definitely that also determined by the postmodern iteration of rejecting paranoid state and accepting schizophrenia since computer has no connection with past and future but present. The novel opens with a prologue named Zohar where scenes of wrestling match is introduced between Big Daddy and Giant Haystack "one huge man from TV. "His name is Big Daddy and right now he is the most famous wrestler in Britain. He is like God [...]. Everybody likes him..." (AM).The target of the lexicon of International Gesture is to define the celebrity culture from the TV:

"[T]he thing is, they are not here to express genuine feelings, or to fake them and dress them up *natural* like on TV \_they are here to demonstrate *actions*. And all the kids know that. Any fool can tell a story—can't they?—but how many can demonstrate one, e.g., *this is what is, mate, stripped of all its sentiments*."(38)

Philip Tew illustrates the wrestling match demonstrating the narrative and archetypal nature of the cultural practices that contribute to the complex set of beliefs and exchange that constitute celebrity and in which the four boys participate actively as audience. (57). Alex with his father Li-Jin and friends Adam and Rubinfine goes to watch it and happens to meet first philographer Joseph Klein, a Jew obsessed with autograph collection, a quality of accepting celebrity culture and dealing with the reproduction of fake; he describes his profession as, "I am an Autograph Man... This is the simpler game than chess. Simpler even than snakes and ladders. This is a slow, malicious game...of ticktacktoe." (AM) After twelve years the novel opens with Alex as an adult suffering from a traumatic experience, the death of his father that has changed his life totally that trauma he could never reconcile with leaves him alienating and rejecting

the reality. He starts rejecting the existence of self, that is 'a fluid sense of identity problematic experience of reality' (Terentowicz-Fotyga, 57), he has issues with his relations and now unable to have harmonic relations with his girlfriend Esther, his rejection of not only restricts with personal life but in social and cultural practices he recoils from religion (Judaism), traditional practices, to him all seems pointless and hollow. He is thoroughly abducted by sign nothing authentic or real but an abyss of "the tension between symbolic and the mundane" (Michiko Kakutani). His rejection of pain leads him to attraction towards fame and popularity that can only attained by him through such profession i.e. autograph collection; his life's meaning and authenticity totally subdued by materialism or Goyishness, while Smith writes for him deals in 'shorthand of experience', 'The TV generation' and 'one of generation who watch themselves'. As Superman finds solace in his Fortress of Solitude Alex finds himself in simulated reality of fantasy and computer screen that takes not him to sadness but mockery. James Wood accuses Smith of dealing with the culture while symbols supersede experience and reality:

"And if Smith is really concerned about Alex's destiny, his wandering in the field of signs that is his career, then why does the novel so willingly indulge in just the sort of pop-culture vacancy that Alex tries to resist? Such vacancy is embedded deep in the texture of the prose." (N. Pag.)

Seemingly endless degeneration of reality makes his life a representation of hyperreality albeit Smith takes him back to his own self but before procurement several incidents take place in his life including epiphanies to hoard from malaise. The life of Alex Li-Tandem is an existentialist due to the failure of him to reconcile with the death of his father's memory and in order to escape from pain he seeks refuge in refurbished symbols and fame. His repressed desires make him doubtful, unfriendly, and nonchalant obsessed with referents that attitude is rampant amongst the youth of globalized culture. He knows several

movies of Kitty Alexander but could not perform Kaddish properly. His rejection of Judaism obliquely suggestive of his failure of rootedness in his own culture but not because of multicultural ambience but globalization and impact of the 'aura' that believes in reproduction. Wood analyses the novel as:

"The books conceptual grid is plausible enough. The problem is Alex, and the novel's assessment of his nullity. He is simply an absence we learn little about him except that he loves Kitty Alexander and is a rather faithless friend and boyfriend. His chosen profession does not yield pathos, as perhaps Smith hopes, but derision."(N. Pag.)

