



## Oppression in the “Happy” Multicultural Land in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* Zadie Smith’in *İnci Gibi Dişler*’indeki “Mutlu” Çokkültürlü Ülkede Baskı

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### Abstract

Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) is a complex and paradoxical work since it presents a portrayal of England in the late twentieth century employing characters from various racial and religious groups. The novel focuses on the relationships between three families: the Bangladeshi and Muslim Iqbals, the English-Jamaican Joneses, and the Jewish-British Chalfens. It depicts a multicultural society, yet it also reflects on the oppression experienced by certain characters, who are marginalized due to their differences from mainstream society. This raises the question whether Smith’s novel celebrates or criticizes the discourse of multiculturalism. This study considers the novel’s attitude towards multiculturalism through the representation of oppression. It aims to explore the theme of oppression with regard to the issues of race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation because these intertwined categories determine an individual’s sense of self and the social relations between different groups. In light of Tariq Modood’s conception of multiculturalism, which underlines the importance of some principles, such as the recognition of the other, positive difference, equality, and a more inclusive version of national identity, this study argues that the novel does not seem optimistic in its treatment of multiculturalism because various kinds of oppression, such as racial discrimination, violence, stigmatization, and indifference, haunt the lives of the marginalized or disempowered characters and trigger counter-attacks from the oppressed group. While impeding the other’s integration into society, this situation also poses a threat to the social order. This reveals that a multicultural society, which embraces all differences and cherishes this diversity, is a dream difficult to be realized in England as portrayed in the novel.

**Keywords:** Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, multiculturalism, oppression, England.

### Öz

Zadie Smith’in *İnci Gibi Dişler* (2000) adlı romanı karmaşık ve çelişkili bir eserdir çünkü yirminci yüzyılın sonundaki İngiltere resmini çeşitli ırksal ve dinî gruplardan karakterler kullanarak sunar. Roman, üç aile arasındaki ilişkilere odaklanmaktadır: Bangladeşli ve Müslüman Iqbal, İngiliz-Jamaikalı Jones ve Yahudi-İngiliz Chalfen aileleri. Roman, çokkültürlü bir toplumu anlatmaktadır, ancak toplumdan farklılığından dolayı dışlanan karakterlerin yaşadığı baskıya da değinmektedir. Bu, Smith’in romanı çokkültürlülük söylemini kutluyor mu, yoksa eleştiriyor mu sorusunu ortaya çıkarır. Bu çalışma, romanın çokkültürlülüğe karşı tutumunu baskının temsili üzerinden ele alır. Çalışma, baskı temasını ırk, din, cinsiyet ve cinsel yönelim bağlamlarında incelemeyi amaçlar çünkü bu iç içe geçen kategoriler bireyin benlik algısını ve farklı gruplar arasındaki sosyal ilişkileri belirler. Tariq Modood’un ötekini tanıma, pozitif farklılık, eşitlik ve daha kapsayıcı bir millî kimlik gibi bazı ilkelerin önemini vurgulayan çokkültürlülük kavramı ışığında, bu çalışma, romanın çokkültürlülüğü işleyişinde iyimser görünmediğini çünkü ırksal ayrımcılık, şiddet, damgalama ve görmezden gelme gibi çeşitli baskıların marjinal veya güçsüzleştirilmiş karakterlerin hayatlarını kâbusa

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çevirdiğini ve baskılanan taraftan da karşı ataklara sebep olduğunu öne sürer. Bu durum, ötekinin topluma entegrasyonunu engellerken, toplumsal düzeni de tehdit eder. Bu da, tüm farklılıkları kucaklayan ve bu çeşitliliği yücelten çokkültürlü bir toplumun romanda resmedilen İngiltere’de gerçekleşmesi zor bir rüya olduğunu gösterir.  
**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Zadie Smith, *İnci Gibi Dışlar*, çokkültürlülük, baskı, İngiltere.

## Introduction

Zadie Smith’s debut novel *White Teeth* (2000) is a complex and paradoxical work because it portrays the lives of three families from different backgrounds: the Bangladeshi and Muslim Iqbals, the English-Jamaican Joneses, and the Jewish-British Chalfens. The novel draws a picture of English society by looking at the personal experiences and the interactions of first and second-generation immigrants and English people, which reflects the multicultural nature of England. However, the characters, who are different from mainstream society in one way or another, experience oppression, which calls into question this picture. Therefore, the critics, who analyze the novel, are divided as to whether it celebrates or criticizes multiculturalism. For instance, in his review of the novel in *The Observer*, Caryl Phillips claims that it “recognises and celebrates” the “cross-cultural fusion in modern-day London” (2000, para. 1-2). More recent works on *White Teeth*, however, are not in agreement with Phillips’s view. Katarzyna Jakubiak, for example, mentions the “widespread misperception of the multicultural world represented in the novel as ‘optimistic’” (2008, p. 202). Likewise, Philip Tew remarks that the “neoliberal, multicultural positivism” is the “very perspective her [Zadie Smith] novel parodies and subverts” (2010, p. 25). At this point, it is important to note that in the discussions on multiculturalism, various kinds of oppression experienced by the marginal characters seem to be overlooked to a certain extent as critics foreground such issues as national identity, identity conflicts, new ethnicities, and hybridity. For example, Dominic Head focuses on post-nationalism, ethnicity, and religion in his exploration of “the triumphs and the limits of multiculturalism” in the novel (2002, p. 183). He does not elaborate on the experiences of female characters whose stories may be different from those of male characters. Nick Bentley, who thinks that the novel represents the multicultural nation in several ways, some of which celebrate, and others undercut a utopian vision of a harmonious England, dwells mostly on national identity, and analyzes how the text dramatizes national identity and multiculturalism in both subject matter and form (2007, p. 499). Except for Irie’s story, he does not reflect on the experiences of female characters. In her essay on *White Teeth* and cosmopolitanism, Katina Rogers, similarly, contends that the novel treats hybridity and multiculturalism satirically (2008, p. 45). However, she uses the terms cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and hybridity interchangeably. She refers to “the myriad forms of marginalization”, which are related to both intra- and inter-cultural differences (2008, p. 59). Yet, she discusses identity, hybridity, patriotism, and history without mentioning religion or the sexual orientations of some characters, which are important issues as they impact on the integration of these characters into society.

