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Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*  
in the context of British Postcolonial Literature

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Christine Powischer

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Betreuerin: o. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Margarete Rubik



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## Introduction

Zadie Smith belongs to one of Great Britain's most celebrated young authors since her first novel, *White Teeth*, was published in 2001. Until now, she has published three major novels and several short stories, which were translated into numerous languages and guarantee her a prominent place in the contemporary British literary scene.

In this paper I will first describe Smith's personal background and the development of her literary career. As she grew up and lives in the multicultural environment which plays a central role in all her novels, her mixed ethnic background has to be considered when analysing her writing.

Furthermore, the reception of Smith's writing by the British media and literary critics is described. In this context it has to be noted that Smith's work is often compared to that of postcolonial writers, as far as the central themes and issues are concerned. Therefore, I am going to present and draw parallels to some of the best known British postcolonial writers, who obviously have had a strong influence on Smith's writing.

The second part of my paper consists of an analysis of *White Teeth* and focuses on form as well as on content, particularly on the major themes history, religion, identity and multiculturalism. Among the formal aspects, structure, language and style, and symbolism are discussed in greater detail: the title of the novel already points to the importance of teeth on a literal as well as on a symbolical level. Symbolically, they stand for human and personal history, which is treated in greater detail in the chapter on history.

With regard to the historical dimension, the focus lies on the fact that every history seems to repeat itself according to certain patterns. Many of the main characters in *White Teeth* therefore suffer from the feeling that they are confined in an ever-repeating circle out of which they are unable to escape.

Another theme which has an equally problematic influence on the lives of most of the main characters is religion. Whereas some of them are engaged in a lifelong struggle to be true to their faith or even join religious groups such as the Witnesses of Jehovah or radical Islamist movements, others are fighting to escape the influence of religion on their lives.

In how far history and religion contribute to the formation of identities is discussed in the following chapter, which is concerned with various concepts of identities. In

accordance with the central topic of postcolonialism, special emphasis is put on the question of whether the concept of a postcolonial identity can be defined and what it comprises.

The final chapter on *White Teeth* deals with multiculturalism, which pervades all other aspects of the lives of the main characters, as they all move in a multicultural London environment. In this context, the question of racism is also of interest, particularly with regard to the strategies and ways in which those of the characters with an immigrant background cope with the manifestations of racism with which they are confronted in everyday life.

Summing up, it can be said that Smith paints a very vivid picture of life in contemporary multicultural London. To a certain extent, it is an ideal and probably utopian picture, but Smith makes it abundantly clear that her aim is to depict the daily normality of modern urban life, which includes encounters with prejudices and racism, as well as happy and even comic instances of life in a hybrid community.



## Part I: Zadie Smith and Postcolonial Literature

### I. 1. Zadie Smith: personal background

When her first novel, *White Teeth*, was published in the year 2000, Zadie Smith was 24 years old and a graduate of English Literature at Cambridge University. In the course of a few weeks, she suddenly became the sparkling new star among British novelists and the hype about her novel exceeded her expectations by far. Critics and reviewers are still trying to classify her, to compare her to other famous authors or to force her into the role of a spokeswoman for all kinds of groups that make up multicultural urban Britain, as I will specify later in this paper.

Zadie Smith was born in 1975 into a mixed-race family, her father being British and her mother Jamaican. Together with her two younger brothers she grew up in the urban, lower-middle class, multicultural environment of Willesden, North London, which also provides the setting for *White Teeth*. After having finished High School in Willesden, she earned a scholarship to Cambridge University, where she took a degree in English Literature. In the course of her studies at Cambridge she wrote a few short stories and also started writing *White Teeth*, which was initially meant to become a short story but eventually expanded into a novel of substantial size.

Since 2000, Zadie Smith has dedicated her time to writing and has already completed two further novels, *The Autograph Man*, published in 2003, and *On Beauty*, published in 2005. In addition, she produced a non-fiction book on writing, *Fail Better*, published in 2006. Moreover, in 2003 she accepted a Radcliffe Institute fellowship at Harvard University, where she worked on a book of essays titled “The Morality of the Novel”<sup>1</sup>, on which she also lectured. In 2005, she married the lawyer and poet Nick Laird, whose poem “On Beauty” provided the title for her third novel and is also quoted in it, along with two more poems from Laird’s collection *To a Fault* (published in January 2005<sup>2</sup>). The couple, who continue to live in North London, are currently celebrated by the press as “a match made in publishing heaven” and “London’s hottest literary property”<sup>3</sup>. This is little surprising considering their comparative youth and the number of works they have already published between them (Laird’s first novel, *Utterly Monkey*, was published in May 2005 and won the Betty Trask Prize in 2006<sup>4</sup>), not to mention the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf.: [http://www.radcliffe.edu/fellowships/show\\_pastfellows.php?file=smith.html](http://www.radcliffe.edu/fellowships/show_pastfellows.php?file=smith.html)

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=authC2D9C28A1129f14728LvP23FD183>

<sup>3</sup> Cf.: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/features/story/0,11710,1495367,00.html>

<sup>4</sup> Cf.: <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=authC2D9C28A1129f14728LvP23FD183>

literary awards Zadie Smith alone has won so far<sup>5</sup>: *White Teeth* won the Guardian First Book Award, The Whitbread First Novel Award, The James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction, the WH Smith Award for New Talent and the Commonwealth Writers' First Book Award as well as the Betty Trask Prize<sup>6</sup>, *The Autograph Man* was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2002<sup>7</sup> and *On Beauty* was nominated for the Man Booker Prize in 2005<sup>8</sup>.

## **I.2. Press on Zadie Smith**

Before dealing with the echo Zadie Smith's novels received in the British press, I want to show how big a part her outward appearance seemed and still seems to play in the kind of criticism she is met with. When looking at the comments on her age and looks, of which I will give just a few of the most striking examples, the impression is created that the press jumped at Zadie Smith because apart from showing literary talent she combines all features of the young, urban, and cool, which makes her perfect material for selling to modern society. I want to further illustrate this by the following quote from an article in the "Guardian", written in the year 2000, which can be interpreted as a summary of the attitudes Zadie Smith confronts with regard to the ways in which the media try to classify her: "Young, attractive, black, female – and very talented. She is everything the media hankers after, the ideal head and shoulders to parade on a newspaper's masthead" (Hattenstone).

Especially during the first months after the publication of *White Teeth*, Smith frequently complained about the fact that she was suddenly being pushed into the role of "a spokeswoman for race, youth, women" (Hattenstone) against her will: "a white male writer is never asked to be a spokesman for anything; he has complete artistic freedom" (Hattenstone). In instances where journalists write that "she insists that she is depicting London as it is, without an overt political agenda" (Carson), or "Zadie Smith says the book was never intended as a multicultural milestone" (Jones), they insinuate that Zadie Smith does not actually mean what she says. With the kinds of comments, however, which Smith frequently makes, it is obvious that she wants to distance herself from all these assumptions in order to be taken seriously as a writer; but in my opinion one

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<sup>5</sup> Nick Laird also won the Eric Gregory Award in 2004 and the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 2005: cf. <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=authC2D9C28A1129f14728LvP23FD183>

<sup>6</sup> Cf. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/1373677.stm>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Poitier

<sup>8</sup> Cf. <http://www.themanbookerprize.com/downloads/ManBoookerPrizeCribSheet.pdf>

should be careful not to take them too literally and to assume that Smith is denying any intention to voice concerns regarding multiculturalism, racism and the like.

One example of how Smith's appearance is used by the media in order to emphasise the multicultural aspect which nowadays seems to sell so well can be illustrated by the author's pictures used on different editions of *White Teeth*:



As Head points out, “the Afro hair-style and the complexion which betokens a mixed-race identity” (Head, 106) of the first picture (as it appears on the first Hamish Hamilton hardback edition of *White Teeth*) has disappeared without a trace on the second picture (taken from the Penguin paperback edition of 2001), to make way for a more Asian appearance. These two pictures thus apparently depict the same person representing two different racial identities that are seemingly interchangeable, a fact which, as Head claims, “suggests a substantive hybridized identity that goes beyond the more cynical marketing objectives” (106) and adds credibility to the “definitive representation of twentieth-century British multiculturalism” (106) which *White Teeth* purports to be. There is another possible explanation for this radical change in Smith's appearance, though, namely that she simply wants to defy categorisation in terms of her own identity, just as she is trying to distance herself from the frequent attempts on the part of reviewers and critics to compare her writing to the works of numerous other established writers.

I have already briefly mentioned another factor apart from her ethnic identity which is often used to categorise Smith, namely the fact that she is not only a young but also a very attractive woman. Journalists who write about interviews with her constantly refer to her looks:

Seated in the lounge at the Westin Copley Place, she was stunning in soft afternoon light, with lively hands and eyes and dressed in autumnal colors.  
(Mehegan)

The big specs and Afro have disappeared. She looked lovely on the cover of *White Teeth* – not a face you could forget. Today, she’s all long straight hair and lip gloss, and looks like any number of drained All Saints waltzing around clubland. (Hattenstone)

With this last comment, also Hattenstone points to the radical change in Smith’s look which I have already mentioned above. He does not, however, consider the possibility of interpreting this change as a desire on Smith’s part to adopt a different racial identity.

All these quotes illustrate what Zadie Smith observed in the interview which I have already cited above, at the beginning of which Hattenstone, ironically, had also pondered on her looks:

She tells me [Hattenstone] about the time she went to do a photo shoot for a magazine and found herself lost in a sprawl of make-up artists, dressers and little Prada dresses that could never have fitted her. “If you’re a woman it’s as if they want to reduce everything to the same denominator. [...] That you must present yourself as an attractive woman even if you’re a rocket scientist. It’s total arse, isn’t it?” (Hattenstone)

That the media are obviously trying to increase the marketability of a novelist by attempting to squeeze her into “little Prada dresses” does of course seem to be rather a sexist marketing strategy, and the situation described is definitely one which a male writer would never experience in this radical way. There is a certain ambiguity in Smith’s attitude towards this problem, however: on the one hand she complains about her looks being exploited in order to increase sales, but on the other hand she is very aware of the mechanisms of marketing and she knows very well how to use her looks accordingly. The following quotation shows this awareness and sums up the dilemma in which Smith finds herself:

Her beauty, brains, and mixed ethnic background made her a poster girl for Cool Britannia. [...] The public’s obsession with Smith’s own appearance has, she acknowledges, helped shape the novel [*On Beauty*]. “I think if you’re a woman your looks are an essential part of you because the world makes them so.” (Kachka)

A quite recent piece of evidence for the fact that Smith deliberately uses her attractiveness to get the attention of a large audience is the appearance of her pictures in the magazine *Vogue*. They were taken in February 2006 at a “VIP party” in London<sup>9</sup> and show Smith in an elegant evening dress, mingling with other celebrities.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf.: <http://www.wireimage.com/GalleryListing.asp?nbc1=1&navtyp=CAL====162929&ym=200602>

Shortly after the publication of her third novel in 2005, Smith provoked considerable uproar in the British media by criticising her home country in an interview for the *New York* magazine. Not only did she claim that “the England that [she] loved” is “just gone” (Kachka), but also that in England there was “just general stupidity, madness, vulgarity, stupid TV shows, aspirational arseholes, money everywhere. It’s just a disgusting place. It’s terrifying” (Kachka). Especially when considering the fact that at that time Smith had just been shortlisted for the Booker prize, it is hardly surprising that this interview met with a storm of indignation in Britain. She did try to tone down the commotion which these remarks had caused in subsequent interviews, however, saying that “she’d been “tearful” on reading the newspaper reports” and insisting that she “didn’t say that” and was “incredibly embarrassed. (Although she did concede that she’d been rude about trash television.)”<sup>10</sup> The writer of the cited article in *The Times* goes on to state that “the truth is that Smith just isn’t good at being interviewed”<sup>11</sup>, which Smith herself has often claimed to be the case. Nevertheless, interviews with Zadie Smith have always been and continue to be in demand – she is, after all, amongst the most popular young British authors of today’s literary scene.

