



## History and Performance of Truth in *The Fraud*

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### Abstract

*Zadie Smith's novel The Fraud revisits the Victorian-era Tichborne Trial to interrogate questions of truth, authorship, class mobility, race, and narrative authority. Set in nineteenth-century England and partially in colonial Jamaica, the novel blends historical fiction with metafictional commentary, offering a layered meditation on authenticity and performance. Through the intertwined perspectives of Eliza Touchet, Andrew Bogle, and Sir Roger Tichborne's claimant, Smith reconstructs a public spectacle that destabilizes legal, social, and racial identities. This article analyzes The Fraud as a postmodern historical novel that challenges archival certainty and exposes the constructed nature of truth within imperial and literary traditions. Drawing upon theories of historiographic metafiction and postcolonial critique, the study argues that Smith transforms the Victorian scandal into a contemporary reflection on misinformation, authorship, and the politics of credibility. The novel ultimately repositions marginalized voices within imperial history and redefines the relationship between fiction, fact, and authority.*

*Keywords: Zadie Smith, The Fraud, historiographic metafiction, Victorian literature, Tichborne Trial, postcolonial fiction, narrative authority, race and empire*

### Introduction

Published in 2023, *The Fraud* marks a significant departure in Zadie Smith's oeuvre. Known for contemporary novels such as *White Teeth* and *NW*, Smith turns in this work to Victorian England, reconstructing the sensational Tichborne Trial (1871–1874)—a legal spectacle in which a butcher from Australia claimed to be the long-lost aristocrat Sir Roger Tichborne. The trial captivated Victorian society, dividing public opinion and igniting debates about identity, class, and truth.

Smith reimagines this historical episode through fictionalized characters and perspectives, most notably Eliza Touchet, cousin and housekeeper to novelist William

Ainsworth, and Andrew Bogle, a formerly enslaved Jamaican man whose testimony played a pivotal role in the trial. By weaving archival detail with imaginative reconstruction, Smith situates *The Fraud* within the tradition of historiographic metafiction — a genre that interrogates historical representation and narrative reliability.

This article examines how *The Fraud* destabilizes conventional notions of truth and authenticity while foregrounding issues of race, empire, gender, and class. Through narrative experimentation and thematic complexity, Smith critiques Victorian epistemologies and resonates with contemporary anxieties surrounding misinformation and public spectacle.

### **Historical Reconstruction and the Tichborne Trial**

The Tichborne Trial was one of the longest and most controversial legal cases of the nineteenth century. The claimant, Arthur Orton, asserted that he was Sir Roger Tichborne, presumed lost at sea. Despite physical discrepancies and contradictory evidence, he garnered support from segments of the British public who viewed him as a victim of aristocratic conspiracy.

Smith's novel does not simply recount the trial but interrogates its theatricality. Courtroom testimonies are rendered as performances; public opinion is shaped by newspapers and rumor. By highlighting the spectacle of the trial, Smith underscores the performative dimension of truth. Legal truth, the novel suggests, is not an objective discovery but a negotiated narrative shaped by class bias and racial prejudice.

The novel's engagement with historical fact aligns with Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, wherein historical narratives are both invoked and destabilized. Smith carefully reconstructs Victorian settings, yet she constantly reminds readers of the partiality and constructedness of archives.

### **Eliza Touchet: Witness and Interpreter**

Eliza Touchet serves as the novel's intellectual and moral center. Observant, skeptical, and socially constrained, she navigates the contradictions of Victorian society. Through her perspective, readers perceive the fragility of social hierarchies and the hypocrisies of liberal progressivism.

Eliza's fascination with Andrew Bogle reflects the novel's interrogation of race and empire. Although she considers herself enlightened, her perceptions are shaped by colonial assumptions. Smith uses Eliza's consciousness to reveal the limits of empathy within imperial structures. The character becomes both critic and participant in the systems she scrutinizes.

Eliza's narrative function underscores the theme of interpretation. She is not merely a witness to events but an interpreter of them, illustrating how all knowledge is mediated through subjective frameworks.

### **Andrew Bogle and Postcolonial Reframing**

Andrew Bogle's character introduces a postcolonial dimension to the Victorian trial. As a formerly enslaved Jamaican who supports the claimant's identity, Bogle complicates the racial dynamics of the narrative. His testimony challenges assumptions about credibility and loyalty.

Through Bogle, Smith connects the English legal spectacle to the brutal history of Caribbean slavery. Scenes set in Jamaica foreground plantation violence and the enduring trauma of colonial exploitation. By juxtaposing metropolitan London with colonial Jamaica, the novel exposes the imperial foundations of British prosperity.

Smith's portrayal of Bogle reclaims a historical figure often marginalized in archival records. His presence reframes the trial not merely as a class dispute but as an imperial drama entangled with slavery and racial hierarchy.

### **Performance, Authenticity, and Narrative Authority**

Central to *The Fraud* is the question: Who has the authority to define truth? The claimant performs aristocratic identity; witnesses perform credibility; newspapers perform objectivity. Identity becomes theatrical, contingent upon audience reception.

Smith draws parallels between Victorian media sensationalism and contemporary digital misinformation. The trial anticipates modern debates about fake news and public belief. Truth, in the novel, emerges as unstable—constructed through repetition, persuasion, and spectacle.

This thematic focus resonates with postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives. Smith destabilizes binary oppositions between truth and falsehood, suggesting instead that narratives compete for legitimacy within power structures.

## **Gender, Class, and Social Mobility**

The novel also interrogates gender and class constraints. Eliza's intellectual capabilities are circumscribed by Victorian patriarchy. Her emotional life remains constrained by social propriety, illustrating how gender shapes access to public discourse.

Class mobility appears both aspirational and illusory. The claimant's audacious impersonation exposes the fragility of aristocratic identity, yet the trial ultimately reinforces class hierarchies. Smith critiques Victorian liberalism's promise of meritocracy, revealing its complicity in preserving privilege.

## **Metafictional Techniques and Literary Self-Consciousness**

Smith integrates metafictional elements that blur boundaries between fiction and historical documentation. Letters, testimonies, and imagined dialogues create layered narrative voices. The text questions its own authority, inviting readers to scrutinize how stories are constructed.

This self-reflexivity situates *The Fraud* within contemporary literary experimentation. By foregrounding narrative artifice, Smith invites readers to consider the ethical responsibility of storytelling. The novel becomes a meditation on the novelist's role in reimagining history.

## **Contemporary Resonances**

Although set in the nineteenth century, *The Fraud* resonates strongly with contemporary concerns. Public polarization, media sensationalism, racial injustice, and debates over authenticity echo through the narrative.

By revisiting a Victorian scandal, Smith highlights the continuity between past and present epistemological crises. The novel suggests that modern societies, like Victorian England, remain vulnerable to charismatic narratives and ideological division.

## **Conclusion**

The *Fraud* represents a bold reconfiguration of historical fiction. Through its layered narrative structure, thematic richness, and postcolonial sensitivity, Zadie Smith interrogates the

instability of truth and the politics of narrative authority. The novel challenges archival certainty, foregrounds marginalized voices, and reveals the performative dimensions of identity.

By transforming the Tichborne Trial into a meditation on credibility and spectacle, Smith bridges Victorian and contemporary epistemologies. *The Fraud* ultimately affirms the power of fiction not to provide definitive truths but to illuminate the contested processes through which truth is constructed.

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