This study is in agreement with the latter group of critics, who argue that the novel criticizes a utopian idea of multicultural England. However, adopting a slightly different approach, it maintains that in order to understand the novel’s attitude towards multiculturalism, its representation of oppression stemming from racial, religious, gender, and sexual orientation-based differences of the characters should be taken into consideration. It re-considers the novel’s treatment of multiculturalism by focusing on the theme of oppression because the novel invites the reader “to look beneath the veneer of light-hearted comedy that a cursory reading might foreground” where the reader can observe “the violence intrinsic to human affairs”, “poignant experiences, emotional dilemmas and violent potentials that the characters’ actions imply” (Tancke, 2013, p. 36). In light of Tariq Modood’s conception of multiculturalism, which emphasizes the centrality of recognition, positive difference, equality, and an inclusive Englishness, this study argues that *White Teeth* does not seem optimistic in its treatment of the “Happy Multicultural Land” (Smith, 2000, p. 465) due to the oppression that haunts the lives of the marginal characters, which, in turn, precludes the other’s integration into the wider society and triggers counter-attacks from the oppressed group.

Multiculturalism is a key concept that was in focus in the post-war period in England. People from various nations, cultures, and ethnicities had lived in Britain before this period. Yet, the arrival of the *Empire*

*Windrush*, which brought hundreds of Jamaicans to England in 1948, is a turning point in English history since mass migration from the former colonies of the British Empire to England started with this event. In the aftermath of the Second World War, England faced an economic crisis due to the war and the decline of the Empire. England needed new labor force. Immigrants could fill vacancies in the labor market. They generally did manual work and contributed to the economic growth of the country. Meanwhile, the demography of the country greatly changed. English society and its culture underwent a transformation, and what it meant to be English started to be debated. The influx of immigrants was not a source of celebration for some people who saw it as a problem from the start. These migrants “have not been simply perceived as individuals or new neighbours, fellow-workers or citizens. They have been seen as ‘different’; seen in terms of race, ethnicity and so on” (Modood, 2013, p. 37). That is why they were “labelled from the outside . . . as ‘immigrants’, ‘coloureds’ or ‘foreigners’” (Modood, 2013, p. 37). They were not welcomed in England or accepted as English people. Yet, these migrants saw England as their mother country, which means that they laid claim to Englishness. Before the 1960s, England aimed to assimilate minorities, but later, the policy gradually changed. Multiculturalism emerged in this context as a government policy with the aim of accommodating and integrating these new groups into the larger society (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 177). This process was not a smooth one. It caused conflicts between the newcomers and a majority of English people.

In his *Multiculturalism*, Tariq Modood, a leading authority on multiculturalism, defines multiculturalism as “a mode of integration that deals not just with individuals but also groups” (2013, p. 146). Integration is not the assimilation of the minority to the mainstream culture or just tolerance to racial, ethnic or religious others. Differences of a minority group must be recognized and respected rather than ruled out. Modood makes a distinction between negative and positive difference. Negative difference, for both group members and the majority, is associated with “alienness, inferiorization, stigmatization, stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination, racism, etc.; but also, the senses of identity the groups so perceived of themselves” (Modood, 2013, p. 34). Thus, negative difference must be “challenged and supplanted by positive difference” (Modood, 2013, p. 142). Immigrants and other minorities should be recognized and accepted with their racial, ethnic, and religious differences. Differences should not be a source of alienation or subjugation, but “group pride” and celebration (Modood, 2013, p. 37).

According to Modood, recognition, equality, respect, and a sense of belonging with others are crucial notions for multiculturalism since multiculturalism is “much more than . . . the co-presence of mutually indifferent communities” (2013, p. 60). These principles are the means for “overcoming the obstacles to the extension of citizenship across difference” (Modood, 2013, p. 114). This process depends on some changes in institutional arrangements and social relations. Firstly, institutions should treat all citizens in accord with the principle of equal citizenship without prioritizing the needs, rights or grievances of the majority. Secondly, dialogues between the majority and minority groups should not be built on the domination and subordination paradigm, but the recognition of others and treating them as equals and fellow citizens. These changes will enable both an individual and cultural minorities to have a sense of belonging to the nation. Varun Uberoi and Tariq Modood see multiculturalism in the context of Britain in three ways, all of which are interlinked. These are a multicultural society, a policy of multiculturalism, and a “vision for the nation”, by which they mean a re-configuration of both “a nation’s identity and people’s sense of it” (Uberoi & Modood, 2013, pp.129-131). A sense of belonging is directly linked to this vision for the nation. If the state provides equal opportunities for culturally diverse citizens regarding the education system, religious holidays, and economic advancement, the divisions between the minority and the majority will gradually dissolve. When cultural differences are recognized by the state and respected by the members of the majority, cultural diversity will not be seen as a disturbance, and citizens will be able to “conceive a common good” (Uberoi & Modood, 2013, p.132). This entails a change of both the nation’s identity in terms of its history, language, traditions, institutions, and people’s sense of national identity, which will be re-shaped in parallel with institutional and legal arrangements. This is the ultimate goal of multiculturalism.