### 1.2.1. Reception of Zadie Smith’s novels in the British media

When rumours spread among the press in 1997 that Zadie Smith, then a twenty-one year-old student of English at Cambridge, got a six-figure advance for her first novel, of which at the time only around 80 pages existed<sup>12</sup>, the media created a hype around both the writer and her debut novel which still has not completely worn off several years later, now that Smith has published her third novel so far. Once *White Teeth* was published in the year 2000, it was praised as a “dazzling debut”<sup>13</sup>, “a winning debut in every respect [which] marks the arrival of a wondrously talented writer”<sup>14</sup>, or “the literary sensation of the new millennium”<sup>15</sup>, and reviewers had to confess that “*White Teeth* turned out to be just as significant as the hype had proclaimed” (Head, 107).

Salman Rushdie was quoted in numerous articles on *White Teeth* as well as on the blurb of the book itself, calling it “an astonishingly reassured debut”<sup>16</sup> and thus adding to the

<sup>10</sup>Cf.: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2088-1774262\\_2,00.html](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2088-1774262_2,00.html)

<sup>11</sup>Cf.: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2088-1774262\\_2,00.html](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2088-1774262_2,00.html)

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Merritt

<sup>13</sup>Cf.: <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?0375703861>

<sup>14</sup>Cf.: <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?1400075505.htm>

<sup>15</sup>Cf.: [http://culturespace.typepad.com/index/2004/08/search\\_for\\_zadi.html](http://culturespace.typepad.com/index/2004/08/search_for_zadi.html)

<sup>16</sup>Cf., f.ex. cover of the Penguin edition of *White Teeth* (published in 2001)

general enthusiasm for the novel as well as encouraging a comparison to his own works and, inevitably, to postcolonial writing. This link, on which I will elaborate later in this part of my paper, is also made obvious to the reader by another quote by an established postcolonial writer on the blurb of *White Teeth*: Meera Syal, author of the successful novels *Anita and Me* and *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* as well as of numerous popular screenplays, articles & essays<sup>17</sup>, is cited calling *White Teeth* “an impressive debut [...] for the sheer audacity of its scope and vision”. In almost all articles and reviews, the link to postcolonial literature and other postcolonial authors is of course being elaborated on, and if one takes a closer look at the reviewers’ identities, the fact that renowned personalities of postcolonial studies such as the novelist and scholar Caryl Phillips wrote a well-known review on *White Teeth*, further consolidates this connection.

The stylistic features of *White Teeth* which the reviewers praised in unison include Smith’s wit and her remarkably good ear for language, which she demonstrates impressively by lending the characters of so many different ethnic and intellectual backgrounds surprisingly authentic voices all throughout the book. From a thematic point of view, many reviewers at once classified it as a “multicultural” and therefore “hip” and “cool” novel, and all seemed to agree that Smith provided a very optimistic outlook on Britain’s multicultural future<sup>18</sup>. Generally, *White Teeth* received very good critiques and the media agreed on the fact that it certainly did live up to the expectations created by the hype surrounding its publication.

*The Autograph Man*, on the other hand, was generally conceived as a disappointment after *White Teeth*, a fact that is not surprising considering the enormous success of Smith’s first novel, which it was obviously very difficult to equal. The book received a number of positive reviews as well, however, and Smith’s stylistic skills and her ability to depict spoken language so accurately was mostly praised even in articles which otherwise did not argue in favour of *The Autograph Man*. Sandhu, for example, admits that Smith’s “prose has bounce” (Sandhu, 66) while on the other hand he does not grant the novel many other merits. Among the main points of criticism is the fact that the hero of the novel, Alex-Li Tandem, is an empty, flat character, who does not rise above the significance of the items of pop culture with which he fills his life and whose emotions and motivations are difficult to comprehend for the reader. This is a fact which also the

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<sup>17</sup> Cf.: <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth94>

<sup>18</sup> That was, of course, before the attacks on the London transport system of summer 2005; in the light of these bombings performed by British-born Muslims, I doubt whether Smith would have been able to present episodes such as Millat’s involvement with the radical muslim organisation KEVIN in such a light and comical way.

critic and author James Wood, who has been called “the biggest [...] fish in the literary criticism pool”<sup>19</sup>, mentions as one of the most problematic features of the novel<sup>20</sup>. He argues that Smith’s “obsession with pop-culture trivia” (Wood) lacks a necessary amount of irony and thus only accounts for the “irrelevant intensity” (Wood) of the novel.

Wood goes on to state that the novel’s other, “continuously problematic element, is its intense preoccupation with Jewishness<sup>21</sup>”. According to him, the constant references to Judaism feel forced and “essentially inauthentic, and [mark] the novel precisely as one not written by a Jew<sup>22</sup>”. Interestingly, however, the author, literary critic and chair of the Department of English at Florida Atlantic University<sup>23</sup>, Andrew Furman, who is Jewish himself, voices a very different opinion in his article on *The Autograph Man*: He praises the novel as “a profoundly important Jewish novel” and “the most thoughtful recent artistic exploration of the problematics of Jewish identity in our broader post-ethnic contemporary culture” (Furman).

All in all, however, the negative criticism of *The Autograph Man* prevails, so much so that Smith herself obviously felt the need to defend her novel. In an interview quoted in the Daily Telegraph, she claimed: “When I was writing *The Autograph Man*, I thought my father was dying. I was incredibly miserable. I really disliked my life and I wrote a book which was very angry and sad.”<sup>24</sup>

Smith’s third and most recent novel, *On Beauty*, generally received better reviews than *The Autograph Man*, even if it still was not able to repeat the enormous success of *White Teeth*. As with her previous novels, critics united in their praise of Smith’s vivid language and her ability to reproduce an authentic language, even though some critics questioned her rendering of American English, claiming that “Smith is not quite a master of American speech” (Alter).

The fact that Smith used E.M. Forster’s novel *Howards End* as a model for *On Beauty* was received in a rather ambiguous way by critics. While some reviewers state that it is “an ambitiously sprawling, gentle homage to E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* disguised as an American campus novel” (Press), others not so favourably argue that “the parallels

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<sup>19</sup> Cf.: [http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/birnbaum\\_v\\_james\\_wood.php](http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/birnbaum_v_james_wood.php)

<sup>20</sup> Cf.: Wood

<sup>21</sup> Cf.: Wood

<sup>22</sup> Cf.: Wood

<sup>23</sup> Cf.: <http://www.wisc.edu/wisconsinpress/books/2657.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Cf.: Reynolds

with *Howards End* are more important (and perhaps also more amusing) for the writer than they are likely to be for the reader” (Alter) and that “Smith's unsubtle imitation of Forster remains puzzling, superfluous, and perhaps a little precious” (Alter). What goes without saying, however, is the fact that Smith’s attempt to model her novel on a work such as Forster’s undoubtedly was a courageous one.

Zadie Smith herself tends to play down her novels, and even though she likes to claim that “there are people who hate me way more than I hate me” (Press), she is often described by journalists as “her own worst critic” (Press). Numerous articles<sup>25</sup> cite her famous verdict of *White Teeth*: she “compared her style to "a script editor for *The Simpsons* who'd briefly joined a religious cult and then discovered Foucault."” (Press). In the same article, Press very accurately sums up the reasons Zadie Smith might have for using as a strategy what might at a first glance appear to be genuine modesty:

Smith’s penchant for self-flagellation suggests a combination of cunning and wisdom. Preemptively dismissing her books disarmed reviewers, who, in backlash to the hype around *White Teeth*, damned her as a fashionable multicultural wunderkind. Her auto-critiques also served as a defensive shield, preventing all that praise from clogging up her brain while she pushed her own boundaries. (Press, italics in original)

To bring this topic to a conclusion, it can only be stated that due to her youth and initial inexperience in dealing with such a huge amount of public attention, Zadie Smith naturally did not always manage to present herself and her views favourably in front of the media. Amidst all this ongoing fuss about her person, however, one must not forget that at the heart of this discussion should lie her three novels which, with all their faults and merits, deserve to be treated with respect by critics as well as by the readership.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf., for example, Blount, Press, or Edemariam.



### **I.3. Postcolonial Literature<sup>26</sup>: an attempt at definition, its roots, and its development**

Not only is the term “postcolonial” *per se* a difficult one to define, bringing with it much controversy (Walder even goes as far as saying that it is being used “for want of a better term”<sup>27</sup>), it is also rather difficult to pin down when exactly the term came to be used for the branch of literary and social criticism, i.e. in the meaning in which I am also applying it in this paper. Its earliest use was strictly historico-political and referred to those countries of the British Empire which had gained their independence and were thus “after (Latin: “post”) the colonial period”. Walder mentions that “the OED records the first use of ‘post-colonial’ in a British newspaper article of 1959, referring to India, [...] which achieved independence in 1947” (p. 3). With the development of postcolonial theory, it came to “describe both a state of being, defined by its place in the passage of epochal history, and a critical orientation toward the reading of the past, not least of its textual traces” (Comaroff in Goldberg, p. 15).

Most scholars agree with the claim that Edward Said’s study *Orientalism*, published in 1978, in which he criticises the “Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture” and “the aggressiveness necessitated by the colonial expansion of the European powers” (Windschuttle, p.1), constitutes “the genesis of postcolonial theory” (Shankar, p. 359) or, as Childs puts it, “marks the Western academy’s late entry into an awareness of post-colonial theorising” (Childs, p. 1). Other critics such as Neil Lazarus tend to support the view that the field of postcolonial studies gradually developed in the course of the 1980s when “postcolonial” ceased to be used in strictly historical terms due to the changing ideological context<sup>28</sup>. The topics of this newly emerging field, however, were the same in any case: criticism of the eurocentricity and the patronising attitudes of the Western scholars who were engaged in cultural studies of the so-called Third World countries and made use of their “supposedly homogenous, innate, and historically continuous traditions” to “falsely define and ensure their subordinate status”<sup>29</sup>, as Bhabha puts it. Furthermore, the works of the postcolonial scholars have always been and continue being concerned with issues such as (cultural) identities, hybridity, liminality and the crossing of borders, language, etc. (I will go into detail about the topics of postcolonial studies later in this part of my

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<sup>26</sup> Postcolonial studies in general are not limited to the former British colonies, of course, but also to former Spanish, French etc. colonies. I will, however, be referring to British postcolonial literature only in this paper.

<sup>27</sup> Walder, 1

<sup>28</sup> Cf.: Lazarus, p. VII

<sup>29</sup> Cf.: Graves

paper). As I have already hinted at above, British postcolonial studies generally concentrate on the “Third World” countries amongst the former British colonies – Ireland, the USA, Australia or New Zealand are usually not included under this heading.

The pioneers who set up the basis of postcolonial studies as it is today actually started out in the discipline of literary studies: Said was a scholar of Comparative Literature, and Homi Bhabha, who is the second crucial figure in the earlier history of postcolonial studies, actually is a scholar of English Literature<sup>30</sup>. As a logical consequence of dealing with the above mentioned topics more intensely, the field of postcolonial studies gradually broadened towards disciplines such as history, anthropology, geography, psychology, architecture<sup>31</sup>, as well as cultural studies and most recently film and media studies, but it still is principally seen as “the fastest growing branch of literary studies in Britain over the past decade” (Mullan<sup>32</sup>).

### **I.3.1. Topics most frequently discussed in Postcolonial Studies**

Postcolonial theory, as Walder puts it, is “anti-colonial” and “celebrat[es] the neglected or marginalized” (Walder, p. 60). Thus, it is concerned with the consequences of colonialism and the ways in which the respective national cultures have been influenced by the colonial experience: In their introduction to their influential book on postcolonial literature *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft et al. state that the term postcolonial is used “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft et al., p. 2). In this context, departing from a political point of view, the main topics with which postcolonial studies are concerned include the criticism of eurocentrism, British cultural hegemony, the economic as well as political subordination of the Third World countries, and “the shifting power relationships between different parts of the world, as well as between people within particular territories” (Walder, p. 2). Taking these concepts as a starting point, publications in postcolonial studies tend to focus on more specific issues such as the quest for cultural and national identity, the notions of hybridity and the crossing of borders, of the immigrant experience and living in exile, the problems of language and translation (especially, in this context, the failure of communication because of mistranslation or misunderstanding), just to name the most frequent ones.

