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**Happy Multicultural Land? Reading Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*  
as a Critique of Multiculturalism as an Ideology**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This essay explores the portrayal of multiculturalism in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* in order to show how Smith, rather than as an ideology, depicts it as a reality. Through its characters' experience as immigrants of different generations and various ethnic backgrounds in London – one on the most “multicultural” cities in the world – the novel effectively questions the utopian idea of a “Happy Multicultural Land”, that is to say a trouble-free harmonious society. The study supports this critique by highlighting and analyzing the conflicts that some of these immigrants have to come to terms with, especially in the sense of identity. In this context, the myth of “Englishness”, as well as the ambiguity of “racial purity”, are also examined. In addition, and as a contribution to the overall study, an integral part of the essay is dedicated to the history of multiculturalism, with regard to its colonial past, and the political outcome of it in the form of multiculturalism as a concept.

### **Keywords**

Postcolonial

Multiculturalism

Immigration

Identity

Ethnicity

“Race”

“Englishness”

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## **1. Introduction**

*White Teeth*. The title of Zadie Smith's novel is arguably a metaphor for national unity. By implying that we all have white teeth, despite different shades and forms, it gives a unified picture of a diversified nation.

Set in London during the late twentieth century, from the end of the Second World War until the 1990s, the novel depicts the emerging era of modern multicultural Britain, where one definition of Englishness no longer existed, but there instead were multiple ways of living due to, amongst other things, migration. This contemporary Englishness is represented through the novel's various characters, which together combine a great mixture of different ethnicities such as English, Asian, Caribbean, Jewish and of course, Jewish-English, English-Caribbean, and English-Asian.

Despite its multicultural setting and characters however, the novel does not give an unambiguously celebratory vision of the idea of multiculturalism. It does offer a new type of Englishness through its multicultural characters, but is nevertheless also keen to show that the old ways of thinking about race, ethnicity and culture, still exist beneath the superficial multicultural make-up of London in the late twentieth century. This becomes depicted through one of the overarching themes of the novel, which is the fear of multiculturalism as something that will liquidate identity. Whilst Britain feels threatened by it in terms of losing its national identity, first-generation immigrants likewise fear the loss of their heritage, through the concept of assimilation.

Thus, in a witty, satirical and eloquent language, the novel portrays the complexity and reality of multicultural Britain. Nevertheless, by doing this, it also

provides an enquiry into the contradictions of multiculturalism as a philosophy and a policy. This essay is going to examine the way the novel does this. Through a critical close reading of certain passages that highlight the conflicts of some of the immigrants, it will explore *White Teeth* as a critique of multiculturalism as an ideology.

## 2. Multiculturalism in Britain

‘What’s past is prologue’<sup>1</sup>

In order to be able to explore the novel as a critique of multiculturalism, a basic understanding of multiculturalism as an ideology is essential. Furthermore, it might be wise to examine how Britain turned into its current ‘multicultural’ state in the first place. Because as the novel’s epigraph suggests, Britain’s multicultural present is tied to its colonial past.

### 2.1 The History

‘This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment’ (WT, 326)

According to Randall Hansen, it was the post-war period that laid the modern<sup>2</sup> foundations for multiculturalism in Britain since, as he emphasizes, it was from 1948<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The quote comes from William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* and is the epigraph of *White Teeth*.

<sup>2</sup> The impact of immigration on Britain goes as far as back to when the Romans entered the country (McCarthy and Henderson).

to 1962, that Britain received its first 500,000 ‘Commonwealth’ immigrants from its former colonies, the West Indies and the Asian sub-continent (Hansen, 19). Initially, the mass-immigration was regarded as ‘beneficial to the nation’ rather than a burden. Due to labour shortages, which could not be met by Britain’s own workers, immigration was as Adrian Favell expresses it, ‘economic in nature’ and thereby ‘negligible as the source of salient political problems’. In other words, it was not expected to ‘disrupt’ the national identity, that is to say “Englishness”, in any way since ‘commonwealth and colonial ties mean[t] that the immigrants [were] considered part of the nation in any case’ (Favell, 23). Moreover, the immigrants were thought as temporary workers, who would eventually return once Britain had reconstructed its economy. The fact that some of them would stay had not been taken into account.