The term oppression in this study ties in with what Modood associates with negative difference as mentioned above. Drawing upon Charles Taylor, he claims that “a denigration of a group identity, or its distortion, or its denial, . . . , the withholding of recognition or misrecognition is a form of oppression” (2013, p. 48). Thus, oppression will be used in this study to refer to any kind of subjugation, such as racial

discrimination, violence, stigmatization, humiliation, exclusion, and indifference, because these instances reflect the withholding of recognition and misrecognition. Moreover, such an atmosphere, contra the aims of multiculturalism, precludes one's integration into society. This study explores the theme of oppression with regard to race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation for several reasons. Firstly, although Modood discusses multiculturalism with respect to ethnic and religious minorities in his work, he draws parallels between an ethnic minority and other disadvantaged groups such as women and gays. For example, he notes that equality is "about celebrating previously demeaned identities", so it is not "peculiar to race/ethnicity" (2013, p. 64). He adds that racial and religious identities "just like gay identity . . . should not be privatized or tolerated but should be part of the public space" (2013, p. 64). Secondly, he gives priority to both a group's and an individual's integration in his theory of multiculturalism. Race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation are the overlapping categories that determine an individual's sense of self. In addition, each one of these categories informs interpersonal relationships in the novel. Lastly, conflicts in a society cannot be resolved if certain groups, such as women and homosexual individuals, continue to be regarded as others.

## Main Body

English society, as represented in *White Teeth*, does not seem to have resolved the problem of negative difference. The orientalist bias is still prevalent in society. In the eye of the majority "[An Oriental] is *first* an Oriental, *second* a human being, and *last* again an Oriental", as put by Edward Said (2003, p. 102, emphasis original). The Saidian line of thinking can be expanded to address any kind of discrimination because conflict between different communities does not stem just from racial differences. That is, although it is primarily racial otherness that leads to the discrimination of certain characters, whoever does not belong to the majority is regarded as an other. The characters in *White Teeth*, thus, cannot always manage to engage in dialogues that go beyond the boundaries of race, religion, gender, and sexual identity. In multicultural London, which "provides a meeting place of various cultures, religions, and political viewpoints" (Rogers, 2008, p. 45), the coming together of various groups generally leads to the subjugation of the ones who do not belong to the majority. Therefore, the reader is invited to call into question the "Happy Multicultural Land", which is a concept satirically used in the novel (Smith, 2000, p. 465).

*White Teeth* abounds in scenes where there is an explicit racist attitude towards non-white communities. The Iqbals, who are Bangladeshi Muslims, are among the above-mentioned post-war immigrants. What they experience in London is racism, an unfriendly society, poor living conditions, and an inferior social status. They live in Whitechapel at first, but they have to move to Willesden Green for reasons of security. In Whitechapel, they are "forced . . . into the basement while kids broke the windows with their steel-capped boots" after "that madman E-knock someoneoranother gave a speech" (Smith, 2000, p. 62). This is the *Rivers of Blood* speech a Conservative Party member, namely Enoch Powell, delivered in 1968. It was a hate speech; however, "Powell's inflammatory rhetoric against the alleged dilution of British identity by the settlement of people from the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean . . . elicited popular support" (Farrar, 2012, p. 10). It is for this speech that Powell is "iconic for those who reject multiculturalism" (Farrar, 2012, p. 10). Those rejecting multiculturalism are the ones who maintain the traditional conception of national identity. According to this conception, Britishness is a pure and homogeneous entity, which excludes non-white people. This monolithic understanding and xenophobia are closely connected. Alsana Iqbal is aware of this connection and the fact that it poses a threat to her family in terms of safety and security. She makes a comparison between Whitechapel and Willesden stating that there is not "enough of any one thing to gang up against any other thing" and that windows are not smashed in Willesden Green (Smith, 2000, p. 63). However, Willesden is not a safe place for the immigrant, either. On the contrary, it is almost the same for Alsana since "they all looked at her strangely, this tiny Indian woman" (Smith, 2000, p. 63). She cannot escape the oppressive white gaze with the change of location. Although she thinks that it is a nice place, she feels insecure in Willesden, which reinforces her anxiety and fear. Thus, when she sees signs of shops such as "*Mali's Kebabs, Mr Cheungs, Raj's, Malkovich Bakeries,*" she says, "Liberal? Hosh-Kosh nonsense!" because she believes that "[n]o one was more liberal than anyone else anywhere anyway" (Smith, 2000, p. 63, emphasis original). The co-presence of various racial identities does not mean that they are treated as equal citizens in England. A culturally diverse

society entails a policy of multiculturalism, which reinforces an individual’s sense of being a part of that nation and society. Alsana articulates and criticizes the gap between the discourse of multiculturalism and her own experiences in England.

