

52. Integration and Identity Conflicts: Multicultural Dynamics in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*¹

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Abstract

Focusing on how migration and diaspora influence personal and communal identities within contemporary Britain, this article examines the multicultural and postcolonial themes in Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* (2000). The paper analyzes the consequences of decolonization and subsequent immigration from the Commonwealth to Britain, which instigated a blend of cultures and the emergence of a multiracial society. Through a detailed exploration of the novel's characters—predominantly the Iqbal family and the Jones family—the article illustrates how individuals navigate their complex cultural landscapes and how they often grapple with dual identities and a sense of rootlessness. Utilizing theoretical frameworks from prominent scholars like Said, Bhabha, Ortiz, and Pratt, the paper argues that the novel serves as a microcosm of London, showcasing interactions among diverse ethnic groups that challenge traditional notions of Britishness. Smith's narrative's structure, which weaves between past and present, underscores the persistent impact of historical contexts on contemporary lives. Hence, the article highlights Smith's portrayal of 'transculturation'—where characters somehow adapt and form hybrid identities, reflecting broader postcolonial realities. Overall, what is emphasized in what follows is *White Teeth* not only captures the essence of modern British multiculturalism but also critiques the lingering effects of colonialism on identity formation in a postcolonial world.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, postcolonial identity, diaspora, cultural integration, hybridity

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Entegrasyon ve Kimlik atıřmaları: Zadie Smith'in *İnci Gibi Dıřler* Romanında Multikültürel Dinamikler³

Öz

Bu makale, Zadie Smith'in *İnci Gibi Dıřler* (2000) adlı romanındaki çok kültürlü ve sömürge sonrası temaları incelemekte, göç ve diasporanın çağdař Britanya'da kişisel ve toplumsal kimlikleri nasıl etkilediğine odaklanmaktadır. alıřma, Britanya'ya ardışık göç dalgaları ve bunun sonucu olarak ortaya çıkan çok kültürlülüğün ve çok ırklı bir toplumun oluşmasının getirdiği sorunları analiz etmektedir. Makale romandaki özellikle Iqbal ve Jones ailelerine odaklanıp roman karakterlerinin detaylı bir şekilde incelenmesi sonucunda bu aile bireylerinin karmařık kültürel manzaralardaki konumlarını genellikle çift kimliklerle ve bir köksüzlük hissiyle boğuşurken nasıl resmedildiklerini ele almaktadır. Said, Bhabha Ortiz ve Pratt gibi önemli bilim insanlarının teorik çerçevelerinden yararlanarak, alıřma, romanın Londra'nın bir mikrokozmosunu resmettiğini ileri sürmektedir ve geleneksel Britanya kimlik kavramlarını sorgulayan farklı etnik gruplar arasındaki etkileşimleri ortaya koymaktadır. Anlatının geçmişle şimdiki zaman arasında gidip gelmesi, çağdař yaşamlar üzerinde tarihsel bağlamların sürekli etkisini vurgular. Bu sebeple, makalede Smith'in karakterlerinin Britanya toplumuna bir şekilde adapte olup daha geniş sömürge sonrası gerçekleri yansıtan hibrid kimliklerin oluşturulduğu bir "transkültürasyon" sürecine dikkat çekmektedir. Dolayısıyla, *İnci Gibi Dıřler* romanı, modern Britanya çok kültürlülüğünün özünü yakalamakla kalmayıp, sömürge sonrası kimlik oluşumunda sömürgeciliğin kalıcı etkilerini de eleştirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çokkültürlülük, sömürge sonrası kimlik, diaspora, kültürel entegrasyon, hibridlik

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Introduction

During the period of presumed de-colonization or neo-colonization which followed the dissolution of the British Empire in the first half of the 20th century, there occurred immense immigration from the Commonwealth to the motherland. This migration was driven not only by financial problems in colonized countries but also by the need for labor in England, which resulted from the overwhelming effects of two world wars. Immigration from various countries continued without limitation until two legislative acts concerning Commonwealth immigration were passed in Parliament in 1962 and 1968. Following these acts, immigration from formerly colonized countries never ceased but did decline in number, despite occasional surges in 1986 and 1990 (Hampshire, 2005, p. 2). In the short term, England experienced immediate riots in Nottingham and London, yet in the long term, this mass migration process resulted in the emergence of a colorful, multiracial, and multicultural England (Spencer, 1997, p. 87).

