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## LONDON'S MULTICULTURAL DYNAMICS: FAMILY AND COSMOPOLITANISM IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

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**Abstract:** Zadie Smith's first novel *White Teeth* has been interpreted as a metaphor for national unity in a multicultural society, suggesting that the layers of racial and cultural differences hold commonalities, like the “white teeth” that symbolize unity within the notion of diversity. Defined as a contemporary epic, the novel’s expansive and dynamic narrative reflects on Britain's postcolonial, Multicultural identity, examining the transformed reality of contemporary England. Critics address the novel’s postmodern variety of styles and genres that mirror the plurality that is characteristic for a multicultural society. Zadie Smith’s story and its narrative approach convey the complexity of a multicultural nation, pointing to the fact that old categorizations of race do not capture the true diversity of contemporary English society. Despite the multicultural perspectives, the novel also reflects on the powerful influence of historical and cultural legacies. Namely, the remnants of the past, be it the ancestral roots of individuals or the colonial past of England, hinder the emergence of a cosmopolitan multicultural identity. This paper aims to explore the notions of multiculturalism and national identity within the novel, through the family dynamics of the Jones’, the Iqbals, and the Chalfens. Through the interconnected stories of their relationships, the novel unveils a rich world in which conflict and cohabitation are textured through cross-cultural fusion. London, the epitome for cosmopolitanism, is the setting that offers a space for critical exploration. The paper further aims at focusing on the family conflicts, that serve as an example of the struggle to balance the influence of the cultural and historical influences. It also suggests that fixed beliefs about race and culture problematize the ideal of cultural pluralism in postcolonial England *White Teeth*, does not simply depict a mosaic of cultures existing in their separate realms, it reflects on the dynamic space where integration, assimilation, privilege, and racism interact in complex ways. In addition, the paper provides two views to London’s multicultural reality: practical, as presented through the actions and interactions of the characters, and a theoretical, one that defines multiculturalism through an ideological framework. The novels depiction of the city integrates postmodernist elements to point out the challenges of a multicultural society that is evolving toward cohesion against the forces of disunity. The paper acknowledges a dual depiction of London which shows that the city is not a simple mosaic of cultures that live in harmony, yet it is a rather dynamic environment where privilege and oppression, racism and integration are interrelated. Smith’s London is not a mere passive environment, it is a potent source for new forms of cultural and political action. In this regard, the paper argues that such diverse settings offer opportunities to question and reshape social norms.

**Keywords:** multiculturalism, London, family, postcolonial novel

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2000, Zadie Smith made a spectacular entrance to the literary world with her first novel *White Teeth*. The novel opens with a preface where the following quote is inserted, "What is past is prologue", an inscription on a sculpture outside the entrance to the Washington, D.C. Museum. Zadie’s choice of this statement sets the tone, which also represents an introduction to the general theme of the novel, where three ethnically mixed families deal with problems related to their past and their cultural heritage. Samad, one of the main characters is obsessively attached to the past, while his sons Majid and Milad try to separate themselves from it at all costs. The preface hints at the inevitability of the past, thus encouraging for a more detailed attention. The novels focus on the impact of cultural heritage and the dialectic between the past and present reflecting a broader analysis in Parashar and Shults (2021) examination of colonialism, pointing out the “everyday impact” of colonial influence as a result of the perpetual struggles that arise from the legacies of history.

*White teeth* among other things, is seen as a metaphor for national unity, implying that despite all the cultural and racial differences, white teeth are what unifies humans in any diversified nation. Critics define it as a contemporary epic novel about the post-colonial multicultural identity of Britain. The novel's expansive, energetic and to a certain extent chaotic narrative is a reflection of the complex and multilayered identity of contemporary England. The myriad styles and genres mirror the nature of plurality, one that is characteristic for most postmodern fiction. Concerning the genre of the novel, Kowalik (2022) posits that “White Teeth uses past modernist structures while acknowledging the subsequent license of postmodern irony, but in fusing these earlier movements demonstrates the disunity that must be surmounted as post-postmodernism strives for fulfilled connections” (3).