Moreover, there is a certain distance between the racial others and English people. Hostility towards the non-white culminates in violence in the streets. The narrator mentions the “terrible eighties” and the chasm “between those who stayed indoors and those who ran riot outside” (Smith, 2000, p. 219). Those staying indoors are the non-whites who are unwanted in England. While “the mutinous mob roamed wild on the streets”, the house of the Iqbals has a funny image with relatives gathered like “desperate meetings of government and church behind closed doors” (Smith, 2000, p. 219). Alsana thinks that these “assembled weepers and moaners all looking at the treasured picture of Magid [her son] and goat” as if mesmerized are both “pathetic” and “amusing” (Smith, 2000, p. 219). The stark contrast between the violence in the street and the portrayal of the guests at home is ironic. Perhaps, as Linda Hutcheon states with regard to postmodernist fiction, irony is “the only way” the narrator can “be serious” at this point (1988, p. 39). This ironic contrast emphasizes the seriousness of the external threat for the racial minorities living in England. The riot indicates that Asian, Bangladeshi, Indian, Chinese people are regarded as the opposite group, which means that differences are not recognized, let alone respected, by the majority. This social context reveals that diversity means disturbance to the dominant group because it threatens the traditional idea of a homogeneous nation and national identity.

Recurrent discrimination turns the lives of some immigrants into a kind of vicious circle. Non-white characters want to be recognized and given equal opportunities with the English. However, they cannot always achieve these because of their negative difference. Modood remarks that “[t]here is a sense of groupness in play, a mode of being, but also subordination or marginality, a mode of oppression” that comes to the surface with the negative difference, which creates “an unequal ‘us-them’ relationship” (2013, pp. 34-35). The us versus them paradigm is dominant in each period the novel portrays. This paradigm is one of the primary reasons for the hostility to the racial other. Samad Iqbal frequently feels subjugated because of his racial difference. In the Second World War, when he fought for England together with Archie, he felt alienated to a certain extent because he was a Bangladeshi Muslim in the British army. While Archie, an English soldier, continually stared at this non-white soldier, other soldiers called him “Sultan”, which was, for Samad, an insult (Smith, 2000, p. 85). Samad wanted to prove himself to them. That is why he wanted to kill the French scientist, Dr. Perret, who worked for the Nazis in the sterilization program. Although Samad and Archie become friends later on, the stigmatization Samad experienced during the war does not come to an end in multicultural London of the nineties. That is why he feels like a second-class citizen. He fought for England and ended up with a crippled arm, yet England does not welcome him. He has studied biology, yet he works as a waiter and does not earn enough to live comfortably. Therefore, he wants to wear a sign that says:

I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A SCIENTIST, A SOLDIER . . . I AM A MUSLIM BUT ALLAH HAS FORSAKEN ME OR I HAVE FORSAKEN ALLAH, I’M NOT SURE. I HAVE A FRIEND -ARCHIE- AND OTHERS. I AM FORTY-NINE BUT WOMEN STILL TURN IN THE STREET. SOMETIMES. (Smith, 2000, p. 58)

This imaginary sign renders explicit the turmoil Samad Iqbal undergoes. Samad, like many migrants, is an embodiment of the insurmountable negative difference. Whatever he does, negative difference attributed to him by the majority and himself does not turn into positive difference. Furthermore, his sexual attraction to Poppy Burt-Jones, the music teacher of his sons, leads him to a moral impasse. He cannot live according to his family traditions in London, but he cannot go back to Bangladesh, either. As a consequence, rather than feeling included, he thinks that he has been assimilated and corrupted in England.

Unlike Samad Iqbal, who feels like a second-class citizen partly because of his job and low income, some immigrants can be successful businessmen in London. However, wealth does not save them from being victims of violent attacks. Mo Hussein, a first-generation immigrant, is one of these victims. He owns “the most famous halal butchers in North London” (Smith, 2000, p. 472). Yet, “violence and theft had become a regular part of his existence” since his arrival in England eighteen years ago (Smith, 2000, p. 472). The narrator mentions the cruelty he meets as: “Mo had been knifed a total of five times (*Ah*), lost the tips

of three fingers (*Eeeesh*), had both legs and arms broken (*Oaoow*), his feet set on fire (*jiii*)” (Smith, 2000, p. 472, emphasis original). Although the comedy on the surface seems to ameliorate the effect of this episode on the reader, it might be used to shed light on the victimization of the racially differentiated. The narrator states that all this was because of his being a “Paki” in the eye of the majority, though he is a Bangladeshi. Hussein feels helpless because police officers beat him when he reports one of these attacks. Hussein realizes that he cannot trust the authorities. Violence breeds more violence, and he reacts to the brutality of the English by joining and funding KEVIN, which is a fundamentalist Islamic group. This reveals that racial oppression and religious fundamentalism feed on each other in multicultural England, which will be elaborated on in this study.