Through the prism of celebrity culture and hyperreality he categorizes every relations; his relation with Esther is quite ambivalent he loves her but simultaneously he does not remember things related to her it may be her title of thesis or the books she recommends to read nor her operation time to present there. He wants his love to be at distance like in the movies because he is in awe of her beauty that is definitely mortal but he wants that to be her fan always. He seems himself a celebrity though he possesses no fan base. He is very much conscious ironically for his exploration of meaning:

"At the roundabout, wanting for a safe moment to cross the street, Alex—Li tries to imagine his defense if his life were on trial, that is, if he had to prove its worth. It is a kind of imaginary text he carries around with him, along with his obituary, because somewhere in Alex's head he is the greatest, most famous person you never heard of. And who else is going to do it? After all, he has no fans."(Smith, 151)

For the search of authenticity in life he sets out for America, a place that believes in hyperreality the biggest reality to attend an Autographicana Fair and traces Kitty, now a retired form Hollywood, an old woman captivated by her agent once used to be her husband, Alex's greatest pursuit in his life that he longs but what does he find from his journey from a suburbia to a place that adores simulacrum. Tew also asks "if she subliminally desired, then what does this longing represent?" (62). His journey makes him to be reconciled with the nullity of his life

and the social and cultural crises he suffers from and feels reclusive. In America he catches the same idolized International Gestures in the actress moves and mannerism:

“She made a movement very familiar to Alex- Li. It was from the dressing room scene, in which May Ling begs the stage manager to make her an understudy. A quick forward thrust of her head, chin up, eyes pleading and then an impossibly poignant retraction. Everything in its box, including all feelings.”(223)

The cinematic images refer to dead referents of Baudrillard's fourth stage where simulated reality or evil occupies the stage. *The Girl from Peking*, a movie of Kitty that Alex idolizes 'he knelt down before the television', but there nothing Asian in her not even her eyes that were made up artificially look short in the movie. Smith in her essays collection writes "You watch too many films' is one of the great modern sentences. It has in it a hint of understanding regarding what we were before and what we have become" (391). Alex is also not perturbed by the distorted reality of Hollywood movies. His long awaited wish to meet Kitty is a kind of simulacrum over the real Jewishness vs. Goyishness. The life at Mountjoy offers Alex nothing but prods him to fascination towards the simulation and a world of fame that deflates him about the existence of himself and his religiosity; it fears him the mortality of life but this fantasized world he could represent as he wants or as long as he desires. Terentowicz-Fotyga defines Mountjoy "no longer functions as a site of cultural memory; the past proves but a fake spectacle, representation deprived of a referent.... Social, Cultural and political practices becomes subsumed by media simulation and the city turns into the matrix of postmodern mediaspace." (72) Palpably he sees the illusion of this life and the state of volatilizing he starts recuperating but he must undergo the purification rites that happens in epiphany when he discovers the letters sent to Kitty by him are prose-poems that first time realizes Alex his own existence meaningful. This second half of the book and Alex's trajectory to simulated reality

he happens to face several incidents that initiates the reformation to accept reality. He meets there another philographer Honey, she asserts how in this fantasy world of Hollywood racial prejudices preoccupies toward black female and minorities and how Honey herself is a stereotyped character who loves to be watched, Tracey L. Walters contextualizes Honey's character both Jezebel, or overly sexualized predator and the Mammy, the kind, take charge caretaker when she helps find Kitty Alexander (135). The media creates the character what behavior is supposed to be normal. To achieve this 'normalcy' it distorts the sign and transforms into a dead referent. But this reference or decoding by the audience and spectator is no single in comprehending meaning but polysemic in nature and depends on the context of social and cultural system. The theory by Stuart Hall of Encoding/Decoding Model applies to the novel in the sign system of Alex's understanding the correct meaning due to his lack of fit. The message has multiplicity and plurality in meaning and never ubiquitous that is decodable through the historicity of one's self-consciousness and reflexivity. If one is unable to decode the correct one it is the 'failure' of the decoder not of the encoder. The fourth level of Hall's theory Oppositional Code insists on the connotative message before deciding the effect of any message or production it must be clear its importance in the society because the decoder is never passive receptor. It is the contradictory nature of the decoder to fail grasping the real worth of it. The theme parks have a purpose to earn money by alluring people and media produces desires not need to buy not according to Maslow's pyramid but unnecessary items. Alex's fixation to autograph collection is not only a profession but an escape from the real mortal world of pain to him that is not deal—able due to his lack of fit in.