Out of such a culture, the literary voices began to diversify, giving rise to a new sub-field of English literature: diaspora literature. This emerged from the *sour-sweet*⁴ experiences that migrants shared both physically and psychologically as they struggled to survive in a very conservative society like England, far from their homelands. Once colonized and enslaved, these people became workers and servants to the masters and monarchy, both still entrenched in their thrones. Nonetheless, as time passed, these migrants introduced a new voice to the literature of the island, creating a new type of postcolonial discourse. In his groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said demonstrated that the Orientalist discourse of the Europeans was a construct of Western nations, and the knowledge they created and imposed as the sole truth helped them secure a dominant position, contrasting with the diminishing self-image of the otherized Eastern nations (Said, 2003: 3). After a prolonged period during which such an ideology was propagated, postcolonial critics and authors including Said, Fanon, Bhabha, Achebe, Lamming, and Naipaul began *writing back to the Empire*⁵ seeking to dismantle the representations established for the East and its peoples. Furthermore, writers like Naipaul, Mo, Ishiguro, Kureishi, and Smith crafted novels that explored the experiences and relationships between colored migrants and white Englishmen. These works introduced a new perspective on both white and colored individuals, as they depicted the interactions among multiracial characters. The efforts of the postcolonial authors mentioned above align with postmodern concepts of “unmaking” or “deconstructing,” as they challenge colonialist meta-narratives, dismantle predefined roles for both colored and white individuals, and reduce the power differential between them.

Zadie Smith's first novel, *White Teeth* (2000), features a diverse set of characters from various races and social classes, representing the multicultural nature of contemporary Britain. The plot revolves around three families: the Iqbals, a lower-class Muslim, Bengali family including Samad, Alsana, and twins Magid and Millat; the Joneses, a lower-class family with English Archibald Jones, Jamaican Clara Bowden, and Irie; and the middle-class Chalfen family with a Jewish background including Marcus, Joyce, and Joshua. Except for Archie, all are immigrants in England, though the Chalfens have settled on the island and secured a prominent social position due to their high education level. However, the narrative focuses primarily on the Iqbals and the Joneses. Archie and Samad befriended each other during the WWII but lived apart until Samad immigrated to England and began working as a waiter.

⁴ There is a reference here to Timothy Mo's 1982 novel *Sour Sweet* which portrays the painful adaptation process of a migrant family in England.

⁵ Another reference to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) which is one of the theoretical texts that inaugurates postcolonial criticism.

His wife, Alsana, used her sewing machine “old Singer” in the kitchen for “a shop called Domination in Soho” (Smith, 2000, p. 55). After years of savings, they moved from East London, which they considered unsafe for raising children, to North London, a more liberal area (Smith, 2000, p. 59).

The novel begins with Samad's old friend, Archie, attempting suicide by gassing himself in his car, feeling useless and hopeless after divorcing his Italian wife. He is dissuaded by “Hussein-Ishmael, a celebrated halal butcher,” whose absurd but threatening remarks include, “Do you hear that, mister? We're not licensed for suicides around here. This place is halal Kosher, understand? If you're going to die around here, my friend, I'm afraid you've got to be thoroughly bled first” (Smith, 2000, p. 7). Subsequently, he meets Clara Bowden, a Jamaican, and marries her. Both Clara and Samad's wife, Alsana, become pregnant at about the same time, leading to the Iqbals having twin sons named Magid and Millat, while the Joneses have a daughter, Irie. Feeling that English culture is corrupting his family values, Samad sends Magid, the smarter twin, to Bangladesh, hoping a traditional education might save him. Conversely, Magid returns from Bangladesh transformed into a complete English gentleman with no ties to Islam or Bengali culture, dashing Samad's hopes. He begins working with an atheist scientist Marcus Chalfen. In contrast, Millat goes through two contradictory phases: First, he grows into a handsome young man who engages in casual sex, smokes weed, and is influenced by gangsters in movies, identifying with them for life. Eventually, he takes a darker path and joins a fundamentalist Islamic group ironically called KEVIN – Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (Smith, 2000: 295). Irie, secretly in love with Millat for years, follows him desperately but never confesses her feelings. Both she and Magid are punished by being made to work with Joshua Chalfen due to their misbehavior at school, where they meet Joyce and Marcus Chalfen. As the story progresses, Millat, Irie, and later Magid develop close relationships with the Chalfens. Joyce, a botanist, shows more interest in her garden and Millat than in her own son, while Marcus is a scientist working on a project called “Futuremouse,” aiming to genetically enhance a mouse. Both Irie and Magid spend more time working with Marcus at the Chalfens' than in their own home. In the final chapter, Marcus aims to publicize his project, gathering all the characters for the occasion. Samad, Alsana, Archie, and Clara come to support their children, Irie and Magid. Millat, intending to thwart what he sees as Marcus's affront to divine creation, aims to shoot him. Similarly, Clara's mother and her close friend Ryan, members of the “Witnesses of Jehovah,” arrive to protest, as does Marcus's son, affiliated with the environmentalist group “FATE,” who opposes the project on animal rights grounds. In a dramatic conclusion, Millat, high on hashish, aims to shoot Dr. Perret, Marcus's mentor, the Nazi scientist. Archie, noticing Millat's intentions, intervenes and is shot instead. This incident reveals that Archie had previously saved Dr. Perret's life during the WWII when Samad had pressured Archie to kill Perret, then known as “Dr. Sick.” Instead of complying, Archie was wounded when Perret turned the gun on him, leaving Archie lame for life.