Although second-generation immigrants seem to be able to engage in cross-cultural dialogues, their experiences at school, with their families, and with the majority show that they are exposed to racial discrimination, too. Their subjugation is mostly through stereotyping. It is an orientalist strategy used for categorizing and representing the Orient/al, which, in turn, reinforces the West and the East binary. For Said, countries, cultures, and communities of the eastern world are expressed through “a characterized ethnist typology” in European representations of the East (2003, p. 97). This typology appears as racist remarks, nicknames, and humiliation in the lives of the second-generation. Upon using marijuana at school, Millat, Samad’s son, and Irie, Archie’s daughter, are sent to the Chalfen family by the school headmaster in accord with the “constructive conduct management” program (Smith, 2000, p. 303). The attitude of Joyce Chalfen, who is a feminist and a horticulturalist, and who, ironically, takes pride in her Jewish husband, shows that even intellectuals have prejudices about the non-white other. At their first meeting, she asserts her racial superiority by inferiorizing the non-whites and Muslims. She finds the children “exotic” (Smith, 2000, p. 319) and wants to learn where these “brown strangers” come from (Smith, 2000, p. 326). They say, “Willesden”, but this is not the answer she expects (Smith, 2000, p. 319). She asks again, “Yes, yes of course, but where *originally*?”, and Millat replies, “Whitechapel . . . Via the Royal London Hospital and the 207 bus” (Smith, 2000, p. 319, emphasis original). Joyce’s obsession with origins demonstrates that Millat and Irie are, to her, firstly non-white children and only secondly classmates of her son. The stereotypes she has in mind are fixed. Joyce’s prejudice about the other is, to a certain extent, reinforced by some articles published in famous serials and newspapers. As she has read that Muslim children are generally “silent” and “terribly meek”, she is surprised when she sees that Millat does not fit into this type (Smith, 2000, p. 320). From a Saidian perspective, her attitude indicates that the orientalist discourse continues to be reproduced through books and intellectuals in the late twentieth century. However, multiculturalism cannot succeed if stereotypes continue to shape people’s attitudes towards others.

It is mainly for this reason that the state needs to make certain institutional adjustments such as some regulations in the education system. Discussing the attempts to re-structure the education system in keeping with the changing face of England, Max Farrar points to the importance of *Colour and Citizenship* report published in 1969, according to which “the educationalists should stress ‘the extent and value of *diversity* in Britain’” (2012, p. 10, emphasis original). To Farrar, such attempts contribute to structure an inclusive and more tolerant society. Such a change in institutions is in keeping with the ideals of multiculturalism as it can enable the state to address the needs and desires of various ethnic and religious communities. In the novel, Glenard Oak Comprehensive seems to have adopted the principles of equality and non-discrimination. However, the school is compartmentalized: “each section with its own rules, beliefs, laws of engagement” (Smith, 2000, p. 290). The students of dark skin color, those that belong to other ethnic minorities, and the Muslim ones tend to be friends while excluding and being excluded by white British students. Furthermore, the historical events mentioned in the novel take place as “a backdrop against which daily lives unfold” (Squires, 2002, p. 47). The narrator implies the influence of the past on the present by stating that “[t]he history, spirit and ethos of Glenard Oak . . . could be traced back to Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard (1842-1907)”, who donated money for the building (Smith, 2000, p. 303). The school was a workhouse in the colonial period. Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard did a social experiment with the natives as he was interested in “the social improvement of the disadvantaged” (Smith, 2000, p. 303). He sent three hundred Jamaicans to North London to improve their work ethic and education. When this experiment failed, its ramifications were the shattering of hundreds of lives, dislocation, abandonment, and poverty on

the side of the natives. If the ethos of the school could be traced back to a colonizer, who sees the natives as objects to be used in experiments, then, it can be argued that the colonial mindset is what lies behind the supposedly multiculturalist approach of the school. Sir Edmund is remembered and respected by the school directors as “their kindly Victorian benefactor” (Smith, 2000, p. 303). The plight of the natives, however, goes overlooked. In one sense, this points to the amnesia of English society or the selective historical memory prevalent in England. The school is a microcosm of England where multiculturalist policies cannot manage to build bridges between different communities and where the legacy of the colonial past makes it difficult to go beyond the boundary of race.

Although school directors seem to adopt a multiculturalist education policy in the parents’ meeting episode, rather than a genuine promotion of multiculturalism, intolerance and exclusion are discernible in some classes. For instance, when Irie’s class studies Shakespeare’s sonnets, what Shakespeare means by the dark lady and blackness in his sonnets causes a conflict between her teacher and Irie, who is half Jamaican. Mrs. Roody rejects Irie’s suggestion that the lady mentioned in the sonnet can be black and claims that there were not any Afro-Caribbeans in England in that period (Smith, 2000, p. 271). In fact, she does not know much about the population of non-white people in England in Shakespeare’s time, but she insists that Shakespeare cannot have written sonnets to a “lord and then a slave” (Smith, 2000, p. 272). Irie has already been feeling inferior to her classmates due to her skin color, and Mrs. Roody’s vociferous rejection of black beauty reinforces her belief in her inferiority. Those like Mrs. Roody, “who are unwilling to allow for other interpretations”, are the “gatekeepers of past beliefs and prejudices” (Moe, 2016, p. 259). In so doing, they enable the maintenance of the us versus them dichotomy in multicultural England.