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<sup>30</sup> Bhabha: cf. Gewertz; Said: cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward\\_Said](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Said)

<sup>31</sup> Cf.: Schulze-Engler, p. 289

<sup>32</sup> Cf.: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,809618,00.html>

### **I.3.2. Postcolonial writers who have served as models to Zadie Smith**

Writers such as Nayantara Sahgal, who publishes her works in English but was born and continues to live in India, criticise the fact that even though the colonial experience is only one of the different layers of history she experienced, this often seems to justify her being classified as a “postcolonial writer” and thus being, in her eyes arbitrarily, grouped together with a mass of writers from different countries under this single term (cf. Walder, p. 1). Similarly, writers from very different countries and backgrounds find themselves suddenly lumped together solely on the grounds of the quite recent historical development of colonialism and its consequences, the experience of which often remains the only thing they have in common (Walder, p. 2). This fact raises, again, the question of whether it is at all justifiable to sum up a great many writers under the very wide and somewhat fuzzy definition of “postcolonial”, and whether it is possible to do so according to criteria such as place of birth, race, or any single historical experience they share seemingly by chance.

It cannot be denied, however, that most of the so-called “postcolonial” writers do cover many aspects of the above mentioned topics in their works, even if these issues do not necessarily consciously constitute a crucial aspect of their writing. If these topics were taken as the only criteria for an inclusion into the postcolonial field of writing, it would indeed be an extremely broad field of studies. Therefore, in most theoretical works on postcolonial literature, the writers’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds provide an additional argument as to whether to include them or not.

My aim in this part of my paper is not to provide a complete list of all writers who are in some way linked to postcolonial literature, but to provide a background for analysing Zadie Smith’s works. Therefore I will in the following limit myself to only discussing writers whom Zadie Smith has been compared to or associated with:

Zadie Smith [...] is steeped in her forerunners. She has imbibed Edward Said [...], while Salman Rushdie’s influence pervades the chattily intrusive narrative voice. And whether pilfering or in playful homage, the novel carries echoes from the migrant, or “post-immigrant”, literature of such as Sam Selvon, Caryl Phillips, Michael Ondaatje, and Hanif Kureishi.  
(<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,125310,00.html>)

When looking at the basic personal data of the writers which I am going to mention very briefly, it can be seen that they all are approximately one generation older than Zadie Smith. With the exception of Hanif Kureishi, who is not only closest to Smith in age, but also shares the biographical fact with Smith that they both have a mixed-race background, all the above mentioned writers have an immigrant background.

Salman Rushdie is one of the most widely known British authors with a South Asian, and therefore postcolonial, background. Born in India in 1947, he was sent to Britain in 1961 in order to receive a British education.<sup>33</sup> He never returned to settle in India, but has been living in Britain and the United States for most of his adult life. His novels are written in English, but most of his works, fiction as well as non-fiction, focus on India and its history, people, religions etc., and often also on India's relationship to Britain and the British. His novels deal with "issues of migration, translation, hybridity, blasphemy, and globalization" (Sanga, p. 5), among other topics, and his "agenda in the novels is to [...] portray the issues of marginalization, difference, and otherness that the migrant condition brings to the forefront" (Sanga, p. 5). Salman Rushdie's significance for postcolonial studies not only derives from the topics he addresses, however, but also from the fact that even though he writes in English, his "work is not steeped in the European tradition of realism or the desire for metropolitan Western acceptance" (Sanga, p. 4). He includes words, idioms or phrases of India's native languages into his texts that are not always translated or explained to the English readership, or for which he gives the explanation that they cannot be accurately translated into English (the following example is taken from his novel *Shame*):

This word: shame. No, I must write it in its original form, not in this peculiar language tainted by wrong concepts [...] *Sharam*, that's the word. For which this paltry 'shame' is a wholly inadequate translation. [...] A short word, but one containing encyclopaedias of nuance.  
(Rushdie 1995, p. 38f, italics in original)

By doing so, he is on the one hand negotiating between the two cultures, but on the other hand he is doing away with the privilege of the English readership, or even inverting the privilege, because a native Indian reader clearly has an advantage when reading this kind of text<sup>34</sup>.

Rushdie's writing, as I have already mentioned above, is not dominated by the realism which determines European writing, but follows the tradition of Magical Realism, which

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Sanga, Chronology

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Sanga, p. 4, 5

is strongly connected to Latin American writers such as Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez and therefore again closes the cycle towards postcolonialism:

Magical realists incorporate many techniques that have been linked to post-colonialism, with hybridity being a primary feature. Specifically, magical realism is illustrated in the inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, and Western and indigenous. The plots of magical realist works involve issues of borders, mixing, and change. Authors establish these plots to reveal a crucial purpose of magical realism: a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would illustrate. (<http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/MagicalRealism.html>)

Thus, Salman Rushdie is in several ways an important figure in postcolonial discourse, not only on account of his fiction, but also because he actively takes part in the academic as well as public discussions on migration, integration, (British) identity and so on.

Rushdie has had to live heavily protected and in hiding ever since Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced a *fatwa*<sup>35</sup> against him in 1989 because his novel *The Satanic Verses* was considered blasphemous and insulting towards the Muslim faith. Zadie Smith includes the street riots and public burnings which followed the publication of this book even in Britain into her novel *White Teeth*, where her main characters discuss the novel without mentioning its name. This episode, which I will later comment on in greater detail, is also strongly reminiscent of a similar scene in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*, where the main character also attends a public burning of *The Satanic Verses*.

Further connections between Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith include the genre of the family saga, a narration which stretches over several generations and where the main themes as well as the characters and their histories are strongly interwoven with one another. Both writers also make use of the motif of twins in this context, exploring the possibilities that arise from the fact that two biologically identical human beings can develop in completely different ways. Smith, of course, introduces this motif with two of her main characters of *White Teeth*, Millat and Magid Iqbal, whereas Rushdie most ostensibly makes use of this theme in his novel *The Ground beneath her Feet*.

Another British writer with a South-Asian family background, to whose novels Zadie Smith's writing has frequently been compared and whom I have already mentioned above, is Hanif Kureishi. Similarly to the main protagonist of his first and often cited novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi is "an Englishman born and bred,

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<sup>35</sup> In a neutral way, a fatwa is defined as an Islamic religious ruling, cf.: <http://islam.about.com/od/law/g/fatwa.htm>

almost” (Buddha, p. 3) – he was born in 1954 and raised in a mixed-race family in England, his father being Pakistani and his mother English. He started out his career as a playwright, his first play *Soaking the Heat* having been staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 1976<sup>36</sup>. In 1985, his screenplay for the film *My Beautiful Launderette* helped him on to the road to success, on which he is firmly established ever since his first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, won the Whitbread Award for the first novel in 1990. In most of his writings, he portrays British society seen from an immigrant perspective: the main character in the *Launderette* is a young Pakistani who opens a launderette in a London suburb, and both the *Buddha* as well as his second novel *The Black Album* are concerned with the racial and cultural conflicts that young people with an immigrant background face in their British environment.

Kureishi is often described as a “London writer” (Smith, Jules) who is known and often praised for his accurate and lively descriptions of today’s multicultural London. This ability to render a credible and fascinating picture of London as the setting of his books is also a point in which Zadie Smith can be compared to him.

Furthermore, a comparison between Kureishi and Smith can be made in terms of their incorporation of certain events crucial for the lives of immigrants in Britain into their novels, for example the burning of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*, which both Kureishi’s main character Shahid in *The Black Album* and Smith’s main character Millat in *White Teeth* witness personally and which is subsequently being discussed by several main characters in both novels.

Sam Selvon was born in Trinidad in 1923, into a family with mixed ethnic background, as many of the writers I have already mentioned in this paper: his grandparents were immigrants from India on the one side and Scottish on the other. Having worked as a wireless operator and reporter while occasionally publishing short stories, he left Trinidad for Britain in 1950 where he became a free-lance writer. While his first novels deal with life in Trinidad, in *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) he depicts the life of immigrants from the West Indies in London for the first time, a topic which he also discusses in subsequent works such as *Moses Ascending* (1975). It is these works that provide material for comparison with Smith’s *White Teeth* on account of both authors’ vivid portrayal of London:

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<sup>36</sup> cf. <http://www.hanifkureishi.com/time.html>

[..] one could [...] make illuminating comparisons between [...] the creation of Sam Selvon's black city of words in the 1950s, and that of Zadie Smith's multicultural Willesden today.  
(Nasta 2002, p. 244)

Michael Ondaatje was born in 1943 in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) into a mixed ethnic family of Indian and Dutch background. He moved to London with his mother in 1954 where he was educated at Dulwich College, before later moving on to Canada and studying at the universities of Quebec, Toronto and Kingston. He continues to work in Toronto as a Canadian citizen and is a member of the English department at the University of Toronto, while at the same time continuing to be an active writer<sup>37</sup>. The similarities to Zadie Smith which some critics emphasise can most obviously be found in Ondaatje's most famous novel, *The English Patient*, more specifically in his descriptions of life at the end of World War II and especially in the figure of Kirpal Singh. Singh is an Indian sapper who joined the British Army at the beginning of the war and faces its end separated from his company in Tuscany, where he not only has to deal with his personal history but also with the history of his country with respect to European history.

Caryl Phillips was born in the West Indies in 1958 but already moved to Britain with his parents when he was one year old. He therefore received a British education, growing up in Leeds, and studied at the University of Oxford. Phillips continues to live in Britain as a university teacher and writer of novels, stage plays and TV scripts, as well as non-fiction such as anthologies, numerous collections of essays, travel writing and so on<sup>38</sup>. His first novel, *The Final Passage* (published in 1985), which "fictionalises the experiences of his parents and thousands like them who left the West Indies in the 1950s to travel to Britain" (Rennison, 134), in terms of its themes already points the way for most of his following works, which, among other topics, deal with the fates of slaves, migration, relationships between people of mixed ethnic origin, and so on. Apart from the fact that Phillips wrote articles for newspapers like *The Observer* about Zadie Smith's novels<sup>39</sup> in his function as a literary critic, his own works are also compared to hers for a number of reasons. The fact that both writers portray Jewish characters in a number of their books (Phillips in *The Nature of Blood*, and Smith in *The*

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<sup>37</sup>Cf.: <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Ondaat.html>

<sup>38</sup> Cf.: Rennison, 133f

<sup>39</sup>Cf., for example, Phillips, Caryl: 'Mixed and Matched', *Observer Review*, 9 January 2000

*Autograph Man*, to give one example each) constitutes one example of a similarity which is mentioned in literary analyses.

#### I. 4. Locating Zadie Smith in the context of Postcolonial Literature

Due to the fact that not only the term postcolonial, but also the criteria according to which a writer can or should be referred to as “a postcolonial writer”, are difficult to define, it is equally difficult to determine Smith’s position in this relatively young field of studies. Zadie Smith has been mentioned in several works on Postcolonial Literature (for example in Wachinger, *Posing in between*, or in Susheila Nasta’s *Home Truths*) on account of, as it seems at a first glance, two facts: first, her being of mixed ethnic origin; second, her debut novel *White Teeth* being set in “multicultural” London (I will elaborate on this term in detail later) and most of its main characters having an immigrant background (Samad Iqbal and his wife Alsana come from Bangladesh, and Clara Bowden has Jamaican roots, just to name a few examples), which is why critics have claimed that it represents the cultural diversity of contemporary England<sup>40</sup>.

It is obvious that Smith, herself of mixed ethnic origin, cannot – and does not want to – write about contemporary London without addressing typically postcolonial issues: most of the main characters in her books are of mixed-ethnic background themselves (such as, for example, Irie Jones in *White Teeth*, Alex-Li Tandem in *The Autograph Man* or the Belsey children in *On Beauty*), have got a first- or second-generation immigrant background (the Iqbals in *White Teeth*), or are part of a multi-ethnic relationship (Alex-Li Tandem and Esther in *The Autograph Man*, and Howard and Kiki Belsey in *On Beauty*). Smith even seems to be expected to write about race issues: a recent article stated that “young black men” are “characters conspicuous by their absence from her first book, *White Teeth*” (bbc news, my italics<sup>41</sup>) whereupon Zadie Smith felt obliged to emphasise that “her new [...] book [*On Beauty*, published September 2005] would be tackling these characters” (bbc news.). She kept her word, as both her second novel, *The Autograph Man*, and her third book, *On Beauty*, have at their centre characters of mixed ethnic backgrounds (in *The Autograph Man*, the main character Alex is half English and half Chinese, whereas in *On Beauty*, the main characters come from a half English and half African American family). All these characters are therefore unavoidably involved in a search for an identity which transgresses the borders of cultural and racial restrictions and thus move towards what can be called “transnational identification”

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<sup>40</sup> cf. Tew, p. 150

<sup>41</sup> cf. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/entertainment/arts/4287367.stm>



(Itakura), meaning that they identify with overall international values and features rather than with items of a certain national identity.