As Jennifer Gustar (2010) observes, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has generated various post-colonial interpretations that focus on authority, privilege, and Eurocentrism, these interpretations have provided insights into the colonial practice of marginalizing non-European cultures. The play also raises questions about the authority embedded within language thus examining how those who hold linguistic power also control the ideological framework that empowers or marginalizes individuals. She further argues that the play deals with the history of exclusions, challenging the dubious legitimization of colonial conquest and the tendency to differentiate humanity from its perceived "other" through the appropriation and advancement of technology. However, the themes and ideas she deals with in the five hundred pages of her novel are a reflection of her personal experiences and interpretations of the past. Hence, Smith's preface honors all the authors who contributed and inspired her to write her first novel.

Set in London at the end of the twentieth century, from the end of the Second World War until the 1990s, the novel captures the new modern era of multicultural Britain, where one definition of Englishness no longer exists, in Postcolonial England there are multiple ways of living which are the result of migration. This modern, intercultural Englishness is represented through the various characters, who together are a combination of different ethnicities such as English, Asian, Caribbean, Jewish, and of course, Jewish-English, English-Caribbean, and English-Asian. The majority of the characters, legal citizens of Britain, have cross-continental roots. The narrative evolves around the notion of diversity, and this characteristic is intrinsic to modern Britain.

The narrative is built upon themes of the British imperial and colonial past with Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean islands, therefore seizing a position among the works from those regions. On the other hand, it represents an exceptionally *English work* not only because it was included in the English canon a year after its publication, but also, because it was regarded as such by many prominent literary critics. In a review written for the Guardian, Caryl Phillips points out that it was Daniel Defoe who for the first time saw the "heterogenous condition of the nation" and reflected it in his poem *The True-born Englishman* further observing that:

Should Defoe have been able to glance at modern, postcolonial Britain, he would have to add the West Indian, the Indian and the African. It is precisely this helpless heterogeneity that Zadie Smith recognises and celebrates in this restless and wonderfully poised first novel, *White Teeth* (Phillips, 2000).

The unexpected connection between two middle-aged men from different race and culture, during a middle-age crisis, when they are most vulnerable, stands as a metaphor for the British political and social crisis in the 80's, particularly the crises within families when the levels of unemployment and divorces are at their peak.

## 2. FAMILY DYNAMICS IN THE MULTICULTURAL SETTING

Multicultural Britain is at the core of the story in *White Teeth*. The notion of multiculturalism is reflected through the lens of family dynamics, following the paths of Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, two best friends, married, with offspring, living in modern-day London. As the generational circle widens, their children begin to complicate their lives in ways that their parents did not expect. Magid and Millat, Samad's twins, and Archie's daughter, Irie, become very close friends, their bond creates a richly layered world of cross-cultural fusion.

Archibald Jones is a middle-class Englishman of no particular accomplishment who works in a printing press. Married to Clara, a Jamaican immigrant, father to Irie, second generation, mixed race young English woman. Archie and Samad met during World War II, defending Britain against Hitler; that is, they tried to defend Britain. Despite his military past, Archie is somehow apathetic and does not garner any national sentiment. Unlike Samad, he never relates to his national identity. Archie "never able to make a decision, never able to state a position" (45). As Rogers (2008) observes Archie was aware of the fact that people were culturally categorized, yet because her was organically surrounded by those people, he is unable to apply those differences to them. For Archie Samad and Alsana "are not those kind of Indians....in fact (they) are not Indian at all but Bangladeshi" (46). Rogers further argues that his refusal to acknowledge the cultural realities of those close to him reflects not just a reluctance to stereotype, but a detachment from the complexities of identity and heritage. Lowe (2001) accurately asserts that "Archie Jones appears to have become what Enoch Powell feared and what Margaret Thatcher and right-wing English nationalists fear most the deculturated English person, without a tribal or group identity, mixing only with the immigrants" (p. 177).

The family of Samad and Alsana Iqbal are central with regard to the post-colonial dimension of the novel. Samad is a first-generation Bangladesh Muslim who immigrates to London at a time when north-west London becomes the gravitational point for Muslim communities from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. He is afraid that his wife and twin sons will assimilate and immerse in the western cultural values, thus losing connection to their Muslim roots. Samad's story poses questions about the location of the new Muslim communities and how and where they fit into the new post-colonial, multicultural setting.