Multicultural Dynamics in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

White Teeth presents a wide panorama of the contemporary multicultural state of Britain. It covers the relationships of three families from different classes and races over a period that begins with the war years of Samad and Archie and stretches to 1999. Having grown up in a family with an English father and a Jamaican mother, like Irie in the novel, Zadie Smith reflects a microcosm of London that includes the personal stories and experiences of characters with diverse ethnic cultures and backgrounds (Watchtel, 2010, para. 2). The variety in the characters and their distinct experiences flavor the novel in such a way that it resembles a comedy show one might encounter on TV. Smith underscores this quality of a metropolis in England by stating:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. (Smith, 2000, p. 326)

London is “the backdrop that channels social interaction,” a modern city where people from different backgrounds come together to challenge the idea of a homogenous culture and Britishness (Fernandez, 2009, p. 143). As seen in the excerpt above, Irie has a name that stems from her Jamaican origins meaning “everything OK, cool, peaceful”, and her surname from her English father, Archie Jones (Smith, 2000, p. 75). Her mother Clara, who marries an Englishman, is also a descendant of an English colonizer named Captain Charlie Durham who raped her grandmother, Ambrosia while she was being taught by him. The debauchery and immorality of the colonialist male mind is criticized by depicting such a scenario in which an innocent and weak girl is abused by a powerful and authoritative man. The captain leaves Ambrosia alone in the island and during the birth of her daughter, Hortense, who is the mother of Clara, there happens an earthquake when, once again, one of Captain's friends tries to seduce Ambrosia, and the narration continues at this moment with a sarcastic tone:

If this were a fairy-tale, it would now be time for Captain Durham to play hero. He does not seem to lack the necessary credentials. It is not that he isn't handsome, or tall or strong, or that he doesn't want to help her, or that he doesn't love her (oh, he loves her; just as the English loved India and Africa and Ireland; it is the love that is the problem, people treat their lovers badly) all those things are true. But maybe it is just the scenery that is wrong. Maybe nothing that happens upon stolen ground can expect a happy ending. (Smith, 2000, p. 361)

Not only are non-English characters portrayed in close relationships with each other, as in the case of Samad, Alsana, Magid, and Millat, but they also engage with English characters—they marry, form intimate and business partnerships, and share deep friendships. In other words, they come together to create a multicultural society. London, as a “contact zone” in the sense that Mary Louise Pratt has coined, provides an ideal space for these diverse cultures to influence each other reciprocally (as cited in Ashcroft et. al., 2008, p. 48). In *White Teeth*, the actions and reactions of various groups, characters, and ethnicities in certain situations affect others, leading to changes and modifications in their attitudes, actions, or ideas. Notably, when Irie and Millat from the Iqbal and Jones families meet the Chalfens, the moment is described as crossing a border: “When Irie stepped over the threshold of the Chalfen house, she felt an illicit thrill... She was crossing borders, sneaking into England” (Smith, 2000: 328). After crossing such a border, Irie begins to question her life and her own family, experiencing a sense of alienation as she is enchanted by the middle-class white English lifestyle:

