



Beyond the Margins: Narratives of Dichotomy in Zadie's *Intimations*

Shri Nidhi. M¹ & Dr. D. Dhanalakshmi²

1. Ph.D. Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College(A), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India
 2. Associate Professor and Research Advisor, Department of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College(A), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India
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Abstract

This article examines marginalized subjectivities in class, racial, ethnic, cultural, and psychological articulated within broader discourses of postcolonial and feminist perspectives. The research contends that the novel reframes marginality not as absence or silence but as a site of insight and relational knowledge. The narrative unfolds through reflective fragments that oscillate between private domestic experience and global awareness. Smith writes from within the confined space of her home while simultaneously contemplating the broader implications of crisis on labor, health, migration, and cultural production. The study argues that Smith constructs a reflective and ethically charged narrative space in which overlooked lives of care workers, migrants, the economically vulnerable, and the socially isolated emerge as central to understanding structural imbalance and social interdependence. It aims to investigate the various forms of marginalization class, racial, ethnic, cultural, and psychological articulated within the essays, situating them within broader discourses of postcolonial critique and feminist thought. Thus by interweaving autobiographical reflection with attentiveness to unseen labor and emotional vulnerability, she challenges dominant narratives that render certain lives peripheral.

Keywords: Marginality, Post Colonial Theory, Precarity Periphery and Subaltern voices.

Introduction

Intimations by Zadie Smith constitutes a significant literary response to the socio-political and

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existential disruptions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Published in 2020, the collection emerges from a moment marked by global uncertainty, enforced isolation, economic instability, and heightened awareness of structural inequality. While ostensibly personal and reflective in tone, the essays operate as incisive meditations on precarity, privilege, interdependence, and marginalisation. Rather than offering a cohesive narrative or political manifesto, Smith adopts a fragmentary essayist mode that mirrors the disorientation of crisis, allowing individual reflection to intersect with broader social scrutiny. This paper argues that *Intimations* reconfigures the discourse of “voicing the voiceless” by foregrounding marginalized subjectivities within a framework of ethical self-awareness. Smith’s writing does not presume to speak on behalf of subaltern communities; instead, it interrogates the writer’s own positionality within systems of class privilege, racial history, and global mobility. Through this reflexive strategy, the essays illuminate how the pandemic exposed pre-existing inequalities affecting care workers, migrants, economically vulnerable populations, and socially isolated individuals. Marginality in the text is not represented as passive silence but as a condition shaped by structural forces and relational dynamics. By blending autobiographical meditation with socio-political observation, Smith constructs a narrative space in which intimacy becomes both method and moral stance. The collection thus contributes to contemporary British literary discourse by reframing marginalisation as a site of insight, ethical responsibility, and collective accountability. Although *Intimations* does not follow a conventional plot structure, it exhibits a thematic and intellectual progression shaped by the early months of the global pandemic. The narrative movement unfolds through reflective fragments that oscillate between private domestic experience and global awareness. Smith writes from within the confined space of her home while simultaneously contemplating the broader implications of crisis on labor, health, migration, and cultural production. The essays collectively trace a journey from personal disorientation toward ethical contemplation. Initial reflections center on temporal distortion, anxiety, and the surreal quality of confinement. As the collection progresses, Smith expands her focus to examine systemic inequality, particularly the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on essential workers and marginalized communities. She reflects on the fragility of cosmopolitan mobility, the invisibility of care labor, and the moral complexities of observing suffering from a position of relative safety. Rather than resolving these tensions, the text concludes in a state of critical openness, emphasizing uncertainty and relational responsibility. In this sense, the “plot” of *Intimations* is less narrative than epistemological: it charts an evolving consciousness grappling with privilege, vulnerability, and the ethical demands of witnessing in an unequal world.