Equally, the immigrants’ intention was also temporary. The British Nationality Act 1948, which not only provided them free entry, but also acknowledged that as former ‘colonial subjects’, they were ‘indistinguishable’<sup>4</sup> from British citizens, encouraged the immigrants to emigrate in the hope of earning some money and thereby obtaining a more prosperous future back home (Hansen, 29). Eventually however, many of these immigrants stayed and settled in Britain. Favell suggests that coming from former colonies, many of them, especially those from the West Indies, had been raised with ‘British education and culture’ and thereby ‘saw Britain as a natural second home from home’ (Favell, 103-104).

Nevertheless, this “homey” feeling did not last for too long. Due to the outburst of the ‘first race riots’ in Britain<sup>5</sup> during 1958, immigration eventually became a ‘political concern’ for the Conservative Party government of the day, who

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<sup>3</sup> Specifically on June 22. That day the ex-troopship Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury, carrying 492 Jamaican men and women (McCarthy and Henderson).

<sup>4</sup> Superficially ‘indistinguishable’ since they rather turned from ‘colonial subjects’ into subjects of racial discrimination instead (Hansen, 18).

<sup>5</sup> In Notting Hill, London and Nottingham.

ironically tried to handle the ‘racial tension’ through a piece of racial legislation; the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which restricted immigration by ‘clearly demarking and limiting future coloured immigrants from others of white origin’. Thus, the ‘racial tension’, now named, continued.

When the Labour party came to power 1964, they tried to ease the ‘tension’ with ‘forward-looking’ attempts instead. The Race Relations Act of 1965 was the first piece of ‘legislation’ to address racial discrimination<sup>6</sup> (Favell, 103-104). In addition, the liberal minister Roy Jenkins sought to realize his vision of ‘a multi-racial society in which equal opportunity, cultural diversity and mutual tolerance [would become] the norm’, through his speech<sup>7</sup> about integration in 1966 (Donnelly, 165). However, the speech was met with further racism as a response during 1968 when the Conservative politician Enoch Powell predicted in his infamous speech the ‘bloody outcome that [would] ensue if measures [were] not taken to repatriate the new<sup>8</sup> immigrants’ (Favell, 105):

As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see ‘the River Tiber foaming with much blood!’ That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect<sup>9</sup>.

The ‘river of blood’ speech, as it came to be called, may have led to Powell’s dismissal as a member of the Shadow Cabinet, but nevertheless, as Mark Donnelly points out, succeeded in ‘stirr[ing] up emotions on race and immigration issues’. Powell came to represent a sort of role model as ‘the one politician with courage to

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<sup>6</sup> On grounds of color and ethnic origins.

<sup>7</sup> The speech can be found in the next section.

<sup>8</sup> Who were arriving due to the so called ‘Kenyan Asians crisis’.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Donnelly, 168.



speak on behalf of the silent white majority’, which according to opinion polls was ‘between 67 and 82 per cent’ of the population (Donnelly, 168). This ‘sizeable part’ agreed with Powell that immigrants were a threat to their country’s ‘mythical discourse’ of Englishness. Furthermore, they were encouraged by Powell’s ‘inflammatory speech’ to vent this racism into the open through racial discrimination and ‘anti-immigrant violence’ (Favell, 105-106).

As a further liberal attempt to stop the ‘racial tension’, the scope<sup>10</sup> of the Race Relations Act of 1965 got extended into another one in 1968. However, owing to, as many have suggested, the ‘Powell effect’, Labour lost the 1970 election to the Tories who in turn passed a more restricted Immigration Act to the immigration control in 1971<sup>11</sup> (Hansen, 191-192). Nevertheless, when Labour regained its power in 1974, the disappointing extent<sup>12</sup> of the Race Relations Act got reinforced into another in 1976. Looking back however, Favell claims that the legislation was ‘more symbolic than proactive’ since the ‘racial tensions’ continued and rather increased by the end of the 1970s, which were also the beginning of the ‘Thatcher years’ (Favell, 107-108).

When Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government came to power in 1979, it took over British nationality law and introduced a new tighter British Nationality Act in 1981<sup>13</sup> (Hansen, 207). This legislation ended the tradition of ‘*jus soli*’<sup>14</sup> policy: the second-generation immigrants born on ‘British soil’ were thereby no longer automatically granted British citizenship unless one of their parents were or became ‘citizen’, ‘settled’ or ‘resident’ by means of the act (Hansen, 214-215).