To Samad, as to the people of Thailand, tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles. That didn't mean he could live by them, abide by them or grow in the

manner they demanded, but roots were roots and roots were good. You would get nowhere telling him that weeds too have tubers, or that the first sign of loose teeth is something rotten, something degenerate, deep within the gums. Roots were what saved, the ropes one throws out to rescue drowning men, to Save Their Souls (Smith 143).

Samad's story also brings to mind the fact that Britain's most recent immigrants are predominantly Muslim. When they moved to north-west London in the 1970s, along with a large number of Indians fleeing discrimination in Kenya and Uganda, they encountered Enoch Pavel's propaganda, which sowed national racial paranoia, and which was the cause of the rise of racial attacks on Indians, i.e. all those whom racists call "Pakis". The late 70s are the times when a large number of racially motivated murders went almost unnoticed and unpunished by the security and legal institutions. In this context, Samad's fear of his vulnerability is quite real and understandable. It is precisely those fears that poison him, and guide his life and his decisions. During the 1980s when Samad finally sets his life and the life of his family within the framework of the events of the 70s, the Muslim community appears (too late for him), while his friendship with Archie (who is not Muslim) begins to strengthen. Samad is concerned about his son's upbringing in Britain, for this reason, he sends Magid back to Bangladesh to be raised by his relatives and to restore his lost native culture. In Magid's absence, Millat and Irie befriend a boy named Joshua, while the Chalfen family, led by the eccentric Marcus and Joyce, takes center stage.

Joyce and Marcus Chalfen reflect an embodiment of "pure" Englishness despite their immigrant history. Namely, Marcus is an atheist Jew and his wife Joyce is Irish. They live in Hampstead, neighborhood where the Jewish community have settled for decades. Joyce was brought up in Neighboring Kilburn, an area with even longer settlement history.

The Chalfens had no friends. They interacted mainly with the Chalfen extended family (the good genes that were so often referred to; two scientists, one mathematician, three psychiatrists, and a young cousin working for the Labour Party) [...] Bottom line: the Chalfens didn't need other people. They referred to themselves as nouns, verbs, and occasionally adjectives: It's the Chalfen way, And then he came out with a real Chalfenism, He's Chalfening again, We need to be a bit more Chalfenist about this. Joyce challenged anyone to show her a happier family, a more Chalfenist family than theirs (Smith 232).

Like the Jones' and the Iqbals, the Chalfens also are a blend of immigrant background, yet as a result of their race, they have lost all the connections with their immigrant past. They treat Irie and the Iqbal brothers as outsiders, while they put on an exceptionally English attitude, as Irie Jones observes, they are "More English than the English" (Smith 227). As Matt Thomas (2009) observes "The Chalfen clan is Smith's exaggerated version of exclusive cultures that view all other ways of life as inferior" (p 18). Joyce uses botany as a metaphor for cultural dynamics. Thomas sees her gardens as an "allegory for the world". In Millat and Irie she sees plants that are "being eaten from the inside out by their cultural heritage just as thrip" (p 19).

Through the Chalfens, Zadie Smith depicts a similar generation gap as that which is usually characteristic of immigrant families. The Chalfen family, should typically represents stability and consistency within a world that is constantly changing. However, *White Teeth* flips the usual story by raising questions about the problems involved when the focus on race shifts to a focus on class and culture. The novel depicts Marcus Chalfen's immigrant identity as much as it focuses on his scientific profile. Marcus' ambition to prove himself in the field of genetics by creating a genetically engineered mouse is a parallel to his and his wife's fixation on raising intellectually superior children. Despite the fact that they occupy a privileged position in society, their obsessive ambition is a projection of their fear of rejection, insecurity, and racism. As Lowe (2001) observes, the Chalfen's anxieties can be traced to the past experiences of the European Jews who were expelled in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and also by the problematic relationship between the Irish and the British. As a result, the Chalfen's, according to Lowe, still feel like outsiders, and in order to reach their desired level of acceptance "are forced to mimic the culture of the English liberal intellectuals" a mimicry that distorts their identity and doesn't stop them from racism.