Smith divides the novel into two parts structuring on religion (i) Mountjoy: The Kabbalistic Alex-Li Tandem, Ten branches of Kabbalistic Tree of Life, (ii) Roebling Heights: The Zen of Alex-Li Tandem: Ten Bulls, a Zen parable based on

Kakuan. The religion is a process of social relations and Smith uses it as imagery in the fragmented society where one cannot identify oneself accosted to religion. Alex's loss of his father makes him religiously vacuous (a kind of losing God) and rigid to accept the spirituality and unity:

"The journey to God. It's very long. It is quiet dull [...]. But for Alex there was no merging, no loss of self. He didn't understand this idea of unity in nothingness. That sort of thing was beyond him. He felt no magic." (AM)

To set Kitty free from his agent, comes back with her but the false news is spread into media that Kitty has died that favours Alex selling the autographs' of her in auction on high price while Esther experiences the bizarre act of not telling Kitty about her false news of death while making money from 'slow malicious game'. But to keep his promise Alex gives the money to Kitty so that she can go and start her fresh life. There occurs the second epiphany:

"it's your money: he said, "and it's pointless giving it back even when they find out you're not...then it'll just be worth more because you'll be the actress who everybody thought was dead and her autograph went for such and such on the day everybody thought she was dead and on and on. That's the way it works. It's all madness anyway. Take it, Kitty. Take it and bloody run!

[...]

"You're a *good* boy', said Kitty, patting his face. 'I'm very very glad we meet. You're a realist, like me. This is good. You kill me, but then you resurrect me. And you are forgiven.'" (397)

The false death of Kitty offers the death and shattering the illusion of simulacrum and he when Adam, Alex's friend asks to paste the autograph of Kitty he denies to paste beneath the letters of Hebrew but his father's a very personal touch and to return to his own self. This recuperation redeems the efficacy of celebrity culture and resolves the conundrum of searching authenticity in his own mundane suburbia of Mountjoy. He

learns that 'actual life is unavoidable and painful' and the desire for symbols ends with the reconciliation with the memory of his father's death. The novel ends with an Epilogue Where Alex offering Kaddish after 17 years of his father's death that not only ascertains the displacement of simulacrum or hyperreal image that checks the self-understanding to reality and accepting the challenges of religion to witness the loss of his father in memory. The offering of Kaddish is not in the manner of the lexicon of International Gesture but the genuine self or real gesture unlike any televisual performance. The novel begins with Jewishness and ends with Zen Buddhism. The Goyishness or the materialistic side of a person who thinks that "the collector is the savior of objects that otherwise be lost". With the death news of Kitty and leaving Alex is the end of artificiality and with the rituals the restoration of Alex is possible. And he learns to accept the challenges and pain of life under the paternal figure God.

#### WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. 1993. "The Culture Industry." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum.
- Eco, Umberto. 1986. *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays*. William Weaver. (Tr.). New York: A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book.
- Jackson, Peter. 2003. (Dir.) *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Hollywood: New Line Cinema.
- Kakutani, Michiko. 2002. 'An Elusive, Whimsical Autograph'. The New York Times. 25 September. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/25/books/books-of-the-times-an-elusive-whimsical-autograph.html>.
- Smith, Zadie. 2002. *The Autograph Man*. New York: Penguin.
- Terentowicz-Fotyga, Urszula. 2008. Print 'The Impossible Self and the Poetics of the Urban Hyperreal in Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*'. *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*. Tracey L. Walters (ed.). New York: Peter Lang.
- Tew, Philip. 2013. 'Celebrity, Suburban Identity and Transatlantic Epiphanies: Reconsidering Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*'. *Reading Zadie Smith*. Philip Tew (ed.). London: Bloomsbury.

- Walters, Tracey L. 2008. 'Still Mammies and Hos: Stereotypical Images of Black Women in Zadie Smith's Novels'. *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*. Tracey L. Walters (ed.). New York: Peter Lang.
- Wood, James. 2002. 'Fundamentally Goyish'. *London Review of Books*. 24(19) October 3. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n19/james-wood/fundamentally-goyish>.