She had a nebulous fifteen-year-old's passion for them, overwhelming, yet with no real direction or object. She just wanted to, well, kind of, merge with them. She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfishness. The purity of it. It didn't occur to her that the Chalfens were, after a fashion, immigrants too (third generation, by way of Germany and Poland, née Chalfenovsky), or that they might be as needy of her as she was of them. (Smith, 2000, p. 328)

Such a relationship among diverse individuals and cultures, involving reciprocal influences, is termed “transculturation” by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz. These influences lead to distinct reactions and changes in the individuals and groups affected (Ashcroft et. al., 2008, pp. 213-214). To illustrate further, the “Futuremouse” project in the novel by Jewish scientist Marcus Chalfen and Nazi scientist Dr. Perret culminates in significant tension at the end. This tension involves various groups, or “ethnicities,” such as the Islamic fundamentalists KEVIN with Millat, the Christian fundamentalist group Witnesses of Jehovah with Irie's grandmother Hortense, and environmentalists with Marcus's son Joshua. They all

converge to protest a project that involves genetically modifying an animal. Labeled an atheist, Marcus, along with his partner Dr. Sick, strives to create a super animal and, potentially, a superhuman—mirroring the aspirations of fascist leader Hitler. Ironically, this genetic modification is depicted as the project of a victim, once persecuted to foster a pure and powerful race through gene modification. The author juxtaposes two conflicting entities—a victim and a Nazi scientist engaged in Nazi projects—not only to highlight a motif but also to satirize the fundamentalist desire for an unnatural, modified society. The pursuit of purity in racial background or the modification of beings through scientific projects to create a “better” being, in other words, meddling with genetics and altering generations, is critiqued by an author challenging the notion of purity. In the novel, no one is portrayed as pure. For instance, Samad and Alsana are from Bangladesh, and although Samad clings to his Bengali culture and strives not to assimilate with other nations, Alsana counters his views by referencing an encyclopedia that states Bengalis are descendants of Indo-Aryans who “mixed with indigenous groups of various racial stocks” thousands of years ago (Smith, 2000, p. 236). As a mouthpiece for the narrator, Alsana critiques those who insist on emphasizing cultural differences:

‘Oi, mister! Indo-Aryans... it looks like I am Western after all! Maybe I should listen to Tina Turner, wear the itsy-bitsy leather skirts. Pah. It just goes to show,’ said Alsana, revealing her English tongue, ‘you go back and back and back and it's still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy-tale!’ (Smith, 2000, p. 236)

Samad's emphasis on such cultural differences could be seen as a barrier to fostering, in Bhabha's words, “anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 206). Insisting on cultural distinctions was a hallmark of colonialist discourse, as the colonizer did not consider himself on the same level as his subjects; thus, he felt the need to differentiate both himself and his culture from the others. This is described as “the process of the enunciation of culture as ‘knowledgeable’, authoritative, and adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 206). Historically, the colonizer produced “statements of culture or on culture to differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 206). In fact, this colonial practice continues. Now, as a member of the Bengali diaspora in England, Samad views himself and his culture as distinct from others and wishes for his family to “act like a Bengali Muslim” rather than assimilate into English culture. It can be inferred from this context that Samad's actions negatively impact the natural growth and development of unique cultural identities especially in the case of Millat and Magid, as he imposes limitations and boundaries on himself and his family.

A multicultural city composed of diverse groups, races, and cultures, London is not portrayed as forming a “union” free from polarized groups. Almost every character in the novel is associated with an extremist group and exhibits fundamentalist beliefs related to their religion, identity, and nationality. Bentley typifies the diasporic character in *White Teeth*, quoting from Slavoj Žižek, as “subject” who “attempts to fill out its constitutive lack by means of identification, by identifying itself with some master-signifier guaranteeing its place in the symbolic network” (Bentley, 2007, p. 486). This symbolic network is the cosmopolitan society of London, England. For Samad, a Bengali Muslim, this network negatively influences him and his sons, drawing them into sin and eroding their faith in Allah. Tempted by his sons' music teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones, and unable to resist this corrupted culture, Samad decides not to raise his children there. Unable to relocate his whole family back to Bangladesh, he sends one of his sons, Magid, back to hometown, hoping to preserve at least one child from the cultural corruption of England. In Salman Rushdie's words, Samad harbors an “imaginary homeland,” envisioning Bangladesh as a