In interviews, however, especially in those about *White Teeth*, Smith seems to want to avoid being seen as deliberately depicting a multicultural society or as a defender of immigrant rights: having been asked how she approached “multiracial London” in an interview in 2002, she said

“I was just trying to approach London. I don't think of it as a theme, or even a significant thing about the city. This is what modern life is like. If I were to write a book about London in which there were only white people, I think that would be kind of bizarre. People do write books like that, which I find bizarre because it's patently not what London is, nor has it been for fifty years.”

([http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/teeth/ei\\_smith\\_int.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/teeth/ei_smith_int.html))

Furthermore, in different interviews Smith also dismisses all relations to Postcolonial Literature and even tries to distance herself from the frequently made comparisons to writers like Salman Rushdie: In an interview with Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, she even claims that she “hadn't read Rushdie when [she] wrote *White Teeth*” (Nasta 2004, p. 273), a fact which is subject to doubt considering that Smith was an obviously well-read student of English Literature at the time she wrote *White Teeth*. This comment, as well as several other, similar ones, in which she also, for example, calls the comparison to Rushdie or Kureishi “racist nonsense”<sup>42</sup>, makes it clear that Smith wants to be seen as an independent writer in her own right, which most critics in the meantime do:

Zadie Smith's dazzling debut caught critics grasping for comparisons and deciding on everyone from Charles Dickens to Salman Rushdie to John Irving and Martin Amis. But the truth is that Zadie Smith's voice is remarkably, fluently, and altogether wonderfully her own.

(<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?0375703861>)

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<sup>42</sup> Cf.: Hattenstone, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/whitbread2000/story/0,6194,417437,00.html>

## **Part II: *White Teeth***

### **II. 1. Plot**

*White Teeth* tells the story of two families with different backgrounds living in North London. They are primarily linked by the friendship of the two fathers, the Bangladeshi Samad Miah Iqbal and the Englishman Archibald Jones, who got to know each other while serving in the British army during the Second World War. The friendship between the two very different men is sealed for life when Archie completes Samad's order to kill a French scientist who is supposed to be collaborating with the Nazis. Thirty years later they live in the same London neighbourhood, are both married to women twenty years their junior and their children, Samad's twins Magid and Millat, and Archie's daughter Irie, are best friends. Also Alsana Iqbal, who had been promised to Samad in marriage even before her birth, and Clara Jones, daughter of the Jamaican immigrants Hortense and Darcus Bowden, become friends in their everyday struggle with their elderly husbands, their strong-willed children and their multicultural London environment.

Later on in the novel, a third family, the half Jewish, half Catholic Chalfens, who represent a more or less typical British family, join the plot. As the focus shifts from the parental generation to their teenage children, the battle of the protagonists against the ghosts of their past becomes less furious and more successful. Irie, from whose perspective the last passages of the book are mainly told, is the one who in the end consciously decides to let the past be and who unites all families and their histories: she has slept with both twins, Magid and Millat, on the same day, and will therefore never be able to tell who the biological father of her daughter is. The man who, at the very end of the novel, lives at Irie's side and fulfils the role of a father to the child is Joshua, the oldest son of the Chalfens. Thus, the novel closes on the optimistic note that Irie has liberated her daughter from the restrictions of family history, which have always troubled her in her own adolescence, as in the end all three families and their different histories are united in this small family.

## II. 2. Aspects of Form

### II. 2. 1. Structure

*White Teeth* is a multifaceted book with many layers, which not only has a number of strands of action connected with the various protagonists who are equally important to the development of the plot, but which also contains a lot of so-called “analepses”, i.e. significant parts of the story are told by means of flashbacks. An analepsis can be defined as “a narration of a story-event at a point in the text after later events have been told” (Rimmon-Kenan, p. 46). By means of this technique, the structure of the book represents the importance of history, personal as well as collective history, to the lives of the main characters, as well as the fact that it is impossible to escape one’s past – a problem which I will discuss in greater detail in the chapter dedicated exclusively to the role of history in the novel.

At a first glance, the structure of the novel might seem arbitrary and even erratic. When we take a closer look at the table of contents, however, it becomes evident that *White Teeth* does, in fact, have a very clear and well thought-out structure: there are always five chapters grouped together, with the name of one of the protagonists plus two dates serving as a heading. In three out of four cases the first date is a contemporary one and the sequence follows the chronological evolvement of the plot. The second date, however, in the cases of Archie, Samad and Irie, point to the past and one chapter in each section deals with “the Root Canals”, i.e. the history, of the characters or one of the members of their family. The last section, however, is headed “*Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1999*” which makes it not only the last part of the book, but also the only one which points to the future after shedding light on a significant event in the past: it is revealed that Archie never actually killed the French scientist, Dr Perret, even though he told Samad he had done so. This amendment of personal history, along with the glimpse of a future which is no longer burdened with secrets of the past, adds a hopeful note to the novel and serves as a sign that it is, after all, possible to leave the past behind and approach the future with optimism.

However, flashbacks not only occur on the level of whole chapters but can also frequently be found within chapters. The core structure runs from the opening of the book in the year 1975 with Archie’s attempt at suicide and ends with a showdown in which all protagonists are involved on New Years Eve 1992, to which a prolepsis (i.e. a flashforward) into the year 1999 is added at the very end. Around this frame, three major

analepses which make up whole chapters as well as many shorter flashbacks are grouped, as I will show with a few examples in the following paragraphs.

While Archie, who has just been introduced as the first of the main characters, is waiting for his car to fill up with gas in order to commit suicide in the very first chapter, his mind roams over his past and he recapitulates his reasons for this attempt at suicide. This flashback is just the first of many more, minor analepses that fill the reader in on more and more stories of Archie's past. Similarly, also Clara's and Samad's past is partly presented by means of flashbacks that are scattered all through the novel. The characters' whole life-stories, however, are never fully revealed, which further adds to the notion that no history can ever be complete, and teases the reader into imagining the parts that are left out even though there is no possibility to find out what is reality and what is imagination.

One of the most important analepses within a chapter is the episode in which it is uncovered what really happened that night during the Second World War in which Archie was expected to shoot Dr Perret, which I have already mentioned above. This flashback is incorporated into the very last chapter of the book, located in between the moment in which both Samad and Archie recognise the old man in front of them as Dr Perret, and the moment in which Archie jumps up to save the aging scientist a second time from being shot. The special significance of this flashback results from the fact that it not only rectifies one of the lies about the men's personal history, but also puts the future of their friendship into perspective:

[Samad] realizes that he has been lied to by his only friend in the world for fifty years. That the cornerstone of their friendship was made of nothing more firm than marshmallow and soap bubbles. That there is far, far more to Archibald Jones than he had ever imagined. [...] And then, with a horrid glee, he gets to the fundamental truth of it, the anagnorisis: This incident alone will keep us two old boys going for the next forty years. It is the story to end all stories. (p. 533)

In contrast to the above mentioned analepsis, most of the other flashbacks in *White Teeth* do not serve to reveal the truth about a specific event in the past, but they rather show how different people will remember history in a different way. This becomes especially conspicuous in the passages that deal with Samad's ancestor, Mangal Pande, whose life story is so important to Samad that he is constantly talking and arguing about it despite the fact that his opinion strongly diverges from almost all scholars and other people in his surroundings who come into contact with that historical topic.

Samad keeps mentioning his great-grandfather in conversation and does not miss an opportunity to express his pride in this famous ancestor, but the first and major flashback to this historical event can only be found relatively late in the novel:

According to the legend, during the spring of 1857 in a factory in Dum-Dum, a new kind of British bullet went into production. Designed to be used in English guns by Indian soldiers, like most bullets at the time they had a casing that must be bitten in order to fit the barrel. There seemed nothing exceptional about them, until it was discovered by some canny factory worker that they were covered in grease – a grease made from the fat of pigs, monstrous to Muslims, and the fat of cows, sacred to Hindus. [...] The rumour reached the large unsightly ears of Mangal Pande [...] who swaggered into his parade ground – 29 March 1857 – stepping forward from the throng to make a certain kind of history. (p. 253).

In this description of Mangal Pande, there is already a kind of irony perceptible in this passage, which lessens the credibility of the truth of the related events, but Smith instantly further reinforces the impression that there is no true version of Pande's story by adding a second flashback on the same event immediately after the first one. This second version paints a very different picture of Pande and describes him as having been "half drunk with bhang<sup>43</sup> and wholly drunk with religious fanaticism" (p. 254), and that he not only "shot at his lieutenant and missed him" (p. 255) but also, when he "saw the game was up, pointed his enormous gun at his own head and dramatically pulled the trigger with his left foot. He missed." (p. 255). This description is rather reminiscent of a slapstick scene in a bad comedy movie than an event in which a man proves to be a true hero, and thus this second flashback provides a stark and comic contrast to the first one.

Therefore, it can be stated that the flashbacks in *White Teeth* generally do not serve the purpose of making the past clear, but are on the contrary employed to emphasise the point that it is not possible to dig down to one single and universal truth. Rather, whenever one looks into the past, one unavoidably discovers a different story every time, which makes it necessary to waive one's insistence on truth and accept the fictional dimension of history. In the novel, all characters find this very difficult. Irie, finally, seems to be the first and only one who can actually live at peace with history.

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<sup>43</sup> Bhang is derived from the cannabis plant and traditionally used in drinks (cf. [www.geocities.com/sarabhanga/bhang.html](http://www.geocities.com/sarabhanga/bhang.html))

## II. 2. 2. Language

Zadie Smith's ability to render spoken language and its variations and accents in a very lively and authentic manner is often praised by critics, regardless of their opinion of Smith's novels as such. Additionally, it is her "imaginative imagery" (Carson) which immediately catches any reader's attention and certainly constitutes one of the most characteristic elements of her style. Another distinctive feature of her writing is the irony which Smith very frequently employs to put her characters into perspective and give the reader a hint of her own opinion on their respective ways of life.

### II.2.2.1. Accents and dialects

#### Jamaican Creole (patois)<sup>44</sup>

Patois is a creole language, consisting of elements of English and African languages (cf. Gesslbaur, p. 39). Variations of this language are spoken throughout the Caribbean area and were brought to Great Britain by the immigrants from that part of the world. The extent to which the Caribbean Creole languages are still in use after emigration differs from generation to generation of the diaspora communities. The use of patois is not exclusively limited to the Caribbean British immigrants, however, as some elements of the language are also used by groups such as the Rastafarians in order to emphasise their unity and, at the same time, to distance themselves from other social groups (Mair, p. 232 ff). In *White Teeth*, it is interesting to note how characters such as Hortense Bowden and other first generation immigrants still consistently stick to speaking patois except for very few occasions, whereas the influence of the Jamaican accent fades in the second generation already. Thus, by taking a closer look at which of the protagonists use Jamaican patois on what occasion, one can draw several socio-linguistic conclusions about their social situations and goals.

Hortense Bowden, who left Jamaica for England when already an adult, as a rule still uses Jamaican Creole even though by the end of the novel she has spent the greater part of her life in London: She tells Clara, for example, "it not [...] dat young man's *soul* you boddryn yourself wid! How many times must I tell you – you got no time for bwoys!" (p. 31, italics in original). As this example vividly illustrates, Smith manages to render the accent in a very authentic manner by using a spelling which comes very close to a phonetic representation of these utterances even though she takes care to stay "within

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<sup>44</sup> In the following passages, I am going to stick to Mair's way of referring to "Creole" in a capitalised, but "patois" in a non-capitalised spelling (cf. Mair, 2003)

the limits of English orthography” (Mair, p. 236). On certain occasions, however, even Hortense very consciously adapts her language to the situation and the goal she wants to achieve:

‘Clara! Come out of de cold.’

It was the voice Hortense put on when she had company – an over-compensation of all the consonants – the voice she used for pastors and white women. (p. 40)

From her careful choice of language, Clara can immediately tell that her mother is not alone and must be with somebody she looks up to or wants to impress. By consciously altering her pronunciation, Hortense shows her respect for “white women” and people of responsibility and power, especially those among the Witnesses of Jehovah whom she very much admires. She claims to have the same respect for Ryan Topps, whom she is with on the above mentioned occasion and who later in the novel becomes a very dedicated convert to the Witnesses thanks to Hortense’s efforts. He even moves in with Hortense some time after Clara has married and gone to live with Archie. Topps is described as very stereotypically English in his appearance and behaviour but speaks in a peculiar manner: “cockney yet refined, a voice that had had much work done upon it – missing key consonants and adding others where they were never meant to be” (p. 388). Probably as a consequence of the large amount of time the two spend together and the extent to which Hortense admires him, she also starts to speak in the hyper-correct manner which is typical for the cockney accent: “‘Im a very civilized bwoy. [...] I have de greatest hadmiration for him.” (p. 387).