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<sup>10</sup> The latter legislation covered ‘public places’ the former one of 1965 had lacked to cover, such as discrimination in employment, housing and education (Favell, 106).

<sup>11</sup> The Immigration Act of 1971 restricted primary immigration by allowing only temporary residence through work permits.

<sup>12</sup> Whilst the previous acts only addressed direct discrimination, the latter covered also indirect discrimination.

<sup>13</sup> It was put into force in 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Citizenship acquired by birth within the territory of the state, regardless of parental citizenship.

Notwithstanding the restriction of British nationality amongst future immigrants, the change did not affect those immigrants who had already settled in Britain and thereby Britain's already existing "multicultural" state. The resistance to it, especially the riots<sup>15</sup> of 1981 and 1985, eventually led to, as Favell puts it, 'a fairly open *de facto* acceptance of the "reality" of this state (Favell, 109, 114).

Multiculturalism as a concept was used to deal with this 'reality', and will be further discussed in the following section.

## 2.2 The Ideology

'Multiculturalism is the political outcome of ongoing power struggles and collective negotiations of cultural, ethnic and racial difference'<sup>16</sup>

If Britain's multicultural present is the outcome of its colonial past, multiculturalism is, as Tariq Modood states in the quote above, 'the outcome of *ongoing*<sup>17</sup> power struggles'. Its conceptual framework is still being questioned. Only recently the current Prime Minister of Britain, David Cameron, criticized the philosophy of multiculturalism by claiming that it has 'failed'<sup>18</sup> to promote a 'common' national identity.

When the first wave of post-war Commonwealth immigrants arrived in England, the expectation was that they would leave their differences, in terms of customs and cultures, behind and 'simply' assimilate to 'Englishness' in the same way as the colonies were to have assimilated to 'Britishness' during the days of the

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<sup>15</sup> Between the police and protesters in Brixton.

<sup>16</sup> (Modood, vii)

<sup>17</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> Cameron, David. "Speech on radicalization and Islamic extremism". Security Conference, Munich. 5 February 2011.

British Empire (Rex, 32). Nevertheless, as John Rex points out, ‘this policy was very quickly abandoned’ because, as Nikos Papastergiadis emphasizes, ‘arrival rarely means assimilation [since] departure seldom entails forgetting and rejection’ (Papastergiadis, 205). Assimilation became thus replaced with integration – the foundational concept of multiculturalism, which Home Secretary Roy Jenkins sought to render explicit in his famous speech of 1966:

Integration is perhaps a loose word. I do not regard it as meaning the loss, by immigrants, of their own characteristics and culture. I do not think that we need in this country a ‘melting pot’, which will turn everybody out in a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone’s misplaced version of the stereotyped Englishman...I define integration, therefore, not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance (Favell, 104).

The speech and concept might have sounded ‘forward-looking’, but as Jenkins himself acknowledged, “integration” might also be a ‘loose word’. While it has been used to distinguish the policy from the one of assimilation, Conrad Watson observes that there was ‘still a confusion surrounding the two terms, with “integration” occasionally employed to suggest assimilation’ (Watson, 3-4). Papastergiadis agrees, referring to ‘integration’ as ‘a sort of amoeba term’ in terms of philosophy and politics, which ‘has been used to promote both openness and closure [and thereby] being the encourager and the protector of difference’ at the same time.

According to Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, it is not the ‘word’ itself, but rather in the concept that the confusion lies (Alibhai-Brown, 11). The ‘formulation’ of the policy of integration differs from the ‘assimilative logic of the nation-state’, which rarely corresponds with its ‘practices’ and thus, as Papastergiadis argues, there clearly

seems to exist a gap between ‘the great promise of multiculturalism’ and the multicultural reality and ‘everyday life’ of the immigrants (Papastergiadis, 202-204).

Favell agrees that ‘the British philosophy’ of multiculturalism does not live up to its ‘ideals’, but nevertheless points out that ‘however well a philosophy succeeds’, there is always a ‘complexity’ (Favell, 29, 229). In the context of multiculturalism, this complexity lies in the way it is entangled with nationalism. As demonstrated in the previous section, post-war immigration, besides leading to a more multicultural population, has somehow also triggered many different needs to reinforce the myth of Englishness. Fears of losing ‘national identity’ have since then, as Favell suggests, been useful arguments for ‘debate expansion’ by politicians who are ‘seeking a voice’. By depicting immigration as an ‘issue’, the concept of assimilation versus integration has been used as a solution to deal with multiculturalism (Favell, 23-24). Nevertheless and as already mentioned, this ‘medium-term solution’ continues to be criticized (Favell, 229). One of these critiques is the novel, which will be explored in the following chapter.