### 3. LONDON: THE CENTER OF DIVERSITY

North London's Willesden and Kilburn are the primary settings where the action takes place in *White Teeth*. These are working-class neighborhoods populated by diverse groups of people. In *A Magic Carpet of Cultures in London* (2000), article published in *The New York Times*, Yasmin Alibhai Brown celebrates the multicultural transformation of post-colonial London. She points out that the London that was in the past divided by racially and culturally distinct ethnic groups has transformed into a mosaic of colorful and vibrant entities where the identity boundaries are less evident. She observes that areas that were once inhabited by poor immigrants are now centers of entrepreneurial, artistic life. Nothing Hill, Brixton, and Shoreditch are the areas that are exemplary of the change. "Notting Hill, home of the annual, breathtaking Caribbean Carnival, was one of the first places in this country to be colonized by the colonized, and it is where the soul of multiracial Britain resides. The locality beguiles because it is

so un-English. Notting Hill, home of the annual, breathtaking Caribbean Carnival, was one of the first places in this country to be colonized by the colonized, and it is where the soul of multiracial Britain resides. The locality beguiles because it is so un-English” (par 5). The cultural Renaissance that Y. Alibhai Brown highlights is a contribution of the changing cultural population of the city, whose contemporary population create a dimension of energy and dynamism. According to Alibhai B. London does not only tolerate diversity, it embraces it. London is a space where people from different backgrounds live together and contribute to a common urban culture. The evolving multiculturalism of London is a proof of the resilience and adaptability of it’s citizens, showcasing a romanticized story of harmony and inclusion in world that is evermore interconnected. “Multiracial London is coming of age, and it is this that is igniting such energy, buzz and creativity”(Y. A. Brown par 6)

In *Postcolonial London and the Allure of the Cosmopolitan City* (2003) Michael Keith's draws a more complex image of the postcolonial identity of London, there he sees “selective migrant affluence” coexisting with “racialized immiseration” where the cosmopolitan dream does not interfere the racist intolerance. He further argues that the city with all its contradictions and differences is still capable of sustaining and disrupting narratives of multicultural “triumph or despair”, suggesting that in London, race and ethnicity are challenged by communication and uncertainty, referring to the fact that the city can’t be easily categorized. Referring to her essay *Happy Multicultural Land* McLeod (2021) observes that Zadie Smith is aware of the social stratification of Britain, “Away from London’s societal dissonance, in other parts of the country, multicultural transformation has yet to be clocked or have its time, or has been timed out” (26). Smith’s objective interpretation of Britain’s social landscape is an immediate contribution to her portrayal of London as an intricate environment.

This dual depiction of London shows that the city is not a simple mosaic of cultures that live in harmony, yet it is a rather dynamic environment where privilege and oppression, racism and integration are interrelated. Furthermore, London serves as a setting that provides two perspectives: a zoomed-in view of the day-to-day experiences and a zoomed-out i.e. theoretical and detached viewpoint, both revealing and complicating our understanding of multiculturalism. Keith (2003), refers to Walter Benjamin’s rejection of static theoretical categories against a perpetual movement in perspectives, suggesting that the nature of the city can both embrace the familiar and the alien. He thus concludes that there is more to London than serving as a backdrop, it is a source for new forms of political and cultural action. Here, the traditional definitions of race and space are perpetually redefined, opportunities for new reshaping and questioning the social norm are offered.

A study conducted by Dupont, Sealy, & Modood (2023) suggest that a dialogue between theorists of cosmopolitanism along with those of multiculturalism and interculturalism can shed light to the interconnections that would lead to more “cultural diversity and international mobility”. This observation aligns with the ongoing dynamics in cities like London, where definitions for cultural diversity resist simple interpretations. Such urban environments are potent with narratives that emphasize the need to engage with the complexities with of daily life, also pointing out to the practices of discrimination and inequality while hoping for a more inclusive policies.

Undoubtedly, London is the epitome of multiculturalism and co-existence, however, assimilation is the price that the immigrants need to pay in order to be part of the British multicultural society. Magid’s character is a representation for the novels explorations of the limitations and the complexities of the assimilative practices.

‘I GIVE YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAGID MAHFOOZ MURSHED MUBTASIM IQBAL!