Clara’s case is an interesting one, as she was taken to England by her mother when she was a teenager. Therefore, her linguistic development is at a stage in between that of her mother, who, as I have just shown, generally still uses the Jamaican vernacular, and her daughter, whose mother tongue is the English of the London district in which she was born and raised. Clara, however, is in a position where it obviously seems to her that she has to make a decision for one of the languages she hears and uses on a daily basis in her teens. Her decision becomes final when she opts for leaving her mother and marrying Archibald Jones, hoping for a change for the better in her life.

Clara’s subsequent attempts to get rid of her Jamaican accent are very obviously linked to her equally strained efforts to improve her social status. When she first meets Archie Jones at the age of nineteen, the influence of her mother’s faith as well as her Jamaican accent are still strong as, for example, her answer to Archie’s question about her missing teeth shows: “‘Man... dey get knock out [...]. But I tink to myself: come de

end of de world, d'Lord won't mind if I have no toofs.'" (p. 24/25). After her marriage with Archie, both her faith and her accent, which seem to be somehow connected, start to fade and only flare up again at moments of crisis or strong emotions, as extracts of this conversation with Alsana illustrate:

'Now, isn't that strange, Archie?' said Clara, filling in all her consonants. She was already some way to losing her accent and she liked to work on it at every opportunity.

[...] 'You're pregnant?' said Clara surprised. 'Pickney, you so small me kyant even see it.'

Clara blushed the moment after she had spoken; she always dropped into the vernacular when she was excited or pleased about something. Alsana just smiled pleasantly, unsure what she had said.

'I wouldn't have known,' said Clara, more subdued.  
(p.65/66)

This example is taken from an episode from the early days of her marriage, at a time when she still seems to be unsure of her language and frequently unconsciously lapses into Jamaican patois. Later in her life she becomes very sure in her use of the type of English that her husband and daughter, as well as most of the people in her surroundings, speak, so that as a consequence her use of patois takes on an entirely different purpose. She only switches to patois to lend her speech special emphasis and weight or to explicitly express strong emotions about something. When her mother Hortense can be heard singing loudly outside the door of the hall where Marcus Chalfen's presentation of his experiment is taking place, Clara makes it very clear that she wants her husband to take care of the situation: "*Archie*, she growls, lapsing into a threatening patois, you kyan jus leddem sing trew de whole ting!"(p. 528).

Clara's daughter Irie, who is of mixed ethnic background but born and raised in London, exclusively uses the dialect of her London environment. Even though she also has contact to speakers of patois, such as her grandmother or other members of the black community in North London, to Irie patois obviously does not come naturally and she is never described as using it. This shows that, just as she knows that patois exists and as she can understand it without actively using it herself, she is aware of her mother's family's past but manages to distance herself from it and to pursue her own way in life.

The three generations of women thus provide very clear examples of how different generations of immigrants gradually adapt their way of speaking, depending on their surroundings. Whereas the first generation immigrant Hortense and the British-born Irie constitute the rather typical and expected examples of the transition from the native



language of the “old” country to the native language of the new country of their choice, Clara provides an interesting example of a possible solution how to cope with the state “in-between”. Her example also makes it clear that it is very difficult and nearly impossible, even for a bilingual person, to combine the use of both languages to an equal extent. Instead, it is obviously necessary to make a decision for either of the two languages in order to be able to look into the future. In Clara’s case, she decides against patois and for the use of English in her daily life. This decision can be seen as an example of the obvious choice for any immigrant who is planning to stay in Great Britain and aspires to a career of any kind, as it is also a decision for cultural integration and a rise on the social ladder, which would not be possible otherwise.

The fact that also Millat and his so-called Raggastani “crew” use elements of patois in their everyday communication without having a Caribbean background points to a socio-linguistic phenomenon which Mair describes as follows:

The first development that helped the survival of Jamaican Creole outside the Caribbean, particularly in Britain, was its transformation from a community language shared by Jamaicans to what has been called British Black English [...], an optional additional symbolic code available to all members of the Afro-Caribbean community [...] and, most importantly, the British-born descendants of the original immigrants, who – while usually solid native speakers of the socially appropriate vernacular of their home region in Britain – have continued to cultivate a somewhat simplified version of Jamaican Creole as a means of asserting a separate group identity. (Mair, p. 232, 233)

Mair goes on to state that the symbolic use of Black British started to spread out relatively quickly to groups of white and Asian youths, who, often initially inspired by their admiration for certain kinds of “black” or “multicultural” pop music, also began to incorporate elements of Creole into their language as a linguistic code which served the purpose of strengthening their identity as a group while at the same time separating them from middle-class social mainstream (cf. Mair, p. 232f). This is exactly what adolescent Millat and his friends are doing in *White Teeth*:

Millat’s Crew looked like trouble. And [...] they were of a breed: *Raggastani*. [...] Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati, and English. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called that, was equally a hybrid thing: Allah *featured*, [...] Kung Fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; added to this was a smattering of Black Power (as embodied by the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy). (p. 231, 232, italics in original)

Smith's description of this group of boys of Asian immigrant background blends in perfectly with the socio-linguistic analyses quoted above: the language which they carefully constructed for themselves is used for several specific purposes. On the one hand, it serves to back up the very artificial and hybrid identity designed to express their solidarity with blacks, while at the same time showing off their uniqueness and cohesion as a group. Their primary and superficial aim, however, is not to make an elaborately constructed socio-cultural statement, but to appear "cool" and to constitute an accepted group inside a system of adolescent formations which additionally serves the purpose of protecting its members from possible assaults that they were victims of when on their own:

People had fucked with Dipesh and Hifan when they wore traditional dress in the playground. People had even fucked with Millat, with his tight jeans and his white rock. But no one fucked with any of them any more because they looked like trouble. They looked like trouble in stereo. (p. 232)

Their elaborately constructed identity contains contradictions as well, however, on account of its hybridity: in the scene from which the above mentioned quotations are taken, they claim to be on their way to Bradford to protest against Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Considering the cultural mixture which they represent and which is based on pop-culture elements to a large extent, their supposedly religious motive does not seem credible. It quickly becomes obvious that they are not going to join the protests out of Islamic conviction, but rather because they seem to have been caught in the spirit of a kind of collective rebellion and are excited by the prospect of making themselves heard and seen in a country which otherwise likes to ignore marginal groups like theirs (I will elaborate on these reasons further in the chapter on multiculturalism).

The above examples for linguistic behaviour of first and second generation immigrants in London show that Smith has a very good ear for linguistic details: Mair even claims that

Zadie Smith's true linguistic expertise [...] reveals itself on a level beyond mere representation – namely in her uncanny ear for the latest innovation in teenage slang and other socially typical idioms and turns of phrase, which opens up a level of analysis which ordinary linguistics usually does not reach. Where linguists characterise varieties abstracted from the contexts of their use through enumerating their phonetic, grammatical and lexical features, she "stages" them in typified fictional incidents. (Mair, p. 236)

This shows that Smith knows the milieu about which she is writing very well and that she is a very avid listener. By incorporating these accurate observations into her novel she manages to make her readers aware of these linguistic phenomena and their inherent implications, while reaching a far broader audience than any theoretical book on linguistics would.

#### **II.2.2.2. Meta-language**

Smith not only demonstrates her linguistic knowledge and her ear for linguistic phenomena in her authentic renderings of the characters' different dialects and ways of expressing themselves, but she also incorporates numerous passages into her novel where the characters or also the narrative voice reflect on the language used. These reflections cover a very broad range of various languages and variants:

For example, on one occasion the narrator comments on the fact that “in Jamaica [...] there is no choice of personal pronoun, no splits between *me* or *you* or *they*, there is only the pure, homogenous *I*” (p. 327, italics in original). This linguistic explanation is immediately followed by the comic scene where an enraged Hortense tells Clara that “I and I don't speak from this moment forth” (p. 327), giving the rather unsettling impression that she might have a split personality.

An equally comic effect is achieved by the way in which Abdul-Mickey, the Iraqi owner of an Irish pub, is described as speaking:

‘We live and fucking learn, Archibald,’ says Mickey, not to be offensive, but because the F-word acts like padding to him; he can't help it; it's just a filler like beans or peas. (p. 523)

This linguistic observation shows in a humorous way that Abdul-Mickey is so well-integrated into his London surroundings that he not only unconsciously uses “the F-word” very frequently, but also has got used to beans and peas as a side dish being a significant part of his job, and therefore also of his life.

Also, it is generally assumed that someone who has learnt a language as a foreign or second language often makes associations and explores meanings of words which a native speaker simply takes for granted and does not further think about. This is exemplified in the following episode, in which Alsana reflects on the multifaceted meaning of the word “involved”:

Involved. At least that was the right word, Alsana reflected [...]. Sometimes, here in England, especially at bus-stops and on the daytime soaps, you heard people say 'We're involved with each other,' as if this were a most wonderful state to be in, as if one chose it and enjoyed it. Alsana never thought of it that way. *Involved* happened over a long period of time, pulling you in like quicksand. *Involved* is what befell the moon-faced Alsana Begum and the handsome Samad Miah one week after they'd been pushed into a Delhi breakfast room together and informed they were to marry. [...] *Involved* is neither good, nor bad. It is just a consequence of living, a consequence of occupation and immigration, of empires and expansion, of living in each other's pockets... one becomes involved and it is a long trek back to being uninvolved. (p. 439, italics in original)

Here, not only Alsana's detailed reflections with regard to the word involved are shown, but the reader is also provided with an insight into the cultural differences in crucial stages of life, such as courtship and marriage. To Alsana, obviously, to be involved with somebody does not bear the positive connotations of a "chosen" and "enjoyable" situation. On the contrary, it is rather an undesirable condition which, however, one cannot avoid because it is not one's own choice with whom this involvement will take place. It certainly is a conspicuous detail that she immediately interprets the nuances of the word as being connected to colonisation and immigration, which is an association that obviously comes very naturally to her as an immigrant because this issue is one which constantly occupies her thoughts. It is not an observation, however, which one would expect an English character to immediately make in this way.

Smith also proves her well-trained ear for the little peculiarities which can be found in the way of speaking of different social groups when describing how children talk among each other. When Irie, Magid and Millat are children of nine years, for example, they like to play the game of "taxing" something:

Irie still felt the irritable hot sting of shame and wanted a rematch. 'Tax that,' she said, pointing to a rather beat-up motorbike leaning by Kensal Rise tube. 'Tax that, and that,' indicating two BMXs beside it. Millat and Magid jumped into action. The practice of 'taxing' something, whereby one lays claims, like a newly arrived colonizer, to items in a street that do not belong to you, was well known and beloved to both of them. (p. 167)

Again, Smith connects a specific usage of a phrase to the principle of colonisation, even though the children in this case are certainly unaware of the possible interpretations of

their actions. What to them is a fun game which they have taken over from other children at school, to an outsider aware of the underlying family histories can look like descendants of immigrants laying claims on their new home country, thus reversing the process of colonisation by making the “new territory” their own. Especially notable here is the explicit reference to the fact that things are being claimed “that do not belong to you” (p. 167). With this simple and almost casual phrase, Smith makes it clear how omnipresent the injustices and horrors of colonisation are in the subconscious of those whose lives have been in some way or another determined by it.

Apart from reflections like the ones mentioned above, Smith also incorporates passages on some phenomena of English grammar into her novel, for example a comment on the use of what grammarians have called the “non-negative tags after negative sentences” (Swan, p. 479):

“Excuse me, you’re not going to smoke that, are you?”  
Marcus closed his eyes. He hated the construction. He always wanted to reply with equal grammatical perversity: Yes, I’m not going to smoke that. No, I am going to smoke that. (p. 415)

Adding a tag question with this kind of construction to an utterance is a very English peculiarity of speech which is used, for example, to lend special emphasis to a statement or question. It is therefore quite unexpected that Marcus Chalfen, of all characters in the novel, is described as hating this very customary way of expressing oneself, as he is one of the protagonists who represent Englishness in their values and beliefs, as opposed to the characters with immigrant backgrounds. In a wider sense, Marcus’ reaction could be interpreted as revealing the fact that even people with a very English background do not entirely identify with every part of their culture. In this special case, it obviously is the complicated and indirect manner of speaking which English people tend to apply when they want to voice a request that Marcus cannot stand and regards as “perverse”. This preference for a very direct way of expressing oneself is something which all Chalfens have in common, which means that their opinion in this case diverges from the typically English point of view.