### **3. Exploring the conflicts of the immigrants in *White Teeth***

‘A distance was establishing itself...between fathersons, oldyoung,  
borntherebornhere’ (WT, 219)

According to John McLeod, although immigrants and their children may share the same feeling of rootlessness and displacement, they ‘occupy different positions due to [their] generational differences’ (McLeod, 250). This fact concerns especially the first- and second-generation immigrants through their circumstances of being

‘borntherebornhere’ For this reason, the following sections will discuss the characters’ conflicts as immigrants in multicultural Britain through two perspectives; firstly through the first-generation immigrants’, that is to say Samad and Alsana’s, and secondly through the second-generation immigrants’, namely Magid, Millat and Irie’s.

### **3.1 The first-generation immigrants: Samad and Alsana**

‘Hadn’t they all come to this island for a reason? To be safe. Weren’t they safe?’ (WT, 219)

As mentioned earlier, the reason for emigration from Asia and the Caribbean to the UK was mainly economic and thereby also an effort for the immigrants to secure a more prosperous and ‘safe’ life for themselves and their children. However, as McLeod points out, ‘migrants tend to arrive in new places with baggage; [not only] in the physical sense of possessions or belongings, but also the less tangible matter of beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviors and values’ (McLeod, 244). Inevitably, this leads them to encounter a conflict that was not taken into account before. As stated by Stuart Hall, ‘they are obliged to come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit’. Thus, they suddenly have to tackle the fine line of adapting ‘without simply assimilating’ and thereby forgetting the culture by which ‘their identities’ were ‘shaped’ (Hall, 310).

In *White Teeth*, the first-generation Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh; Samad and Alsana Iqbal, both have to come to terms with this inner conflict of adaption versus resistance. They are both ‘split people’. Samad acknowledges this

state of mind by saying: ‘half of me wishes [to let] the things that are beyond my control wash over me, [whilst] the other half wants to fight the holy war’ (WT, 179). Alsana confirms this by bitterly saying: ‘My husband fights the Third World War every single bloody day in his head, so does everybody’ (WT, 235).

However, for Samad’s other immigrant friends, it is slightly ‘easier’<sup>19</sup> to deal with the situation than it is for him. ‘Accept it. He will have to accept it, won’t he. We’re all English now, mate’ his friend says, but Samad declines assimilation as an option by claiming that he has been corrupted by England: ‘I am corrupt, my sons are becoming corrupt...I don’t know what is happening to our children in this country’ he says, and takes Alsana’s sisters as an example:

All their children are nothing but trouble. They won’t go to mosque, they don’t pray, they speak strangely, they eat all kinds of rubbish, they have intercourse with God knows who. No respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it’s nothing but corruption. Corruption! (WT, 190-192).

According to Esra Mirze, and as also demonstrated above, Samad’s fear of assimilation makes him see everything British ‘as a source of corruption’ of him and his children’s’ Bengali roots. Because to Samad ‘tradition was culture, and culture led to roots’ (WT, 193). Thus, he tries to ‘resist assimilation’ by picking ‘ideological fights’ (Mirze, 192). An example of this is when he questions the celebration of the ‘pagan’ Harvest Festival: ‘Why must my children celebrate it?’ and suggests excluding it from the school curriculum with this claim: ‘The Christian calendar has *thirty-seven* religious events. The Muslim calendar has *nine*. And they are squeezed out by this incredible rash of Christian festivals’ [emphasis in original] (WT, 129).

Samad even picks fights with his wife Alsana claiming that she ignores her

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<sup>19</sup> “Easier” in the context.