utopia where Magid would internalize all Bengali traditions and grow up a devout Muslim and a true Bengali man. Ironically, Magid returns to England transformed into “a pukka Englishman, white-suited, silly wig lawyer,” who speaks elegantly and eats pork (Smith, 2000, p. 407). Samad’s earnest effort to shield his family from moral decay is futile because Bangladesh, once a part of India and a colony of England, still harbors an educational system that inculcates English values rather than Bengali or Muslim ones, a system established by the British during colonization. It becomes evident that not much has changed in the education system of the colonized country even after the departure of the colonizers. Students in Bangladesh are taught to be more English than those in London, exemplified by Millat, who stayed in London, was educated there, and ultimately joined an Islamic group. Neither returning to the homeland nor continuing life in London offers salvation. The book suggests that once a person starts living in the diaspora, they face the dilemma of returning to their homeland or remaining in an alien country, with neither option being satisfactory as they can feel no true sense of belonging to either:

[Y]ou make a devil's pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started ... but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food, dreadful newspapers who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained. Who would want to stay? But you have made a devil's pact ... it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere. (Smith, 2000, p. 407)

In addition, the novel sharply criticizes the discrimination that the English exhibit against non-English nations. Racial discrimination and stereotyping are satirized throughout the novel. For instance, during the war, when Samad was in a tank with Archie and others, he is derogatorily referred to as “Sultan” or “Indian Sultan,” which irritates Samad. He responds:

‘Sultan... Sultan...’ Samad mused. ‘Do you know, I wouldn't mind the epithet, Mr. Mackintosh, if it were at least accurate. It's not historically accurate, you know. It is not, even geographically speaking, accurate. I am sure I have explained to you that I am from Bengal. The word ‘Sultan’ refers to certain men of the Arab lands many hundreds of miles west of Bengal. To call me Sultan is about as accurate, in terms of the mileage, you understand, as if I referred to you as a Jerry-Hun fat bastard’. (Smith, 2000, p. 85)

Samad is entirely justified in his criticism, as the tendency to homogenize all Eastern people and attribute qualities that do not belong to them is a clear manifestation of Orientalist discourse and a binary opposition of “the West and the rest.” The novel contains various explicit critiques of these discriminatory acts, often overtly satirized in the narration. For instance, Millat and his friends form a gang with non-English members named “Raggastani” (a combination of the words Ragga and Pakistani), and the narrator vividly describes their transformation:

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 anymore because they looked like trouble. They looked like trouble in stereo. (Smith, 2000, p. 232)

In a multicultural society like contemporary London, polarization becomes inevitable as people from different backgrounds, races, families, and classes feel the need to align themselves with a “master-signifier,” leading them to express themselves in various ways within society—in other words, they claim identities through the groups they form, whether violent or non-violent. Otherwise, “no one who looked, spoke, or felt like Millat was ever in the news [or on the English agenda] unless they had recently been

murdered" (Smith, 2000: 234). The group mentioned in the quote above is characterized by class and race, consisting of poor, non-English boys perceived as a menacing "trouble" to society, a result of enduring repression and discrimination throughout their lives. They form a kind of power, and no one dares confront them as they did before because they are now seen as formidable and not passive. They emerge from a multicultural society as a reaction to the verbal or physical insults that have persisted long after Commonwealth immigration to England. These groups also have a negative image in the eyes of the English. For example, when Millat and his gang try to buy a ticket to Bradford, they encounter trouble with the ticket-man over the price, to which the ticket-man insinuates, "'Well, I'm afraid that's the price. Maybe next time you mug some poor old lady,' looking pointedly at the chunky gold that fell from Millat's ears, wrists, fingers, and around his neck, 'you could stop in here first before you get to the jewellery store'" (Smith, 2000, p. 230). However, once subjugated, a man is not as weak and docile as he used to be; he becomes a daunting presence on the streets of London. When the ticket man derogatorily calls Millat a "Paki," he retorts after slamming a fist on the glass, "First: I'm not a Paki, you ignorant fuck. And second: you don't need a translator, yeah? I'll give it to you straight. You're a fucking faggot, yeah? Queer boy, poofter, batty-rider, shit-dick" (Smith, 2000, p. 231).