Thus, this example might serve as a reassurance for characters with an immigrant background who, like Samad, for instance, seem to be desperately trying to reconcile absolute Bengalianness with complete Englishness. This attempt is doomed to fail, of course, because as the above mentioned example shows, nobody can identify with a particular culture to a hundred percent. While people with an English background seem to

accept this fact naturally and in a very casual way, however, it takes a lot of insight for characters with an immigrant background to stop fighting for total acceptance and complete concurrence with both their “old” and their “new” cultures.

### **Proverbs and idiomatic expressions**

There are quite a few instances in *White Teeth* in which one of the protagonists uses a traditional proverb to emphasise his or her point. At times, however, a character with an immigrant background does not use the phrase correctly and therefore gives the utterance a completely different and comical meaning:

For example, when Shiva complains about Millat’s stubbornness, he calls him a “classical Iqbal. Can’t let things go. Can’t let sleeping cats die or whatever the fuck the phrase is.” (p. 503). He rightly suspects that his wording differs somewhat from that of the traditional phrase “let sleeping dogs lie”<sup>45</sup>, but he does interpret it correctly as a request to leave things as they are. By using this version of the proverb, Shiva successfully manages to lend his opinion special emphasis, but at the same time his replacing the words “dogs” with “cats” and “lie” with “die” creates amusement for the reader, as well as for the listening Millat, who does not give an answer to Shiva’s reproach as he obviously does not take it seriously.

Another interesting example of an immigrant using a traditional expression in a slightly different way can be found in an argument between Archie and Samad, in which Samad tells his friend: “Please let us not get into the nature of truth. Then you do not have to draw with my cheese and I can avoid eating your chalk.” (p. 256). Here, Samad obviously refers to the common idiom “to be as different as chalk and cheese” but expands it to give it a broader meaning: with this one phrase, he tells Archie that their opinions are so divergent that they can never come to a consensus, let alone each see through the eyes of the other. Thus, Samad gives the idiom a more literal meaning by breaking up its rigid structure and putting it into a broader context.

Abdul-Mickey, the second generation Iraqi owner of the Irish pub, impressively demonstrates his knowledge of traditional English proverbs when he tells Samad, “We’re all English now, mate. Like it or lump it, as the rhubarb said to the custard” (p. 192). By using this phrase, he on the one hand successfully emphasises his point about being English, but on the other hand it still makes a humorous impression on the reader, who has been filled in on Abdul-Mickey’s immigrant background. This comic effect is

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. for example PONS 1995, Dictionary of Idioms, p. 457

achieved by the discrepancy that seems to exist between this proverb which contains elements that are very typical elements of the English cuisine (“rhubarb” and “custard”), whereas it is already known to the reader that Abdul-Mickey’s family roots lie in a culture area which would never be associated with either rhubarb or custard.

Also Alsana does not always have a firm grasp of her English expressions, but she likes to use proverbs of all sorts and frequently creates comic ambiguities by doing so: in a fight with her English enemy Joyce Chalfen, she angrily states: “Oh, we are going to play the tit for the tat. I see. And I am to be the tit.” (p. 443). What she obviously has in the back of her mind here is the expression “to be tit for tat”, which equals the proverb “an eye for an eye”. Alsana clearly wants to say what both of these expressions mean, namely that she wants to pay Joyce back in equal terms for having hurt her feelings. Her actual words, however, take on a comic meaning as “tit” is also a slang expression for “breast” which, however, a woman with traditional Muslim background like Alsana would surely never consciously use in this sense.

### II.2.2.3. Irony

Zadie Smith’s style very often drifts into the ironic and she thus puts the characters into perspective and casts a humorous light on their reactions, beliefs and decisions. Smith’s irony does not transform her characters into ridiculous figures, however, but quite on the contrary only makes them more human and more likeable. Additionally, Smith uses this ironic style to indicate her own opinion on certain topics: for instance, her irony becomes especially conspicuous whenever she writes about religion in general and radical religious groupings, such as the Witnesses of Jehovah or the radicalist Muslim movement KEVIN, in particular. On occasions where she writes about these religious communities, it becomes quite clear that to her personally, the reasons which make someone join such a group, or their respective religious doctrines and practices seem quite dubious.

Smith ridicules the Witnesses of Jehovah and their very literal understanding of the bible, for example:

*It is better to marry than to burn*, says Corinthians I, chapter seven, verse nine.

Good advice. Of course, Corinthians also informs us that we *should not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain* – so, go figure.

By February 1975, Clara had deserted the church and all its biblical literalism for Archibald Jones, but she was not yet the kind of carefree

atheist who could laugh near altars or entirely dismiss the teachings of St Paul. The second dictum wasn't a problem – having no ox, she was excluded by proxy. But the first was giving her sleepless nights. (p. 46, italics in original)

By choosing this particular quotation, Smith employs the strategy of ironically exaggerating the ridiculousness of the verse she cites by taking it out of context and commenting on it in a deliberately modern, colloquial fashion that contrasts sharply with the language and subject of the quotation. Thereby she makes it very clear that to her personally, members of such radical religious groups must be narrow-minded and dependent, indeed even ridiculous, people.

#### **II.2.2.4. Imagery**

As Carson states in his article, *White Teeth*, such as all of “Zadie’s books, [is] brimming with imaginative imagery”. The images she uses are often unexpected, but always turn out to be surprisingly accurate, especially when they are concerned with the appearances of certain people or their emotions and reactions to an event: Kelvin Hero, Archie’s boss, does not simply smile, for example, but his smile is described as “a big gash across his face that came and went with the sudden violence of a fat man marching through swing doors.”(p. 71). One of the customers in the Irish pub is equally vividly depicted as “a sunken old man whose trousers were so high up his body they were gradually swallowing him whole” (p. 186). This description certainly strikes one as accurate, considering the very common and slightly peculiar way that some elderly people, especially men, have of wearing their clothes.

The following scene contains another unusual and therefore striking example of the similes, i.e. comparisons, which are being used to appeal to the reader’s imagination more strongly and to make a scene more vivid and tangible which can be found in *White Teeth*:

She [Clara] wore her sexuality with an older woman’s ease, and not (as with most of the girls Archie had run with in the past) like an awkward purse, never knowing how to hold it, where to hang it or when to just put it down. (p. 24)

These examples, as well as many more instances of this kind of vivid imagery, add to the uniqueness and enjoyment which all of Smith’s novels convey.



## II.2.3. Symbolism

### II.2.3.1. Teeth

As the title *White Teeth* already very clearly communicates, teeth constitute a central element of the novel. The fact that it is stressed that the teeth are white, which teeth of average human beings normally never completely are, may therefore either point to the preoccupation with colour, and consequently with race and racism, or introduce the notion that these very white teeth are something unnatural or even scary. The scariness of teeth also lies in their function of biting and chewing something, which on the one hand serves to nurture but on the other hand can also be an aggressive and destructive feature. On the other hand, of course, human teeth are all the same colour, regardless of different colours of skin. Therefore, the whiteness of teeth could also be seen as a feature which unites all mankind and thus becomes a symbol of tolerance and equality. Teeth not only feature prominently in the title of the novel, but also make up important parts of the chapter headings. Here, they function as symbolic indicators of the contents of the respective chapters: Chapter two, for example, is headed “*Teething Trouble*” (p. 27), and describes the rather difficult adolescence and coming-of-age of Clara Bowden. At the end of the chapter, Clara has lost her front teeth and has decided to leave her home and get married to Archie Jones, hoping that he can provide her with the better life she hopes for. Thus, the trouble referred to in the heading can be found on a literal level – Clara is in trouble because she loses her teeth in an accident – as well as on a figurative level: just as growing teeth is a painful process, Clara goes through a painful period in her life during which she not only has to come to terms with her past and her family, but also make a decision about what she wants to achieve in her future and how she is going to do so.

The heading of chapter four, “*Three Coming*” (p. 67), refers to an important event in the course of the novel which will be decisive for the future of both protagonist families: the births of the twins and Irie. Even though this phrase does not unambiguously point to its connection to dentistry, the other allusions to that semantic group make this a very plausible interpretation.

Two chapters of the novel very explicitly carry the scientific names of teeth: chapter seven is called “*Molars*” (p. 161), while chapter twelve is named “*Canines: The Ripping*

*Teeth*” (p. 309). The connection to the contents of the respective chapters as well as to their inherent historical symbolism is made quite obvious in chapter seven: While Samad is on his way to his first illicit meeting with Poppy, the twins and Irie visit the old Englishman Mr J P Hamilton on the occasion of the harvest festival at their school. Mr Hamilton quickly proceeds to lecturing the terrified children about the importance of cleaning one’s teeth and the high number of casualties among “niggers” during the Second World War, on account of their visibility at night because of the whiteness of their teeth against the blackness and darkness. Hamilton then goes on to make quite a few more statements that very clearly symbolically link teeth to what is going on in the meantime with Samad and Poppy: he not only generally warns the children that “fibs will rot [their] teeth” (p. 173) but also informs them that

“the important matter is the third molars [or] wisdom teeth. [...] The problem with third molars is one is never sure whether one’s mouth will be quite large enough to accommodate them. They are the only part of the body that a man must grow into. [...] Because if not [...] terrible, terrible infection ensues. Have them out early [...] Because they’re your father’s teeth, you see, wisdom teeth are passed down by the father [...]” (p. 173).

Especially against the background of Samad’s doubts and reproaches against himself while he is on his way to commit what he believes to be a mortal sin, Mr Hamilton’s speech can very clearly be read as a piece of advice to the children to free themselves of the weighty burden of history passed down to them by their family. Only by coping with their history as early as possible will they be able to avert the fate which Samad is sure he foresees for his children, namely that “the sins of the Eastern father shall be visited upon the Western sons” (p. 161). Samad himself is trying to fight this development, but his attempts are too half-hearted and must therefore remain futile, as the last symbolical act in this chapter illustrates: Poppy hands Samad, who is probably going to spend the night at her place with her, a toothbrush. This gesture can be interpreted as being an attempt at cleansing him of the sin of adultery, and it very neatly fits into the symbolism of this whole chapter. It remains too weak an action, however, to help Samad and the children to break out of this circle of histories, as it stays on the surface only – it is impossible to cure an infected molar with a toothbrush, of course.

Also chapter twelve has got an obvious connection to the canines mentioned in its title. It describes the Chalfens, the middle-class English family with whom Irie and Millat start to spend a great amount of their time. Irie is fascinated by their

intellectualism and the realisation that the Chalfens are able to “let speech flow freely from adult to child, child to adult, as if the channel of communication between these two tribes was untrammelled, unblocked by history, *free*” (p. 319, italics in original), while Millat uses their pecuniary generosity for his purposes. So they both start to spend significantly more time at the Chalfen’s house than in their own home. This naturally worries their mothers, who are afraid that they are losing their children to this strange English family. Especially Alsana feels very strongly that she is being robbed of her only remaining son and calls the Chalfens, whose name she associates with “Chaffinches” (p. 344), “birds with teeth, with sharp little canines – they don’t just steal, they rip apart” (p. 344). As this chapter also deals with “the immigrant fears – dissolution, *disappearance*” (p. 327, italics in original), it becomes clear that Alsana not only foresees the alienation of her child from herself, but a complete rupture in the lives of the second generation, who are in imminent danger of completely breaking with their past, their cultural heritage, and history. At the same time, the resulting void is being filled by a new set of attitudes with which the Chalfens are gradually “Englishifying” (p. 345) the children in Alsana’s eyes.