‘own culture’ or is not acting like a true ‘Bengali’. Whereas Alsana confronts him with questions like: ‘My own culture? And what is that please? And what is a Bengali, husband, please?’ As a result, she looks it up in an encyclopedia and ironically discovers that ‘Bengalis’ are indeed descendants of the ‘Indo-Aryans’. ‘It looks like I am Western after all’ she says and concludes with a metaphor:

It just goes to show...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!  
(WT, 236)

Through Alsana’s words, the novel depicts the ambiguity of ‘purity’<sup>20</sup> and thereby the one of ‘Englishness’<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, it further shows how Alsana contradicts herself when even she, ‘the unflappable Alsana Iqbal’, worries and fears that England is threatening their “pureness”:

But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalists, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, peanuts, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, disappearance. Even the unflappable Alsana Iqbal would regularly wake up in a puddle of her own sweat after a night visited by visions of Millat (genetically bb; where B stands for Bengali-ness) marrying somebody called Sarah (aa where ‘a’ stands for Aryan), resulting in a child called Michael (Ba), who in turn marries somebody called Lucy (aa), leaving Alsana with a legacy of unrecognizable great-grandchildren (Aaaaaa!), their Bengali-ness thoroughly diluted, genotype hidden by phenotype. (WT, 327)

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<sup>20</sup> As Stuart Hall highlights, most modern nations consist of disparate cultures, which were only unified by a lengthy process of violent conquest – that is, by the forcible suppression of cultural difference. Thus, modern nations are all cultural hybrids in reality (Hall, 296-297).

<sup>21</sup> ‘The British people’ are the product of a series of such conquests (see above) – Celtic, Roman, Saxon, Viking and Norman (Hall, 296).

Thus, similarly to the nationalists who are afraid of losing their national identity, the first-generation immigrants are afraid of ‘dissolution’ of their ‘race’. This is portrayed in a satirical way, for as Hall argues, ‘race is not a biological or genetic category with any scientific validity’. Hall points out that ‘there are different genetic strains and “pools”, but they are as widely dispersed within what are called “races” as they are between one “race” and another’ (Hall, 297-298). In other words, what Alsana is having nightmares about disappearing, is in reality already dissolved. The novel further suggests how this fear overlaps with the fear of cultural assimilation when Alsana once again contradicts herself:

I am saying these people<sup>22</sup> are taking away my son<sup>23</sup> from me! Birds with teeth! They’re Englishifying him completely! They’re deliberately leading him away from his culture and his family and his religion (WT, 345).

Whereas her niece reminds her: ‘What are you afraid of, Alsi? He’s second generation – you always say it yourself – you need to let them go their own way’ (WT, 346). Nevertheless, the situation is unacceptable for Samad. He refuses to see the generational gap, claiming that there’s only ‘one generation! Indivisible! Eternal!’ (WT, 289).

One might question why Samad and Alsana do not return to their home country if they are afraid of corruption and dissolution. However, as Smith makes clear, this is ‘the oldest sentence in the world’ and much easier said than done (WT, 163).

Although Samad does complain about how he ‘should never have come here’ and how ‘that’s where every problem has come from’ and although he keeps thinking ‘never should have brought my sons here, so far from God...condoms on the pavements, Harvest Festival’, his disillusionment with the country clashes with the

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<sup>22</sup> The Chalfen family, who symbolize the notion of “Englishness” in the novel.  
<sup>23</sup> Millat.



inability to leave it. Not just for economical or safety reasons, which made him immigrate in the first place, but for reasons that regard his diasporic identity.

Salman Rushdie explains the complexity of this diaspora crisis by saying that 'exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back'. Despite looking back however, he points out that it is impossible to reclaim 'precisely that thing that was lost' due to the 'physical alienation'. Thus, rather than an actual place one can return to, the idea of home becomes fictionalized into 'imaginary homelands' instead, hence the title of his essay (Rushdie, 10). Avtar Brah acknowledges this phenomenon by saying that 'home [becomes] a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination... a place of no-return' (Brah, 192). By way of example, when Samad expresses his wish to return to the East, his fellow waiter Shiva confronts him with their crisis: 'Ah, well... we all do, don't we... [but] who can pull the West out of'em once it's in?' (WT, 145).

Thus, as Laura Moss puts it, the first-generation immigrants are 'caught between a nostalgia for home', which represents their past, and a loathing for the future' (Moss, 16). Samad acknowledges this complex state of 'in-between[ness]' even before immigrating to Britain (McLeod, 247). Whilst in war, he asks himself:

What am I going to do, after this war is over... Go back to Bengal? Or to Delhi? Who would have such an Englishman there? To England? Who would have such an Indian? They promise us independence in exchange of the men we were. But it is a devilish deal (WT, 112).