A sense of belonging with others is important for an individual to integrate into society. Yet, Modood argues it is “dependent on how others perceive and treat you, not just as an individual but also as a member of a racial group or ethno-religious community” (2013, p. 147). In a suffocating atmosphere, where cultural diversity is not much celebrated, some second-generation immigrants, like Millat, are drawn to violence, drugs, and criminal acts. Millat is in search of identity, and to him, the only way to gain visibility is through aggression. He is fond of movies about mafia fathers and gangsters. He mimics such figures and styles himself after them (Squires, 2002, p. 32). He becomes the leader of a gang called Raggastani. The narrator states that “on any scale of juvenile delinquency he was the shining light of the teenage community” (Smith, 2000, p. 218). After questioning “*what was wrong with all the children*” (Smith, 2000, p. 218, emphasis original), the narrator reflects on the reason why these young people have come together as:

People had fucked with Rajik back in the days when he was into chess and wore V-necks. People had fucked with Ranil, when he sat at the back of the class and carefully copied all teacher’s comments into his book. People had fucked with Dipesh and Hifan when they wore traditional dress in the playground. People had even fucked with Millat, with his tight jeans and his white rock. But no one fucked with any of them any more because they looked like trouble. (Smith, 2000, p. 232)

Each member of this gang is bullied at school and in the neighborhood due to his ethnic origin. Each one is vulnerable to peer bullying when alone. Raggastani provides them with shelter and a sense of togetherness. Thus, the gang is an output of the subjugation that the “other” faces in England.

Not only racial but also religious differences between groups lead to problems in society, which impedes England’s being a “happy” multicultural land. The novel demonstrates that these factors are closely related. Muslim characters advocating fundamentalist Islam are the ones who are oppressed due to their skin color. Millat is one of those who support Islamic fundamentalism in order to be visible in England. He turns into a Muslim militant, and his transformation starts with his participation in a book burning affair with his crew. In fact, he does not know who Salman Rushdie is or what his book says about Islam. However, he feels resentful and frustrated. “It’s a fucking insult,” he says, “We’ve taken it too long in this country. And now, we’re getting it from our own, man. Rhas clut! He’s a fucking bador, white man’s puppet” (Smith, 2000, p. 233). Rather than criticizing him, the narrator interprets his anger in such a manner that makes the reader understand Millat’s motives:

But he knew other things. He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; . . . ; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans . . . . In short, he knew he had *no face* in this country, *no voice* in the country, until the week before last when suddenly *people like Millat* were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and *Millat recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands*. (Smith, 2000, pp. 233-234, emphasis added)

The narrator does not defend Millat or book burning, but rather sympathizes with him as he has to bear the burden of being a brown Muslim like his father and ancestors. An immigrant's having no face in a country means that cultural, ethnic, and religious differences are tolerated rather than celebrated by the majority. Likewise, Millat's having no voice in England can be interpreted as the exclusion of immigrants from decision-making processes. Moreover, as Modood underlines with regard to Muslims in Britain, "whether and what kind of integrative citizenship takes place is inevitably dependent upon majority attitudes and interests" (2013, p. 140). The ideas of Joyce about Millat, a Muslim boy, in the above-mentioned episode, where she also states that Muslim families do unbelievable things to their daughters, demonstrate the misperception of Muslims in England (Smith, 2000, p. 320). It can be argued that their identities are fixed with labels, such as "backward" and "uncivilized", by those like Joyce Chalfen. Therefore, some Muslims, like Millat and his friends, resort to aggression without a second thought. They want to assert their identity and difference in this way.

The integration of Muslims also "depends on the behaviour of some Muslims" (Modood, 2013, p. 181). As regards the issue of religion, radical Islamic groups in England pose a threat to social order and peace. Religious fundamentalism signals a shift from "religion as faith" to "religion as ideology", which "highlights a precipitous demarcation of 'us' and 'them'" (Sen, Wagner, & Howarth, 2016, p. 216). Fundamentalist Islam advocated by the members of KEVIN, which stands for "The Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation" (Smith, 2000, p. 470), fits into the definition of Islam as an ideology rather than Islam as faith. The narrator defines this radical group as "an extremist faction dedicated to direct, often violent action" (Smith, 2000, p. 470). Beneath the ironic naming of the group, then, lies an important threat to multicultural society. This is terrorism. While "terrorism can be seen as an extreme manifestation of lack of integration in Western societies", it is also what triggers Islamophobia (Wetherly, Farrar, Robinson, & Valli, 2012, p. 5). Thus, it is a twofold obstacle to make a success of multiculturalism. In other words, religious militancy is paradoxically both a cause and an effect of such Muslim characters' inability to integrate into the larger society. When Hifan talks to Millat about the ongoing "spiritual war", he says, "[W]e need to make our mark in this bloody country" (Smith, 2000, p. 295). This need to make one's mark in the country is in line with Samad's desire to kill a man in the Second World War since, in each case, the other resorts to violence in order to be visible. However, Millat is in-between with "one foot in Bengal and one in Willesden" (Smith, 2000, p. 219). This in-betweenness leads him to an inner conflict. On the one hand, he sleeps with a white girl. On the other hand, he is expected to be a devout Muslim. Millat becomes a terrorist in order to gain visibility as a Muslim. The narrator states that "he was in the forefront, the first into battle come jihad . . . a man of action, like Brando, like Pacino, like Liotta" (Smith, 2000, p. 445). The text invites the reader to question the absurd juxtaposition of jihad and Al Pacino at this point. Millat ends up shooting Archie while aiming at Dr. Perret on the launch day of Marcus' FutureMouse Project. If "a plural, changing, inclusive British identity, which can be as emotionally and politically meaningful to British Muslims as the appeal of jihadi sentiments" were reaffirmed in England, perhaps, those like Millat would not see religious extremism as a means of gaining recognition and responding to the hostility they face in England (Modood, 2013, p. 139). Yet, it bears repeating that Islamic terrorism definitely leads to Islamophobia in the West. As Modood asserts, "multiculturalism . . . cannot itself flourish in the context of fear, [and] terrorism" (2013, p. 142). Islamic fundamentalism gives birth to prejudice about Islam and Muslims. This impedes social cohesion, which is one of the goals of multiculturalism.