Chapter Five, “*The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal*”(p.83), is one of three chapters that symbolically point to “the root canals” of one or more characters, along with chapter ten (“*The Root Canals of Mangal Pande*”, p. 244) and chapter thirteen (“*The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden*”, p. 356). These chapters make it especially clear that Smith is actually referring to the roots and consequently the history of the character in question. The descriptions of the characters’ life stories also provide insights into the development of their fears and attitudes and thus provide possible explanations for the characters’ behaviour and problems later on in their lives. Once this connection between teeth and history is established in the reader’s consciousness by means of the reference to root canals, many more instances can be found in which this reference to teeth is used as a symbolic allusion to history:

Millat, for example, describes his parents, who are partly rootless on account of their status as immigrants, as “damaged people, missing hands, missing teeth” (p. 379). This picture is reinforced by an earlier description of Samad as a young man at a time before he immigrated to England: “Samad Iqbal, a tall, handsome man with the whitest teeth and a dead hand” (p. 50). Even though his hand is already useless, at this point in his life

his teeth, and on a symbolical level his connections to his family and ancestors, are still intact and healthy.

Thus, it is very understandable that his own confusion with regard to history makes Samad all the more vulnerable to the lack of historical awareness he senses in Magid. This son, who has been sent back to Bangladesh in order to reconnect with his origins, returns to England a prototypical Englishman in his father's eyes, who calls him "Mr white-trouser Englishman with his stiff-upper-lip and his big white teeth" (p. 454) in an outbreak of rage. By explicitly emphasising the "big white teeth", Samad could on a symbolical level refer to the fact that even though Magid's family history is intact and an important feature of his personality, he chooses to hide them behind a typically English "stiff-upper-lip".

In the case of Clara's personal history, the symbolism of teeth gains an additional facet of meaning as it consists of references to the truth of this history. As I have already mentioned above, Clara loses her upper teeth at the same time as she decides to leave her past behind. She cannot, however, hide her history from her daughter forever: when Irie is sixteen years old, she finds out by accident that her mother is wearing false teeth and reacts to this discovery by in turn leaving home.

Instead of trying to escape history, as her mother did, Irie chooses to dig even deeper into the matter by taking refuge at her grandmother Hortense Bowden's place. There, she not only gets to know her mother's former boyfriend Ryan Topps, but also gains access to a cornucopia of old stories and photographs which enable her to assemble the missing pieces of her history and to come as close to the truth as possible. Thus, among other things, "she [finds] photo-booth snaps of Clara in school uniform, grinning maniacally, the true horror of the teeth revealed" (p. 399). According to the above mentioned interpretation, this signifies that Irie not only finds out the truth about Clara's physical sufferings but also about the whole "horror" of having to grow up in this kind of environment.

Another example for teeth being connected with historical truth can be found in the instance in which Clara maintains that Charlie Durham was clever. She does so in order to please Joyce Chalfen, but secretly she knows that this claim is "a downright lie. False as her own white teeth" (p. 355). These false teeth give the impression of "perfect daytime straightness and whiteness" (p. 378), but at night the truth is revealed and the

illusion of a perfect life is destroyed when Clara puts her teeth into the glass on her bedside table.

Smith makes use of this picture of a set of false teeth being stored away overnight in a glass on several more occasions in the novel. The first time she is describing the day on which Samad and Archie get stranded in a Bulgarian village without the rest of their troop during the Second World War. According to Smith, it was “a day that History has not remembered. That Memory has made no effort to retain. A sudden stone submerged. False teeth floating silently to the bottom of a glass” (p. 90/91). The fact that Smith capitalises both “History” and “Memory” in this passage may point to the interpretation that, while this particular day is of no major importance to generally known world history, it has great significance still to Archie and Samad, who preserve their story of the day on the bedside table of their memories.

These phrases come up in the novel again in an almost literal repetition a few chapters ahead, but this time they give rise to a contrary interpretation: to Samad, the night in which he put his son Magid on a plane to Bangladesh is “history that Samad tries not to remember. That his memory makes no effort to retain. A sudden stone submerged. False teeth floating silently to the bottom of a glass” (p. 209). This event in his life history is probably one of those which Samad feels least proud about and which, in retrospect, feels wrong to him, *false*. To his distress, however, he cannot get rid of the memory as it is symbolically stored very visibly in a glass along with his other memories.

As I have briefly mentioned above, Irie is the only one of the second generation characters who chooses to move on from the old histories by first getting to the bottom of them and finding out as much as possible about her past and her roots. Therefore, also her wish to study dentistry can be interpreted on a symbolical level which perfectly blends in with her desire to heal the wounds inflicted by history, ease the pain caused by the withholding of old secrets, and mend the disturbed relations to roots and ancestors. Thus, by taking care of infected teeth, healing them and establishing order among them, she symbolically does all she can to help the people around her to come to terms with history and to overcome their past.

As most children probably do when they are growing up, Irie also includes into her wish the desire to avoid the same mistakes she thinks her parents have made in their life, in order to lead a better, more successful and happier life than her parents, in Irie’s case especially her mother. By taking care of teeth, Irie hopes to improve her quality of life

and increase her possibilities – as if striving to preserve her healthy set of teeth, she is working her way towards a full, intact range of choices she wants to be able to have in her life. In Irie's eyes, at least, Clara's missing teeth prevented her from leading her life according to her wishes, and even her attempt to hide her deficiencies by means of her false, white teeth was not successful. The replacement of Clara's real teeth with a set of false ones could also be interpreted as her attempt to integrate into British society, which in Irie's eyes is no satisfactory solution. Irie, for her part, is not satisfied with this 'false' integration which takes place only on the surface, but wants to be an authentic part of the society she chooses to live in (cf. Meinig, p. 244)

## **II.3. Themes**

### **II.3.1. History**

History plays a very important role in Zadie Smith's first novel – real as well as fictional historical events, from the early 19th century onwards, are inextricably interwoven with the personal histories of the main characters and their ancestors and thus constitute an important part of the characters' identities. Smith especially emphasises the repetitive nature of history and the fact that one cannot escape one's own history, no matter how hard one tries. She also shows, however, how the different generations develop different attitudes towards history as well as different ways of coming to terms with it.

History comes into play at various levels all throughout the novel: not only does Smith describe important historical events of the time in which the novel is set as formative for some of the characters, but she also makes extensive use of flashbacks as well as having characters, most of all Samad, constantly refer to their family history. As a third layer which lends an additional dimension to the significance of history in *White Teeth*, history is introduced on a symbolical level.

#### **II. 3.1.1. History as a symbol**

Quite early in the novel, when Archie has just been introduced and a few more details about his past are disclosed, Smith mentions that Archie is in no way comparable to the Ancient Greek writer of tragedies Thespis, whom she describes as one of the

“men who say the right thing at the right time, who step forward [...] at just the right moment of history” (p. 23), and who is famous for the fact that “what he showed on stage soon would be acted out in reality as well”<sup>46</sup>, which also makes him a symbol of the repetitive nature and inevitability of history, which I will discuss in further detail later. Smith claims that Archie, in contrast, is “just there to make up the numbers” (p. 23) and thus implies that he is never in the right place at the right time. This, of course, turns out not to be true: even though he never consciously intends to, he twice saves the scientist Dr Perret from being shot, simply by being in exactly the right place at the right moment.

Other symbolical references to history occur when relations between people are compared to events in history. This happens, for instance, to Samad when he confesses his desire for the young music teacher Poppy to Shiva, a fellow waiter at the restaurant. Shiva advises him to give up the idea of a relationship with the white English girl, on the grounds that there is “too much bloody history” (p. 146) between them. His prediction that this relationship cannot come to any good proves to be true when Samad breaks up with Poppy a few weeks later, which gives Shiva an opportunity to emphasise his point, hinting at historical events during colonial times:

‘I told you not to fuck with that business [...]. Too much history there. [...] It’s all brown man leaving English woman, it’s all Nehru saying See-Ya to Madam Britannia.’ (p. 202)

In this context, it would even be possible to go as far as interpreting the splitting up of the twins Millat and Magid as a parallel to the partitioning of India, which took place at the time India gained its independence from Britain.

### **II.3.1.2. The repetitive nature of history**

As I have already briefly mentioned, the concept of the repetitive nature of history is one of the most prevalent topics and comes up again and again throughout the novel. This is first of all demonstrated by the fact that some of the events tend to repeat themselves, but also reflected in the language throughout the book: there are certain phrases which Smith uses several times, always on an occasion crucial for the main characters, in order to transfer the feeling of a *deja-vu* the characters seem to have to the reader as well.

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<sup>46</sup> cf: <http://www.in2greece.com/english/historymyth/history/ancient/thespis.htm>

A passage which has already been cited before and which contains one of the phrases that turn up repeatedly in the novel, also refers to the teeth of its title in a symbolical way by linking history with “false teeth floating silently to the bottom of a glass” (p. 209). As I have explained in greater detail earlier on, the teeth in this context obviously stand for personal histories and stories that mark important developments in the characters’ lives, the fact that they are “false” pointing, on a literal level, to Clara, and on a symbolical level to the fact that these histories are somehow falsified or manipulated by memory. Finding out about her mother’s false teeth turns out to be yet another item on a long list of histories which she is not really told about and induces Irie to leave home and move in with her grandmother Hortense.

To Irie’s annoyance, however, her grandmother only further adds to this list of half-told stories when she talks to Ryan Topps about Irie:

“Clara’s darter,” repeated Hortense in a tearful whisper. “*She might have been yours.*”

Nothing surprised Irie about this final, whispered aside; she just added it to the list: Ambrosia Bowden gave birth in an earthquake... Captain Charlie Durham was a no-good djam fool bwoy... false teeth in a glass... *she might have been yours...* (p. 390, italics in original)

Even though at this point Irie can only react to these frequent allusions with resignation, she slowly starts to get interested in her family’s history and makes use of the time she spends at Hortense’s place by rummaging through her grandmother’s old family photos and other forgotten treasures. Thus, for the first time, she actively engages in trying to find out the truths behind the stories by herself.

Another phrase which (literally as well as in variations) turns up frequently in connection with crucial events in the characters’ lives is “past tense, future perfect”, which is mentioned for the first time to describe Archie’s state of mind after his failed attempt at suicide: “he is in a past-tense, future-perfect kind of mood” (p. 18). In this case, of course, this is a pun with positive connotations in so far as it gives the reader the impression that Archie is leaving his difficult past behind and looking forward to a perfect future.

Similarly, the night at the end of the Second World War in which the seal is set on Samad’s and Archie’s friendship is described as “a past tense, future perfect kind of night” (p. 98), which, however, in the light of the events following immediately afterwards and considering the fact that the reader already knows of Archie’s failed



marriage and his suicide attempt, largely fails to create a positive atmosphere. Instead, the phrase emphasises in an ironic way how unavoidable one's personal fate seems to be and how no future can ever be perfect.

This interpretation is confirmed at the very end of the novel when, after providing quick glances into a seemingly happy future, Smith instantly puts this positive outlook into a more realistic perspective:

But surely to tell these tall tales and others like them would be to spread the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect. And as Archie knows, it's not like that. It's never been like that. (p. 541)

To Irie, the fact that she cannot look forward to a perfect future if she has not come to terms with the past finally becomes clear on the day when she challenges fate by sleeping with both Millat and Magid within only a few hours. This day, thus, changes her life as she becomes pregnant but does not and will never be able to know which of the twins is the father of her child. In this context, the phrase "Past tense, future imperfect" (p. 459) gains a new meaning, namely that unless one comes to terms with the past, the future cannot be to one's satisfaction. From this point in the novel, Irie obviously realises this fact and starts orienting herself towards the future – not least for the sake of her child, who does not have a past which can be pinned down.

Archie saving Dr Perret from being shot is one of the most crucial events which repeats itself and even constitutes a kind of frame for the novel. On both occasions, Archie is rather passive and one could say that history is simply happening to him, instead of him trying to leave an imprint on history, which on the other hand is what Samad seems to desperately want to do. The first time, as he faces Perret alone, knowing that Samad is waiting for him and expecting him to kill Perret, Archie tries to throw a coin in order to decide whether to shoot the Frenchman or not, but as Perret uses the distraction to reach for the gun Archie fails to catch the coin. Thus, fate chooses its own path as the only bullet which is fired that night hits Archie in the thigh and Perret gets away unharmed. Archie only later realises that following the coin's "decision" would actually also have led to the saving of the young scientist.

On the second occasion on which Archie saves Perret, again by being hit by a bullet in his thigh which was actually meant for the Frenchman, there is not even time for him to consider his options. Therefore, this action which might look heroic from the perspective of an on-looker, is once again a matter of chance rather than a conscious decision on Archie's side.