Samad is thus unsuitable, he belongs 'neither here nor there'; he is too British for his country of origin, and too Indian for his country of immigration (McLeod, 247). He acknowledges this 'devilish deal' once more, once there:

These days, it feels to me like you 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...in a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained.

The passage reveals another reason for resisting assimilation. Besides fear of corruption and dissolution, Samad questions why one should integrate into a society where one is not even 'welcomed' and thereby is, arguably, prevented from belonging. The 'multicultural tolerance', which Alana Lentin ironically refers to as the 'nationalist practice of inclusion' is thus being criticized (Lentin, 31).

Nevertheless, Samad adds:

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. And then you begin to give up the very *idea* of belonging. Suddenly...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? [emphasis in the original] (WT, 407)

Undoubtedly, Samad suffers from his displaced position<sup>24</sup> and, as the narrator tells us, 'the further Samad himself floated out to sea...the more determined he became to create for his boys roots on shore, deep roots that no storm or gale could displace' (WT, 193). Thus, in the hope of preventing his children the immigrants' 'devilish' fate of rootlessness, he sends one<sup>25</sup> of them back<sup>26</sup> 'home'. Nevertheless, his attempt to do so fails because, as mentioned also in the beginning, even the

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<sup>24</sup> Not only in terms of belonging but also his faith, which is threatened when he is tempted into having an affair with his sons' schoolteacher.

<sup>25</sup> He can only afford to send one as he does not have enough money to send both.

<sup>26</sup> Although Magid has never before been in Bangladesh.

immigrants' children are 'deemed' to hold this position in the society. In fact, they may 'occupy' an even more complex one since they were born there (McLeod, 247). This will be explored in the following section.

### **3.2 The second-generation immigrants: Magid, Millat and Irie**

'It is only late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung...Danny Rahman...Quang O'Rourke...and Irie Jones. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals [and] medical checks' (WT, 326).

As discussed in the previous section, the conflicts of second-generation immigrants can seem to be of a more complex kind than those of the former generation. This has to do with the fact that they were born in the nation their parents immigrated to and thus, theoretically, should fit in. Yet, when it comes to social practice, they are presumed to be 'stranger[s]' by the society (WT, 266). Their nationality is questioned due to their ethnicity. An example of this is demonstrated in this passage:

You look very exotic. Where are you from if you don't mind me asking?' 'Willesden', said Irie and Millat simultaneously. 'Yes, yes, of course, but where *originally*?' 'Oh', said Millat, . . . 'You are meaning where from am I *originally*.' Joyce looked confused. 'Yes, *originally*.' 'Whitechapel', said Millat, . . . 'Via the Royal London Hospital and the 207 bus [emphasis in the original] (WT, 319).

Through Joyce<sup>27</sup>, the novel depicts the society's assumption of citizens of England as white. Regardless of their citizenship, Millat and Irie are presumed to be from elsewhere due to their 'exotic' looks. Furthermore, at school, they are referred to as 'children of disadvantaged or minority backgrounds' (WT, 308). As McLeod argues, this is remarkable since being 'fictionalised by others as an outsider' does not exactly make the migrant children feel like they are 'permitted to belong to Britain', but rather excluded (McLeod, 247). The novel depicts this and its consequences through the three friends, Magid, Millat and Irie. Even though they share the same feeling, 'the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere', they respond to it in different ways (WT, 269).

Magid responds to this conflict by mimicry<sup>28</sup>. As an attempt to fit in, he mimics everything that he considers English. It goes without saying that this upsets his parents. Alsana is 'close to tears' when he starts calling her 'mum' instead of 'amma', and Samad takes it as an insult when his son starts calling himself 'Mark Smith' among his friends:

'I GIVE YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAGID MAHFOOZ  
MURSHED MUBTASIM IQBAL AND YOU WANT TO BE CALLED  
MARK SMITH!' [emphasis in the original].

Nevertheless, as the narrator points out, 'this was just a symptom of a far deeper malaise':

Magid really wanted to be in *some other family*...he wanted his mother to make the music of the cello, not the sound of the sewing machine...he wanted

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<sup>27</sup> Ironically, a few pages later we find out that Joyce herself is in an immigrant of third-generation. However, since she is white, nobody questions her citizenship.