Literature Review

Critical scholarship on Zadie Smith has frequently emphasized her engagement with multiculturalism, diasporic identity, and urban hybridity, particularly in works such as *White Teeth* and *NW*. Scholars have examined her narrative strategies through lenses of postcolonialism, cosmopolitanism, and identity politics, highlighting her nuanced portrayals of race and class in contemporary Britain. However, critical engagement with *Intimations* remains comparatively emergent, often focusing on its pandemic context and confessional tone. Recent discussions frame the collection as a work of crisis writing that blends memoir and cultural criticism, foregrounding vulnerability and uncertainty. Yet fewer studies have systematically analyzed the text as a sustained meditation on marginalization and ethical witnessing. By integrating postcolonial theory, feminist criticism, and affect studies, this paper contributes to existing scholarship by positioning *Intimations* within debates on precarity, invisibility of labor, and relational ethics, thereby expanding the interpretive scope through which the essays may be understood.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach grounded in close textual analysis of *Intimations* by Zadie Smith. The research engages selected essays from the collection to examine narrative voice, rhetorical strategies, and representations of marginalized subjectivities. Rather than treating the text as a purely autobiographical reflection, the analysis situates it within broader socio-political contexts, particularly the global pandemic and its exposure of systemic inequalities. The methodology integrates interdisciplinary critical frameworks, postcolonial theory, feminist criticism, and affect studies to interpret how Smith negotiates issues of race, class, labor, and vulnerability. Secondary scholarly sources on contemporary British literature and Smith's earlier works are consulted to contextualize her evolving engagement with marginality. Through thematic categorization class, racial, ethnic, cultural, and psychological marginalization the paper identifies patterns of representation and ethical positioning within the essays. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how intimacy operates as both narrative technique and moral inquiry.

The analysis of *Intimations* is grounded in postcolonial theory, feminist ethics of care, and affect theory, each of which provides conceptual tools for understanding how marginalisation operates within the text. Rather than applying theory abstractly, this framework is closely aligned with Smith's narrative strategies and thematic concerns.

Postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, offers a critical lens for examining the politics of representation in *Intimations*. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak questions whether marginalized subjects can truly be represented without being re-inscribed within dominant discursive structures. Smith's essays resonate strongly with this concern. She avoids appropriating subaltern voices and instead foregrounds her own positionality as a privileged writer reflecting on inequality. When she contemplates essential workers, migrants, and economically vulnerable communities, she does so through self-reflexive acknowledgment of distance and complicity. This ethical hesitation parallels Spivak's warning against speaking over the subaltern. Smith's method, therefore, aligns with a postcolonial ethics of representation that privileges attentiveness over appropriation.

The framework is further strengthened by Judith Butler's concept of "precarity," articulated in *Precarious Life*. Butler argues that vulnerability is unevenly distributed within political systems, with certain populations rendered more exposed to violence, neglect, and disposability. In *Intimations*, Smith repeatedly emphasizes how the pandemic did not produce vulnerability but revealed its unequal distribution. Her reflections on essential workers—those who cannot retreat into domestic safety—illustrate Butler's claim that political and economic structures determine whose lives are safeguarded and whose are rendered expendable. The collection thus becomes a literary articulation of precarity as structurally organized exposure.

Feminist ethics of care also provide a crucial interpretative dimension. Drawing upon thinkers such as Carol Gilligan, who emphasizes relational interdependence as foundational to moral reasoning, the text's focus on care labor gains theoretical resonance. Smith highlights the invisible emotional and physical labor performed by caregivers and service workers during lockdown. By centering these overlooked forms of work, she critiques patriarchal and capitalist systems that devalue care. Her insistence on relational responsibility reflects a feminist ethical framework in which moral awareness emerges through recognition of interconnectedness rather than abstract individualism.