One detail about this armed attack shows that the imperial past of England shapes the present to a great extent. Before going to the launch hall, Millat goes to Trafalgar Square with some friends from KEVIN to "come face to face with his great-great-grandfather's enemy, Henry Havelock" (Smith, 2000, p. 503). His great-great-grandfather is Mangal Pande. According to Samad, Pande shot the first bullet in the Indian Mutiny,



and he was executed by Havelock. Millat thinks that whereas “Pande was no one” -as he is not mentioned in history books-, “Havelock was someone” -as English people have built his statue- (Smith, 2000, p. 506). Millat wants to “turn that history around” (Smith, 2000, p. 506). He taps the statue of Havelock and declares: “Round two” (Smith, 2000, p. 507). This episode reminds one of the history of his school, Glenard Oak, because in both cases the stories of colonized people are suppressed or ignored by the English. Although Samad is obsessed with his ancestor’s story and tells it on many occasions, Millat is aware that official history does not make room for his ancestor’s story. Then, the colonial past, racial hatred, and desire for revenge and recognition are closely connected in Millat’s act of terrorism.

Not only racial and religious minorities but also women should have a sense of belonging to the larger society in order to create a harmonious and inclusive society. Discussing the kind of multiculturalism he advocates, Modood remarks that it is not “gender- or sexual orientation-‘blind’” (2013, p. 63). Women of color must be visible in the public space just like men of color; they must have equal rights with the women belonging to the majority. However, certain female characters in *White Teeth* are doubly oppressed because of their skin color and gender. The novel traces their subjugation from the colonial period to the nineties so as to draw analogies and make causal connections between the past and the present. One of these connections is revealed through Irie, Clara, and Clara’s Jamaican grandmother, Ambroisa. In the colonial period, Ambroisa, a fourteen-year-old maid, was raped and impregnated by her English master, Captain Durham. When he had to leave for a mission, he entrusted Sir Edmund Glenard with the task of educating her in terms of faith and morality. The new master sexually abused her as well. The narrator satirically refers to the rape as “a little education” of the native (Smith, 2000, p. 360). The narrator brings together sexual assault and colonialism and ironically states that the Captain loved Ambroisa “just as the English loved India and Africa and Ireland” (Smith, 2000, p. 361). Sir Edmund Glenard, the benefactor of Irie’s school, is a friend of Irie’s great-grandfather and a rapist. In turning back to the colonial past, the novel arguably indicates that while the cruel treatment of the colonized is forgotten by those living in the metropole, it is remembered by the offspring of the victims. In a conversation about Irie’s intelligence with Joyce, Clara unwillingly states that it is due to the English side in her parentage. Clara regrets her statement, but she says so thinking it is what Joyce expects to hear. “It is the genes,” Joyce says, “I’m proven right *all the time*” (Smith, 2000, p. 355, emphasis original). Although Clara thinks that her intelligent genes come from her maternal heritage, not the English master, she acknowledges white supremacy in order to be on friendly terms with Joyce. It is also important to note that in this episode, Joyce reproduces patriarchal and orientalist dichotomies by associating the English man with intellect and ignoring the native woman’s traumatic experience.

Non-white women can find jobs in England, yet they are not welcomed or accepted in certain places. For example, when Archie takes his non-white wife, Clara, to a company dinner, he is dismissed from his job. Although the only reason for his dismissal is his marriage to a non-white woman, the company director states that he is not a “racialist” (Smith, 2000, p. 70). In fact, the director is a supporter of Enoch Powell concerning the issue of the immigrant population in England. While trying to make an explanation to Archie, he says, “Enoch Powell . . . does have a point, doesn’t he? There comes a point, a saturation point, and people begin to feel a bit uncomfortable” (Smith, 2000, p. 72). The director’s uneasiness about the presence of Clara at dinner is a reflection of the anxiety about the shift in the understanding of Englishness from a homogeneous notion to a heterogeneous concept in the post-immigration period. By not allowing the presence of a non-white woman, the director can be trying to maintain the supposedly pure Englishness of his company.

Unlike men of color, dark-skinned women can problematize their bodies if they see it as a marker of their negative difference. Although Millat is a second-generation immigrant just like her, it is Irie who is subject to humiliation for being a big brown girl. She is an object of ridicule at school and among the Chalfens. Upon realizing her attraction to him, Millat rejects her saying, “You’re getting a bit big. I don’t like big. You can’t have me” (Smith, 2000, p. 229). This leads Irie to an identity crisis. She is obsessed with pure Englishness and her body, which makes her feel “all *wrong*” (Smith, 2000, p. 268, emphasis original). In the aforementioned sonnet episode, she is delivered a note by one of the classmates which says, “By William Shakespeare: ODE TO LETITIA AND ALL MY KINKY-HAIRED BIG-ASS BITCHEZ” (Smith, 2000, p. 272). Irie is the embodiment of racial anxiety particularly with her body, which “signifies blackness, not Britishness” (McMann, 2012, p. 629). Unlike Millat, therefore, she problematizes her body “waiting . .