<sup>28</sup> Mimicry is used in post-colonial theory with reference to colonials and immigrant minorities who "mimic" the colonizer's traits, such as cultural habits and linguistic norms, to become like them. The result is however never the same but rather a "blurred copy" which can be quite threatening since mimicry is never too far from mockery and thus can appear to parody whatever it mimics (Ashcroft, 124-125).

his father to be a doctor, not a...waiter...[he wished] to join in with the Harvest Festival like Mark Smith would. Like everybody else would [emphasis in the original] (WT, 151).

The passage illustrates the complexity of identity. Magid's desire to be and do 'like everybody else would' does not only concern himself but also his family, whose social nature collides with the mainstream "Englishness" pattern. In other words, Magid's mimicry confuses the middle class dream with the mainstream reality. Consequently, this makes him become ashamed of his own family and develop a wish to be 'in some other' and 'more English' one.

Samad views this 'malaise' as a symptom of 'corruption'. Thus, as an effort to save him, and with a belief that 'roots were what saved', he sends Magid back<sup>29</sup> to Bangladesh (WT, 193). Ironically though, and as expected from someone who has been born and brought up outside of his homeland<sup>30</sup>, the stay in Bangladesh makes Magid discover his "Englishness" rather than his Bengali roots, and thereby return to Britain as 'more English than the English' (WT, 406).

Millat, on the other hand, 'goes native'. The feeling of being 'neither one thing [n]or the other...Muslim or Christian, Englishman or Bengali' but rather 'in between', eventually leads him to a form of reverse mimicry<sup>31</sup> through Islamic extremism (WT, 351).

According to Bill Ashcroft, 'going native [might] encompass lapses from European [in this case British] behavior' (Ashcroft, 94). Similarly, David Cameron

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<sup>29</sup> 'Back' to Bangladesh where Magid has never before been to.

<sup>30</sup> The concept of 'homeland' is complex amongst second-generation immigrants as demonstrated in this essay.

<sup>31</sup> Similar to mimicry, but reversed. Instead of mimicking the colonizer, one "goes native" and mimics one's own "native" culture. In the same way as mimicry, and as demonstrated above, it can also be threatening (Ashcroft, 94).

argues in a speech<sup>32</sup> how this kind of extremism arises from a ‘search for something to belong to’ and thus works as ‘a substitute for what the [British] society has failed to supply’; ‘a sense of community’. Whilst *White Teeth* is in no way an echo of the Tory party’s dislike of multiculturalism, it clues this argument by showing how English society fails to make Millat feeling a part of it through racial categorization:

He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt curry....took other people’s jobs; or had no relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter; but not a footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep...that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered (WT, 234).

In other words, the ‘devilish fate’ of Samad is more or less passed down to Millat, who in turn promises himself that ‘that’s how it was, but no more’ (WT, 506). The ‘anger’ within him gradually develops into a ‘violent’ one, and in order ‘to prove himself’ to a society he thinks misrepresents him, he ultimately declares a war towards it through a fundamentalist Islamic group (WT, 446).

Thus, the twin brothers are driven into two poles of extremism when it comes to their identities. Irie however, stands in between these rooting poles by means of hybridity. In contrast to Magid and Millat, whose parents both come from Bangladesh, Irie is the result of ‘two entities’: the ‘black Jamaican-English’ Clara and the ‘white English’ Archie (Moss, 12). Thus, she is not only ‘split’ in terms of culture, but also in her racial context. Despite being half English, she still feels like ‘she was

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<sup>32</sup> Cameron, David. “Speech on radicalization and Islamic extremism”. Security Conference, Munich. 5 February 2011.

all *wrong*<sup>33</sup> due to her appearance (WT, 268):

[She] was big. The European proportions of Clara's figure had skipped a generation, and she was landed instead with [her grandmother's] substantial Jamaican frame (WT, 265).

Lacking the attributes that are associated with Englishness or, to be more precise, an '*English Rose*'<sup>34</sup> – 'a slender, delicate thing not made for the hot suns' – Irie feels like an outsider in her native country. Metaphorically speaking, 'there was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land' (WT, 266-267).

Thus, in order to gain a 'reflection', she decides to fight against her genes by straightening out her hair. What is remarkable however, is that, once in the Afro-Jamaican hair saloon, she is taken for a Mexican or an Arab due to her 'cocoa complexion' and 'freckles'. Even her curls are regarded as more 'loose' than 'Afro' (WT, 273). In other words, the novel ironizes how the genes Irie is trying to fight are not even perceived as wholly Jamaican, and thereby how Irie is arguably locked into being perceived as a "stranger".