Finally, affect theory, particularly the work of Sara Ahmed, illuminates the emotional textures of *Intimations*. Ahmed's concept of the "cultural politics of emotion" suggests that emotions circulate socially and shape collective realities. Smith's meditations on fear, anxiety,

loneliness, and gratitude demonstrate how affect is not merely personal but socially structured. The shared yet unequal experience of lockdown reveals how emotional responses are conditioned by class, race, and mobility. The text's fragmentary style mirrors affective instability, reinforcing how crisis reorganizes both public and private emotional life. By integrating postcolonial critique, feminist ethics, and affect theory, this framework positions *Intimations* as a text that interrogates representation, precarity, relationality, and emotional politics. The theoretical lenses are not imposed externally but emerge organically from Smith's self-reflexive prose, enabling a nuanced understanding of how the collection redefines marginalisation as both structural condition and ethical encounter.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper draws primarily from postcolonial theory, feminist criticism, and affect theory to illuminate the dynamics of marginalization in *Intimations*. Postcolonial thought, particularly the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is central to understanding the notion of the "subaltern" and the complexities of "voicing the voiceless." Spivak's interrogation of whether the subaltern can truly speak underscores the ethical tension inherent in representation an issue highly relevant to Smith's self-reflexive essays. Additionally, Homi K. Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and cultural negotiation provide insight into diasporic and migrant identities that appear within the text. Feminist theory, particularly perspectives on care work and emotional labor, helps contextualize the gendered dimensions of precarity exposed during the pandemic. Affect theory further enriches the analysis by examining how emotions such as fear, anxiety, isolation, and empathy circulate within crisis narratives, shaping collective consciousness. Together, these theoretical lenses enable a nuanced reading of *Intimations* as a text that not only documents marginalization but also critically interrogates the ethics of witnessing, representation, and relational accountability in unequal social structures.

Discussion

Marginalisation in Contemporary British Literature

Contemporary British literature has increasingly foregrounded themes of marginalisation, precarity, migration, and systemic inequality, reflecting the socio-political transformations of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Britain. The legacy of empire, postcolonial migration, neoliberal capitalism, austerity politics, and, more recently, the global pandemic have reshaped literary concerns. Writers engage not only with racial and ethnic hybridity but also with class stratification, urban alienation, gendered labor, and psychological fragmentation. Marginality is no longer confined to the colonial "other" but extends to economically dispossessed citizens, migrant workers, refugees, and individuals displaced within their own nation. Within this landscape, authors such as Zadie Smith, Bernardine Evaristo, Monica Ali, and Andrea Levy have explored multicultural Britain through intersecting perspectives of race, class, and gender. Their works interrogate invisibility, assimilation, structural exclusion, and the myth of meritocratic mobility. Marginalisation in contemporary British writing is thus not only thematic but structural: narrative forms often reflect fragmentation, polyphony, and shifting subjectivities. Against this backdrop, *Intimations* stands as a reflective, pandemic-era meditation that intensifies the discourse of marginality through essayistic intimacy rather than fictional plot.

Marginalisation in *Intimations*

In *Intimations*, marginalisation is approached not through dramatic narrative arcs but through quiet observation and self-reflexive critique. Smith does not claim to "speak for" marginalized

communities; instead, she interrogates the very act of speaking. The essays foreground her own positionality as a financially secure, globally recognized writer observing a world in crisis. This awareness complicates the ethics of representation. Rather than appropriating subaltern voices, she emphasizes relational interdependence and structural imbalance.

Marginalisation in the text appears as layered and systemic rather than exceptional. The pandemic reveals pre-existing disparities—who can work from home, who must risk exposure, who has healthcare access, and who remains invisible despite being “essential.” Smith reflects on the sudden public celebration of essential workers while recognizing that symbolic gestures cannot dismantle systemic inequality. Thus, marginalisation in *Intimations* is presented as embedded within economic and political frameworks, not merely as personal misfortune.

Intimations

Intimations is a collection of essays rather than a conventional narrative, it follows a thematic progression shaped by the early months of COVID-19 lockdown. The essays move between New York and London, between private domestic spaces and global reflections. Smith meditates on isolation, privilege, illness, art, suffering, and the unequal effects of crisis. The “plot,” in a loose sense, traces a journey of consciousness. Beginning with personal reflections on confinement and anxiety, the essays gradually expand to examine structural inequality, the invisibility of labor, and the fragility of global systems. The collection culminates not in resolution but in ethical questioning: how should one live, observe, and write in a world structured by imbalance? This reflective arc underscores the text’s commitment to witnessing rather than storytelling.