. for her transformation from Jamaican hourglass heavy with the sands that gather round Dunn River Falls, to *English Rose*” (Smith, 2000, pp. 266-267, emphasis original). For a certain period, Irie does not take pride in her difference, her body or Jamaican roots. On the contrary, she wants to eradicate her difference. She goes to P.K.’s Afro Hair to straighten her hair. The hairdresser applies ammonia to her hair, which causes great pain. Irie’s attempt ends in failure when her hair comes up in clumps. The narrator says that other women in P.K.’s are weeping or screaming as well. Meanwhile, the male section is “all laughter, all talk, all play” (Smith, 2000, p. 275). Thus, being accepted with one’s differences by the society at large seems to be easier for non-white men than it is for non-white women.

Multiculturalism entails some institutional changes, but authorities can be indifferent to the problems of immigrant women. Alsana needs help when Samad sends one of their twins, Magid, to Bangladesh without informing her. He thinks that he can save his son from the moral corruption that Muslims undergo in England. When Alsana learns that her husband has kidnapped her son, she calls “the relevant authorities” for help (Smith, 2000, p. 212). Yet, they respond as: “To be honest, love, we’re more worried about them coming *in*” (Smith, 2000, p. 212, emphasis original). The indifference and racism of these authorities run counter to the principle of equal citizenship. If multiculturalist policies observed the rights of immigrants, they would not talk to Alsana in such a discriminatory manner. Her husband victimizes Alsana as a mother, and institutions ignore the plight of the immigrant woman.

In the novel, both their own families and the larger society ostracize women who have a homosexual orientation. This shows that an ethnic or religious minority is not a homogeneous group as its members have various identities (Modood, 2013, p. 40). Although the novel does not dwell much on the experiences of lesbians, they are the dirty others according to both their family members and the white, heterosexual majority. In her *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas contends that a polluting individual “is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone” (2007, p. 140). “Happy” multicultural England does not seem to accept its “impure” members because they trespass the heterosexuality norm. The heterosexual mainstream’s treatment of Neena, Alsana’s niece and a lesbian, is not in keeping with the notions of “equal dignity and equal respect”, which are “essential to multiculturalism” (Modood, 2013, p. 48). Neena has to endure insults throughout the novel. Alsana continually insults her by calling her “Niece-of-Shame” and “Miss Clever Lesbian” (Smith, 2000, p. 346). While unaccepted by her aunt, Neena is unintelligible to Joyce. In fact, Joyce thinks that she is not homophobic. She likes gay men, and they like her. However, it is difficult for Joyce to imagine lesbian sexuality. When Neena visits the Chalfens with her partner, Joyce stares at them “utterly fixated” (Smith, 2000, p. 348). After some time, she asks Neena whether they sleep on one another’s breasts (Smith, 2000, p. 350). Joyce’s offensive remarks, weird questions, and assumptions about lesbian sexuality reveal that she cannot engage in a meaningful dialogue with the lesbian couple. Marcus, Joyce’s husband, goes one step further and asserts that “dykes” are “terrible temptations to a man” (Smith, 2000, p. 349). He fancies a relationship in which the Iqbal woman would give him “sex”, and the Chalfen man would give her “sensibility” (Smith, 2000, p. 349). He treats Neena, rather than her partner, as a sex object. Furthermore, he calls the first generation of her family “all loony tunes” (Smith, 2000, p. 349). Marcus associates reason and intellect with the western man while associating madness and sexuality with the eastern woman. Although the lesbian couple is humiliated by the Chalfens, rather than her partner, it is Neena who is stigmatized due to her skin color. It seems that “it will take time for dominant groups to learn what hurts others” (Modood, 2013, pp. 52-53). The inability of Joyce and Marcus to empathize with the lesbian couple, particularly Neena, reveals that the binary logic, which establishes dichotomies, such as white/black, the West/the East, heterosexual/homosexual, is at work in their home. As a result of this binary logic, individuals, who do not conform to the expectations of mainstream society in terms of sexual choices, are despised and excluded by the majority.

## Conclusion

The fictional world of *White Teeth* is imbued with various instances of oppression including racial discrimination, violence, humiliation, and indifference among others in both the colonial period and the late

nineties. This haunts the lives of the characters belonging to minority and/or disadvantaged groups. Hostility towards the different ones and minorities, and the fundamentalism of some characters feed one another in England. Although characters from a range of cultural backgrounds come together in the novel, their coming together does not often lead to a negotiation of differences or the recognition of the value of another community’s culture. On some occasions, the narrator seems to be hopeful that English society can be re-shaped with a new mindset. Yet, what is seen as negative difference by certain characters does not always turn into positive difference. This situation paradoxically stems from and results in inequality and misperception of cultural minorities. In this context, the goals of multiculturalism, namely an inclusive national identity and social cohesion, cannot be achieved easily. Considering the ongoing oppression experienced by immigrants and its ramifications, it becomes evident that the “Multicultural Land” represented in the novel is not a “[h]appy” one (Smith, 2000, p. 465). In other words, a multicultural society, which embraces all individuals with their differences and cherishes this diversity, is a dream difficult to be realized in England as portrayed in the novel.

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