But Irie, determined 'to beat each curly hair into submission'<sup>35</sup>, chooses to go through with it anyway and consequently ends up literally meaning it when she says: 'Sometimes you'd give the hair on your head to be the same as everybody else' (WT, 284). Notwithstanding the traumatic experience from the unfortunate hair incident<sup>36</sup>, her desire for "Englishness" continues. When she meets the Chalfen family she just 'kind of [wants to] *merge* with them':

She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfishness. The *purity* of it. It didn't

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<sup>33</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>34</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>35</sup> WT, 275

<sup>36</sup> Since Irie had washed her hair recently, there was no dirt to protect her scalp from the ammonia relaxant, which in turn burned up her long hair into just a few inches.

occur to her that the Chalfens were, after a fashion, immigrants too (third generation, by way of Germany and Poland, ne'e Chalfenovsky)...To Irie, the Chalfens were more English than the English (WT, 328).

This passage stresses the ambiguity of "Englishness" once again, and confirms what Alsana said about it being 'easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person' (WT, 236). Eventually, and indirectly, Irie realizes this, and gives up her search for "Englishness":

'Irie switched Joyce [Chalfen] off...It just seemed tiring and unnecessary all of a sudden, that struggle to force something out of the recalcitrant English soil. Why bother?'

As a consequence of still lacking a place to belong to, she starts to look for her identity in her Jamaican heritage instead. However, as David P. Huddart points out, 'feeling like your home is elsewhere [and with no experience of it] can lead you to imagine a homeland that is a pure, untainted place' (Huddart, 70). Similarly, Irie romanticizes Jamaica as a place of 'no complications...where things simply *were*', until she realizes that even '*homeland* is one of [those] fantasy words'(WT, 402).

As a result of her disappointing attempts to achieve an identity, it is evident that Samad's theory about the accidental quality of 'birthplaces' and 'belonging' appeals to her. 'The land of accidents', which to Samad sounded like a 'dystopia', sounds rather like a '*paradise*'<sup>37</sup> to Irie, who imagines the great feeling of 'freedom' that such a place, where the past is no longer prologue<sup>38</sup>, would provide (WT, 407-408):

'And every single fucking day is not this huge battle between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be' (WT, 515).

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<sup>37</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>38</sup> The quote comes from William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* and is the epigraph of *White Teeth*.



Thus, through Irie's longing, the novel depicts what a blessing it would be if roots were not to really matter anymore, and where following that, there would be no more prejudice about people based on their heritage or appearance. The figure of her unborn child with untraceable roots<sup>39</sup>, symbolizes this forward-looking vision, which embodies the concept of multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the novel continues to be realistic and thereby skeptical towards this idealization:

'But surely to tell these tall tales and others like them would be to speed the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect. And as [we know], it's not like that. It's never been like that' (WT, 541).

#### **4. Conclusion**

To conclude, *White Teeth* shows that history does matter, both in the colonial context and in the sense of roots. The past keeps affecting the immigrants' present, as well as future, whether they are first- or second-generation immigrants and whether they want it or not. 'Because this is the other thing about immigrants (fugees, émigrés, travelers): they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow' (WT, 466). 'Even when [they] arrive, [they]'re still going back and forth; [their] children are going round and round' (WT, 161).

The past's impact on the present makes it difficult for the immigrants to just 'step into their foreign lands as blank people, free of any kind of baggage, happy and willing to leave their difference at the docks...weaving their way through Happy Multicultural Land' (WT, 465). The utopian idea of a harmonious multicultural society is thereby effectively depicted as an illusion.

Thus, rather than giving a celebratory vision of multiculturalism, the novel is

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<sup>39</sup> The paternity of the child is untraceable since Irie has slept with both Magid and Millat.

keen to portray the reality if it. Because in the same way as it is impossible to escape history, it is impossible to avoid its aftermath. Britain's multicultural present is, in this context, the outcome of its colonial past. In an article in the *Guardian*, Smith herself affirms this by saying:

'Multiculturalism as a policy or an ideology is something I have never understood. We don't walk around our neighborhood thinking how's this experiment going? This is not how people live. It's just a fact...an inevitability'

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