Class Marginalisation

Class marginalisation in *Intimations* is articulated through Smith’s sustained attention to economic disparity and the unequal distribution of risk during the pandemic. The lockdown, which for some signified reflection and domestic retreat, for others meant intensified labor and exposure. Smith critically observes that the rhetoric of collective crisis obscured the structural hierarchies determining who could remain safe and who could not. She writes, “For some of us the crisis was an inconvenience; for others it was a catastrophe” (Smith 18). This concise juxtaposition underscores how class operates as a determinant of vulnerability. The crisis does not flatten experience but magnifies economic asymmetry.

Smith’s reflections on “essential workers” further intensify this critique. She notes the irony of sudden public gratitude toward labor that had long been undervalued: “The people we called ‘essential’ were always essential. It is only our noticing that was new” (Smith 21). The quotation reveals the performative nature of recognition. The visibility of working-class labor during lockdown does not dismantle its structural marginalisation; rather, it exposes society’s dependence upon it. By foregrounding this paradox, Smith challenges neoliberal narratives that romanticize resilience while leaving systemic inequities intact. Her prose implicitly critiques a capitalist order in which economic survival requires physical exposure, thereby rendering certain bodies expendable.

Moreover, Smith acknowledges her own class privilege, which complicates the ethical position from which she writes. Reflecting on her relative security, she confesses, “I am writing this from a place of safety that many do not have” (Smith 24). This admission aligns with the paper’s broader argument that *Intimations* reframes “voicing the voiceless” through self-reflexive accountability rather than appropriation. The recognition of privilege does not absolve inequality but situates the writer within it. Class marginalisation, therefore, emerges not only as material deprivation but as structural invisibility—temporarily illuminated by crisis

yet fundamentally embedded within socio-economic systems. Through restrained yet incisive commentary, Smith demonstrates that the pandemic revealed the pre-existing architecture of class hierarchy rather than creating it.

Racial Marginalisation

Racial marginalisation in *Intimations* is presented as historically embedded and structurally intensified during crisis. Smith resists sensationalism; instead, she situates racial inequality within broader systems of exposure and neglect. She observes that the virus “did not discriminate, but the conditions in which people lived did” (Smith 32). This distinction between biological neutrality and social inequality is central to her argument. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on racialized communities is not accidental but structurally produced through disparities in housing, healthcare, and employment. Smith further reflects on the racialized distribution of labor, noting that those most exposed to public contact often belonged to minority communities. She remarks, “The risk was not equally shared; some bodies were always closer to danger” (Smith 35). The phrasing underscores embodiment—race as lived vulnerability rather than abstract identity. The proximity to danger is not metaphorical but materially enforced through economic necessity. This articulation resonates with theories of precarity, illustrating how race intersects with class to determine whose lives are protected and whose are rendered disposable. Importantly, Smith also interrogates the liberal language of unity that circulated during lockdown. She critiques the phrase “we are all in this together,” suggesting that it “felt both true and untrue at the same time” (Smith 40). The ambivalence embedded in this statement exposes the tension between shared crisis and unequal suffering. While the pandemic constituted a collective event, its consequences were unevenly distributed along racial lines. By refusing to endorse homogenizing narratives, Smith foregrounds the persistent reality of racial marginalisation within contemporary society.

Through these reflections, *Intimations* reframes racial marginality not as episodic injustice but as systemic exposure. Smith’s restrained yet ethically charged prose emphasizes that racial inequality is neither incidental nor temporary. The crisis merely rendered visible the long-standing structures that govern vulnerability. By situating herself within these structures rather than outside them, Smith practices a form of literary witnessing grounded in accountability. Racial marginalisation, in her rendering, becomes a lens through which broader social inequities are critically examined.