As illustrated above, Zadie Smith incorporates non-English characters in her novel who are portrayed as powerful, often more so than their English counterparts. Samad, Millat, Magid, Alsana, and Clara are all depicted as stronger and more influential compared to characters like Archie, Joshua, and Ryan. Particularly in the relationship between Samad and Archie, Samad is consistently the dominant figure, characterized by his strong personality, determination, self-confidence, and education. In contrast, Archie is depicted as indecisive, relying on the toss of a coin to make decisions. The novel opens with Archie attempting suicide in his car, a decision he also leaves to chance, only to be stopped by a dominant butcher who forbids him from doing so outside his shop. Later, it is revealed that Archie, influenced by the same method of decision-making, chose not to kill Dr. Sick during the war. While Samad was a promising science student before being wounded in the war, Archie is described as having no distinctive qualities aside from being adept at paper folding; he is depicted as dull, aged, and aimless—"no white knight... [with] no aims, no hopes, no ambitions" (Smith, 2000, p. 48). His passivity is further highlighted in his marriage to Clara, whom he meets immediately after her emotional breakup, and in his interactions with Samad, where he never wins an argument. For instance, when Archie comments on Samad's arranged marriage by saying, "Where I come from... a bloke likes to get to know a girl before he marries her," Samad retorts sharply, "Where you come from it is customary to boil vegetables until they fall apart. This does not mean... that it is a good idea" (Smith, 2000, p. 98). Moreover, when Archie questions Samad's avoidance of pork during the war, Samad replies, "I don't eat it for the same reason you as an Englishman will never truly satisfy a woman" (Smith, 2000, p. 96). The postcolonial tension between Archie and Samad echoes the tension between the oriental and occidental particularly the one traumatized by the colonial abuses. Alongside Samad, characters like Millat, Alsana, and Clara are also portrayed as formidable. Magid is exceptionally intelligent, Millat strikingly handsome, Alsana remarkably extroverted and strong, and Clara significantly attractive, while Joshua is portrayed as ordinary and flat, Joyce as bizarrely obsessed with Millat and her plants, and Marcus as doggedly pursuing a controversial project alongside an ex-Nazi doctor.

Besides these exceptional characters, Smith challenges the conservative model of the traditional British family—white, middle-class, Protestant—as the pillar of society (Fernandez, 2009, p. 144). Archie, an Englishman, marries Clara, a Jamaican woman; Irie marries Joshua Chalfen, a middle-class Englishman. With the exception of Marcus and Joyce Chalfen, most partners in these families come from lower social classes. Samad and Alsana, hailing from Bangladesh, work diligently to save enough

money to relocate to a more desirable area, North London, where slightly higher-class individuals like Archie and Clara reside. In such an environment, people from lower and lower-middle classes interact with the middle class in a vibrant contact zone, forming relationships and marriages. In this multicultural and multiracial society, they blend together, thereby diminishing cultural differences and diversities on a microcosmic scale.

On the other hand, none of Smith's characters are exempt from an identity crisis in such an ambivalent environment. Some are non-English, displaced from their homelands due to economic reasons, while others originate from hybrid backgrounds as different races intermingle. Moreover, the prevalence of a dominant white culture leads these individuals, whose identities are in flux, to experience feelings of self-alienation and rootlessness. For instance, Magid, a Bengali educated in an English school, is possibly influenced by his English peers and renames himself Mark Smith, feeling disconnected from his own family and cultural heritage. His dissatisfaction with his name symbolizes a deeper discontent:

But this was just a symptom of a far deeper malaise. Magid really wanted to be in some other family. He wanted to own cats and not cockroaches, he wanted his mother to make the music of the cello, not the sound of the sewing machine; he wanted to have a trellis of flowers growing up one side of the house instead of the ever growing pile of other people's rubbish; he wanted a piano in the hallway in place of the broken door off cousin Kurshed's car; he wanted to go on biking holidays to France, not day-trips to Blackpool to visit aunties; he wanted the floor of his room to be shiny wood, not the orange and green swirled carpet left over from the restaurant; he wanted his father to be a doctor, not a one-handed waiter. (Smith, 2000, p. 151)