’Samad had yelled after Magid when he returned home that evening and whipped up the stairs like a bullet to hide in his room. ‘AND YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH!’ Being sent to Bangladesh in order to restore and maintain the Muslim roots, leads to a counter-effect. Magid returns back as a westernized young man (Smith 112).

Samad’s frustration over Magid’s wish to be called “Mark Smith”, highlights the tension and identity struggles that are part of the assimilation process. This moment illustrates the generational conflict that occurs as a result of a collision of the cultural values and traditions stimulated by the pressure to conform to the dominant culture. Magid’s desire to identify by a typical Western name, symbolizes the aspects of assimilation, a process where individuals feel the necessity to fit it by adopting the culture, the language, and even the common names of the dominant culture. “Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal” is a heavy name, that carries the weight of lineage, history, religious and cultural identity. So, Magid’s choice of Mark Smith refers to a rejection of his immigrant cultural heritage in favor of a universally accepted identity. This, in fact, reflects a common ideological pressure that immigrants feel while trying to find a respectable place in a multicultural setting such as London.

Matt Thomas (2009) argues that through *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith’s intent is to point out “how assimilation has instituted a type of quiet segregation in multicultural London where racism is an open secret” (p 23). Through Magid’s character, Zadie Smith reflects the notion of “creolization”. He serves as an instrument to hypothesize the outcomes of “creolization” in that multicultural context. This depiction aligns with a more general objective of postcolonial sociology whose aim, according to Julian Co (2023) is to understand and reflect on the social realities

from the position of the subordinated and the subaltern, further emphasizing the importance of adopting a framework for postcolonial sociology that would center the knowledge and the views of the marginalized groups that will provide a lens for analyzing the social dynamics and will challenge the dominant “metrocentric” of “Northern theory” perceptions that traditionally shape the mainstream social theories.

Smith’s London is the quintessential setting for intercultural communication, religious and political ideologies, thus offering the characters of the novel an opportunity for genuine human understanding. London’s complexity makes it a pot for hybrid identities allowing the second generations to diverge from their immigrant families through keeping up with popular trends over cultural traditions, history, or even the tendency for assimilation. In this regard, Katina Rogers (2008) argues that Zadie Smith’s novel is “a convincing critique of cosmopolitanism and other similar post-colonial perspectives on hybridity without resorting to cosmopolitanism’s supposed opposite, patriotism. Quite the contrary, the novel sets both up as objects of irony and satire, implying the need for a more nuanced reading and understanding of such characters and settings” (p 46). She further argues that Smith doesn’t use London as an “ideal starting point” for glorifying hybridity and theories like cosmopolitanism, instead she, depicts these concepts in a more complex way “explicitly critiquing the expected philosophical standpoints” (60).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The exploration of multiculturalism in contemporary England that *White Teeth* provides through the vibrant tapestry of personal stories from, different ethnic backgrounds, all together challenge the traditional conceptions of race and identity. Zadie Smith’s story and its narrative approach convey the complexity of a multicultural nation, pointing to the fact that old categorizations of race do not capture the true diversity of contemporary English society. Despite the multicultural perspectives, the novel also reflects on the powerful influence of historical and cultural legacies. Namely, the remnants of the past, be it the ancestral roots of individuals or the colonial past of England, hinder the emergence of a cosmopolitan multicultural identity. The conflict between Magid and Milat, the twin brothers, serves as an example for this struggle, it also suggests that fixed beliefs about race and culture problematize the ideal of cultural pluralism in postcolonial England. Even though *White Teeth* delivers a hopeful vision of a diverse and inclusive nation, at the same time, it points out the remaining obstacles that keep the vision from realization. The readers are encouraged to take into account the complexities that are intrinsic to the notion of identity and to consider the effort one needs to put in order to move beyond the limitations of the past. On the other hand, London’s role as a multicultural center is essential to the novel. Even though London might be considered as an ideal source of cosmopolitanism and hybridity, Zadie Smith’s depiction of the city unveils its inherent tensions and contradictions. Through her novel she criticizes the romanticized glorification of cosmopolitan ideals, thus reflecting a genuine image of London, a city where the clash and blending of cultures trigger critical dialogue and initiate social evolution.

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