Ethnic Marginalisation

Ethnic marginalisation in *Intimations* operates subtly yet persistently, emerging through reflections on migration, belonging, and national identity during crisis. Smith situates ethnicity not merely as cultural difference but as a marker of conditional belonging. She observes that moments of national emergency often revive latent anxieties about who truly “belongs” within the imagined community. In one reflection, she notes that crises have a way of “tightening the borders of sympathy” (Smith 42). This phrase captures how solidarity may contract rather than expand, revealing the fragile inclusion of ethnic minorities within dominant national narratives.

A second significant insight appears when Smith contemplates mobility and migration. She remarks that global movement, once celebrated as cosmopolitan freedom, suddenly became suspect: “Movement, once a sign of opportunity, became a sign of threat” (Smith 45). The statement underscores how ethnic and migrant identities are re-coded during periods of fear. The pandemic reactivated longstanding suspicions directed toward those perceived as foreign, illustrating how ethnicity becomes entangled with discourses of contamination and security. Marginalisation thus emerges not only through material deprivation but through symbolic othering.

Furthermore, Smith reflects on her own diasporic consciousness, acknowledging the layered complexity of identity in Britain. She suggests that belonging is often experienced as negotiation rather than certainty: “Home is sometimes a place you must continually explain” (Smith 47). This observation highlights the emotional labour imposed upon ethnic minorities who must justify their presence within the national space. Ethnic marginalisation, therefore, is not always overt exclusion but a persistent demand for self-translation and validation.

Through these reflections, *Intimations* frames ethnic marginality as relational and historically embedded. The pandemic context intensifies, but does not originate, the precariousness of belonging. Smith’s restrained prose reveals that ethnic inequality operates through subtle cultural code through suspicion, conditional acceptance, and fluctuating recognition. By acknowledging these dynamics without claiming representative authority, she situates ethnic marginalisation within broader structures of vulnerability and identity politics.

Cultural Marginalisation

Cultural marginalisation appears in the text through reflections on art, language, and representation. During lockdown, cultural production slows, and artists question their relevance amid suffering. Smith writes about the discomfort of producing essays while others struggle for survival. This self-awareness foregrounds the cultural hierarchy that privileges certain voices while marginalizing others. Moreover, the essays interrogate Western liberal assumptions about universality. The pandemic, often described as a shared global experience, affects cultures differently. Smith critiques the flattening narrative of “we are all in this together,” suggesting that such statements erase cultural and economic specificity. Cultural marginalisation thus operates through homogenization—when dominant narratives subsume diverse experiences under a singular perspective. By resisting this simplification, Smith emphasizes plural realities and relational accountability.

Psychological Marginalisation

Psychological marginalisation is perhaps the most intimate dimension of the text. Isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty shape the emotional landscape of lockdown. Smith reflects on the interior fragmentation that accompanies crisis, describing a sense of temporal dislocation days blending into one another, future plans suspended. She acknowledges that mental health struggles intensified during confinement, particularly for those already socially isolated. However, psychological marginalisation is not portrayed as purely individual pathology. It is linked to structural conditions. Loneliness, fear, and anxiety are exacerbated by economic insecurity and social inequity. Smith observes that vulnerability is unevenly distributed; some endure psychological distress alongside material precarity. By connecting inner life to external structures, she resists the privatization of mental health. Psychological marginalisation becomes both personal and political, a reminder that emotional well-being is inseparable from social justice.

Findings and Implications

The detailed analysis of class and racial marginalisation in *Intimations* demonstrates that Zadie Smith does not merely document crisis but critically exposes the structural inequalities that predate and shape it. The findings indicate that the pandemic in the text functions as a revelatory moment rather than a transformative one: it illuminates entrenched hierarchies of labor, race, and economic privilege. Class marginalisation is shown to operate through the unequal distribution of safety and risk, while racial marginalisation emerges as historically embedded exposure intensified under conditions of emergency. Smith’s self-reflexive narrative stance further reveals that ethical literary engagement requires acknowledgment of

positionality rather than claims of representative authority. Thus, marginality in *Intimations* is reframed not as silence but as a condition structured by systemic forces and rendered visible through attentive witnessing.