In addition to Magid, Irie, the daughter of an English father and a Jamaican mother, suffers from a very negative self-image, and her fragile identity seems to dissolve further when she meets the Chalfens. Although she has always felt the need to assimilate both physically and intellectually into English culture, and to rid herself of her curly Jamaican hair, her body is often described using tropical fruit metaphors as a "Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangoes, and guavas; [...] big breasts, big buttocks, big hips, big thighs, big teeth" (Smith, 2000, p. 265). In an effort to appear more English and capture the attention of Millat, whom she loves, Irie visits a hairdresser frequented by non-English patrons who seek to straighten their hair to conform to English beauty standards. The waiting room at the hairdresser's is a testament to this struggle:

[T]he female section of P. K's was a deathly thing. Here, the impossible desire for straightness and 'movement' fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle; here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damndest to beat each curly hair into submission. 'Is it straight?' was the only question you heard as the towels came off and the heads emerged from the drier pulsating with pain. 'Is it straight, Denise? Tell me is it straight, Jackie?' (Smith, 2000, p. 275)

In line with her name – Irie, a Jamaican first name, and Jones, an English last name – Irie feels she belongs neither to a Jamaican nor to an English background despite "inhabiting a body that is psychologically rooted in two places, 'belonging' to both" (Thompson, 2005, p. 127). The ambivalent state of a migrant is vividly captured in Samad's reflection: "This thing, this belonging, it seems like some long, dirty lie... and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an accident. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?" (Smith, 2000, p. 407).

Conclusion

The novel begins with an epigraph, “What is past is prologue,” emphasizing the idea that the present cannot be detached from the past, and colonization period cannot be easily dissociated from the postcolonial one. For this reason, the book employs an unconventional narrative structure, dividing into chapters that do not sequentially follow each other, with the narration oscillating back and forth in time. The past is explored in chapters titled “The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal,” “The Root Canals of Mangal Pande,” and “The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden.” This emphasis on “root canals” underscores that, no matter how deeply embedded the characters are in a multicultural society, “they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow,” compelling them to revisit their past to make sense of their present life (Smith, 2000, p. 466). Traumatized members of the diaspora are depicted as obsessed with their colonial past and national and cultural roots—what they lost after moving to England. This is because, “marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movements and mediation” (Gilroy as cited in Jay, 2010, p. 158).

Although Samad initially feels alienated from his background and even becomes a “parent-governor” who actively participates in school meetings to address issues related to his sons’ education, it does not take long for him to become disillusioned with the life he leads in North London. Unable to leave his past, his Bengali culture, and religion behind, he transforms into a conservative man who clings to his native culture. This is why he insists that Mo, the owner of their regular restaurant, hang a picture of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande on the wall to honor and remember him for life. Samad is consumed by the belief that Mangal Pande was a hero who initiated the first mutiny in India against England, an event that lends a sense of originality and heroism to his otherwise ordinary life. Similarly, Millat grows up to be a handsome young man known for his tight jeans, red-striped Nike shoes, and fashionable jumpers. However, as the narrative progresses, he cannot sever ties with his past and background, which eventually transform him into a “fully paid-up green bow-tie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist” (Smith, 2000, p. 407). In summary, as Bentley also underlined *White Teeth* elucidates the enduring impact of postcolonial history on contemporary behavior and its ongoing significance in shaping personal identities (Bentley, 2008, p. 52).

To conclude, it might be best to remember Said who in “The Mind of Winter” characterizes being in exile – whether physically or spiritually – not as a “terminal loss”, but as a “potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture” (Said, 1984, p. 50). He asserts that individuals in contemporary societies often experience a sense of alienation, anxiety, and rootlessness, acknowledging that such feelings, while common in modern culture, impose significant burdens on those in exile, as they struggle to connect with any definitive roots like nationality, homeland, native culture, or even family. This experience of migrants has been prominently featured in novels by authors who are themselves migrants. Zadie Smith’s debut novel, *White Teeth*, offers a broad panorama of contemporary multicultural, cosmopolitan London, where refugees, exiles, and émigrés come together and forge relationships within their own communities and with the English populace. The novel is rich with themes such as love, war, racism, and touches on numerous issues including colonialism, multiculturalism, feminism, and the futility of wars. Through this amalgamation or contact – often referred to as transculturation – hybrid identities, hybrid cultures, and third spaces emerge, along with new sub-genres in literature, even as new ethnicities and polarization among social groups inevitably arise.

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