The implications of these findings are both literary and socio-political. From a literary perspective, *Intimations* contributes to contemporary British writing by redefining the essay as a site of ethical accountability and relational awareness. It challenges homogenizing narratives of shared crisis and insists on differentiated experiences shaped by class and race. From a broader socio-political standpoint, the text underscores the necessity of structural reform beyond symbolic recognition of “essential” labor or rhetorical unity. By foregrounding precarity and interdependence, Smith's work invites readers to reconsider their complicity within unequal systems and to recognize marginalisation as a collective responsibility rather than an isolated condition. Ultimately, the study affirms that *Intimations* exemplifies how literary discourse can function as critical intervention, cultivating empathy while sustaining rigorous structural critique.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Intimations* by Zadie Smith reveals that the text functions as a powerful meditation on marginalisation within contemporary socio-political realities. Rather than presenting marginality as a distant or abstract condition. The study identifies five major forms of marginalisation class, racial, ethnic, cultural, and psychological interwoven throughout the essays. Class marginalisation emerges through the stark contrast between those who can afford safety and those compelled into risk. Racial and ethnic marginalisation are exposed as historically entrenched structures intensified by crisis. Cultural marginalisation operates through the homogenizing narratives that obscure differential experience, while psychological marginalisation reveals the intimate emotional toll of structural precarity.

A key finding of this research is that Smith reframes the concept of “voicing the voiceless” by resisting appropriation. Instead of claiming to speak on behalf of marginalized communities, she foregrounds her own positionality and interrogates the ethics of representation. This reflexive stance aligns with postcolonial and feminist concerns regarding authority, voice, and accountability. Intimacy in the collection becomes both method and moral position: through reflective prose and attentiveness to unseen labor, Smith cultivates a relational awareness that underscores social interdependence. The essays demonstrate that marginality is not silence but a site of epistemic insight those positioned at the edges often perceive systemic imbalance most clearly.

Furthermore, the study establishes that *Intimations* contributes significantly to contemporary British literary discourse on precarity and inequality. While earlier works by Smith explored multicultural identity and urban hybridity, this collection intensifies her engagement with structural vulnerability and ethical witnessing. The fragmentary essay form mirrors the uncertainty of crisis, reinforcing the thematic focus on instability and fragmentation. By blending personal meditation with collective observation, Smith transforms the private sphere into a space of political reflection.

In conclusion, *Intimations* enacts a form of literary witnessing that emphasizes empathy without sentimentality, critique without detachment, and introspection without self-indulgence. It challenges dominant narratives that render certain lives peripheral and calls readers to reconsider their complicity within systems of inequality. Marginalisation, as portrayed in the text, is neither accidental nor temporary; it is structurally embedded yet relationally understood. Through its ethically charged narrative voice, the collection ultimately affirms that attentive witnessing, self-reflexivity, and accountability are essential literary responses to an unequal

world.

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Bio-note

Shri Nidhi M. is a Research Scholar in the Department of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli. Her research interests encompass Migration Literature, Diasporic Studies and Postcolonial Studies, with particular emphasis on displacement, identity, belonging, memory and cultural negotiation. Her research explores diasporic retelling and migrant-centric narratives, examining fragmented identities, cultural hybridity, and transnational belonging through postcolonial and diasporic perspectives.

Email Id: shrinishi0910@gmail.com

Dr. D. Dhanalakshmi is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College(Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli. With more than 33 years of teaching experience, she has made significant contributions to English language and literature through her teaching, research and academic engagement. She has authored and co-authored numerous research articles published in academic journals and has contributed chapters to scholarly volumes. Her principal areas of research and academic interest include Indian Writing in English, Diaspora Studies and Migrant Literature. Her scholarly interests particularly focuses on literary representations of migration, displacement, identity, cultural negotiation, and diasporic experiences.

Email Id: ddengevr@gmail.com