Thus, the words Samad says to Archie before they set out with the intention to kill Dr Perret in Bulgaria, with which he describes his perception of his own life in relation to his ancestors, gain a new meaning in retrospect:

‘What I have realized, is that the generations, [...] they speak to each other, Jones. It’s not a line, life is not a line [...] it’s a circle, and they speak to us. That is why you cannot *read* fate; you must *experience* it.’ (p. 119, italics in original)

Without taking any conscious influence on the course of events, Archie therefore closes a circle of history in his own life by saving Perret’s life twice in a very similar manner.

The history of Glenard Oak, the school Irie attends, serves as another example of how histories repeat themselves and how generations are linked by them. Ironically, the founder of Irie’s school, Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, turns out to be the very man who, in 1907, sexually molested Irie’s then pregnant great-grandmother Ambrosia under the pretence of educating her:

*It will only take a moment, my dear. One should never pass up the opportunity of a little education, after all. [...] All was preternaturally calm as Glenard began to touch her. But inside, there was a galloping heart-beat, the crush of a million muscles that wanted desperately to repel Glenard’s attempts at an education.* (pp. 360, 361, italics in original)

This episode, of course, casts a very negative light upon the “benefactor” Glenard, who provided the means to erect the building which now is Irie’s school. It also puts his generosity into perspective, showing that this one good deed did not make him a good man, and also shows the concept of education and colonisation in an ironic and very critical way.

When describing the earthquake in Jamaica, at the beginning of which the above mentioned episode takes place, Smith uses a phrase which she also repeats later on in the novel: “Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are two different histories” (p. 360). In this first instance, she is referring to the fact that at the same time as the earthquake starts, Ambrosia’s labour pains start as well. Apart from emphasising the simultaneity of these two events, however, Smith also indicates that to every historical event there is more than just the seemingly objective, official version which is preserved for later generations. In connection not only with the earthquake, but also with Glenard’s attempted rape of Ambrosia, this phrase can also be applied to the

colonisation of Jamaica and thus even be generalised to signify that those colonised, regardless of good intentions on the part of the colonisers, do not necessarily benefit from colonisation at all.

The second context in which Smith uses the same phrase is the moment at the very end of the novel in which Archie recognises Perret, simultaneously realises that there seems to be something wrong with Millat and gets up to move into the line of fire, protecting the ageing scientist with his body. In this situation it can thus be assumed that the “inside” the quotation refers to is Archie’s inside knowledge, as he is the only person who knows what actually happened that night when he was supposed to shoot Perret. The “outside” world, Samad as well as everybody else, does not share this knowledge and can only believe what they were told, which now turns out to have been a lie all along. Thus, at this moment, inside and outside knowledge and history are, for one short moment of revelation and truth, condensed into one again.

Another passage which is literally repeated at two crucial stages of the novel has to do with the coin which Archie throws in order to make a decision:

The coin rose and flipped as a coin would rise and flip every time in a perfect world, flashing its light and then revealing its dark enough times to mesmerize a man. Then, at some point in its triumphant ascension, it began to arc, and the arc went wrong, and Archibald realized that it was not coming back to him at all but going behind him, a fair way behind him, and he turned... (p. 457/p. 540)

On both of the above mentioned occasions, Archie consequently fails to make a decision without the help of the coin. In the chronologically earlier instance, namely the scene in which Archie is supposed to kill Perret and which is only revealed at the very end of the book, he leaves the decision to chance as he tries to retrieve the coin but does not pay attention to Perret, who reaches for the gun and thus makes any kind of decision on Archie’s side obsolete.

The second time this passage turns up occurs earlier in the book, even though it actually takes place almost fifty years after the first instance. In this case, Archie has thrown the coin in order to help Magid, who has just returned from Bangladesh, decide whether or not to meet with Millat. Again, obviously, Archie does not make a decision, and in this case it is not clear how Magid made up his mind in the end, but the next scene makes it clear that both he and Millat have agreed to meet.

### II.3.1.3. The repetitive nature of history and the immigrant experience

Smith not only emphasises the fact that especially the characters with an immigrant background have a very strong obsession with their personal histories as well as the history of their country, but she also insists that they seem to feel caught in a repetitive scheme which makes them re-enact certain events again and again:

And the sins of the Eastern father shall be visited upon the Western sons. [...] Because immigrants have always been particularly prone to repetition – it's something to do with that experience of moving from West to East or East to West or from island to island. Even when you arrive, you're still going back and forth; your children are going round and round. There's no proper term for it – *original sin* seems too harsh; maybe *original trauma* would be better. A trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all, and this is the tragedy of the Iqbals – that they can't help but re-enact the dash they once made from one land to another, from one faith to another, from one brown mother country into the pale, freckled arms of an imperial sovereign. (pp. 161/162, italics in original)

This passage is a crucial one in that it very vividly illustrates the problem which especially Samad has to face as a first generation immigrant. He seems to be stuck in an eternal circle in which he is trapped by his feeling of not belonging, of having to fight for a place for himself, and of having parted from his old country but never really arrived and settled down in the new one. As a result, he cannot rid himself of the constant need to prove himself and to live up to Pande's heroism and to not let his home country down.

Millat, who as a young boy seems to be very much at home in the Western ways of his London surroundings, undergoes a radical change when he joins the radical Islamist movement KEVIN. The influence of this group manifests itself in Millat's sudden religiosity, of course, but also causes him to see his roots in a different light. He no longer makes fun of his father's obsession with Mangal Pande, but suddenly feels the desire to revenge his ancestor's bad reputation and his supposedly unjustified execution himself:

*That's how it was. But no more.* Because Millat was here to finish it. To revenge it. To turn that history around. [...] He believes the decisions that are made, come back. He believes we live in circles. (p. 506/7, italics in original)

What exactly Millat's plan is on that last night which is described in the novel is not clear, but from looking at the context and at Samad's life, it becomes clear that no matter what the plan was, it would not have worked but had to turn out the way it did:

Archie closes the circle of events that connects Samad and Millat, by stepping into the line of fire to save Perret for a second time. Millat, just like his father, thus fails to break out of this loop of history, eternally repeating itself.

#### **II.3.1.4. Historical facts and fiction**

##### **The 1857 Indian Mutiny**

This historical event is the earliest of the numerous historical facts mentioned in detail in the novel. It is also an event, however, which especially Samad feels very strongly about because of the role his great-grandfather played in it. Therefore the information which the reader gets on the mutiny is very one-sided and unreliable, as Samad is the character from whose perspective most of the passages on the mutiny are told.

Even though the official version of the role which Samad's great-grandfather Mangal Pande allegedly played in triggering off the mutiny is not, as Archie never tires to suggest, a very favourable one, Samad obsessively idolises Pande as a great national hero. He not only constantly talks about his famous relative, but he also seems to identify with Pande to a certain extent and judges his own achievements in life in relation to Pande's heroism. This obsession with Pande thus affects Samad's life in numerous ways: when he and Archie first meet as young soldiers during the Second World War, Samad decides "to cement his friendship with Archie" (p. 98) by telling him the story of his great-grandfather, because "for Samad, nothing was closer or meant more to him than his blood" (p. 98). Archie is "suitably impressed" (p. 99), and his admiration adds further emphasis to the pressure which Samad is already under, namely the feeling of having to live up to the glorious past of his ancestor and to become a hero as well. It is this sense of responsibility towards Pande which makes Samad insist that he and Archie have to kill Perret as the war is drawing to a close and this seems to be their last chance to leave an imprint on the history of this war:

"We have been playing silly buggers in this war, you and I. There is a great evil that we have failed to fight and now it is too late. Except we have him, this opportunity." (p. 118)

This incident, to Samad, marks the beginning of his close friendship with Archie, for whom he feels a certain kind of respect and closeness ever since the moment in which he, as Samad supposes, shot Perret. The obsession with Mangal Pande leaves its mark

on Samad's whole life, as he not only measures his own achievements in comparison to Pande but is also constantly talking about him and trying to convince his surroundings of the greatness of his ancestor. Thus, he can often be seen sitting in his favourite pub together with Archie, re-enacting and reconstructing the events of the mutiny with the help of the pub's fittings, debating over what is fact and what is fiction, or be heard lecturing to his already bored family and friends about this heroic ancestor. In the closing scene of the novel, when Archie saves Dr Perret from being shot for a second time, Samad has to acknowledge that his friendship with Archie seems to have been based on fiction rather than historical fact. The question remains, however, whether this realisation leads him to give up his obsessive belief in the factuality of Pande's heroism, thus taking the enormous pressure off him to emulate his famous great-grandfather and giving him the opportunity to leave the past behind him at last.

While there still seems to be some hope for Samad that he might be able to overcome his obsession with the past, his son Millat, on the other hand, is about to enter a very similar state of obsession with history, which seems to go together with his sudden interest in radical islamism:

That's why Pande hung from a tree while Havelock the executioner sat on a chaise longue in Delhi. Pande was no one and Havelock was someone. No need for library books and debates and reconstructions. *Don't you see, Abba?* whispered Millat. *That's it. [...] That's how it was. But no more.* Because Millat was here to finish it. [...] Where Pande misfooted he would step sure. Where Pande chose A, Millat would choose B. (p. 506, italics in original)

As I have already pointed out above, Millat fails in this attempt and has to learn that it is indeed impossible for him to "turn history around". Instead, he unavoidably follows Pande's and Samad's examples and fails to leave the desired impression on history.

### **The Jamaica earthquake of 1907**

Another real historical event which is mentioned by date in the novel is the earthquake in Jamaica in 1907. In *White Teeth*, it is mainly described in detail from the perspective of Irie's great-grandmother, Ambrosia Bowden, who not only survived and witnessed it but even gave birth to her daughter during the event, as I have already mentioned earlier.

Reading the part of the chapter which describes Captain Charlie Durham's point of view, later on in the novel, makes it clear how personal decisions (in this case, of course,

fictional ones) could even trigger off major historical events: because he has not been allowed to take his black mistress Ambrosia Bowden with him on to the ship to England, Captain Charlie Durham relieves his anger and disappointment by making Sir James Swettenham, the English governor of Jamaica, turn back the American ships which have come to aid the Jamaicans with food and medicine after the earthquake<sup>47</sup>. The lack of these foodstuffs and equipment consequently accounts for the deaths of many Jamaicans who cannot be cared for adequately and quickly enough.

## **World War II**

To Archie and Samad, their experiences as very young soldiers in the Second World War are very important as this is not only where they left their innocence behind and passed into manhood, but also where they met and their friendship was sealed. Even though their time as soldiers was rather uneventful and not as heroic as especially Samad would have liked it to be, in retrospect, of course, their experiences sound much more exciting when told to their families and friends. Consequently, the stories they tell do not have much in common with real events any more, but only seem to serve as a source of self-esteem and sense of achievement for Archie and Samad. Their families can no longer be impressed by their accounts, however, as to them World War II is such a distant historical event that they get bored by the constant allusions to it:

“We know what we’re doing. You forget, Archibald and I have coped with extreme situations. Once you have fixed a five-man tank in the middle of a battlefield, [...] let me be telling you, hurricane is little tiny small fry. You could do a lot worse than – yes, yes, very amusing I’m sure”, muttered Samad as the two children and the two wives feigned narcolepsy. (p. 225)

In reality, neither Samad nor Archie ever fixed a tank “in the middle of a battlefield”, so this story, just like most others they tell, is hopelessly exaggerated in order to try and impress their audience. To their disappointment, people are not only not impressed but even get confused by their talking about “the war”:

“War?” she [Poppy] said, as if he had said wireless or pianola or water-closet. “The Falklands?”  
“No,” said Samad flatly. “The Second World.”  
(p. 136)

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<sup>47</sup> “The Gleaner online” reveals that at the time of the earthquake, there was indeed a Jamaican governor called Sir Swettenham who seemed to have diplomatic problems with the American fleet: he insulted the marines because he would not let them land without his permission, but apologised in the end and had a “relief committee” collect the goods from the ships.  
cf.: [www.jamaica-gleaner.com/pages/history/story0017.html](http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/pages/history/story0017.html)

These two episodes make it abundantly clear that Archie's and Samad's attempts to use their experiences in the Second World War as a means of gaining respect and admiration not only fail, but that they even achieve the contrary with their remarks: their families and acquaintances only get the impression that the two men are getting old and keep ruminating about ancient stories that are not relevant to anybody else any more. Additionally, it is the fact that they are so obviously boasting which immediately makes their audiences uninterested.

It is hinted at in one instance, however, that real and personal experience does touch the younger generation, in this case Clara and Alsana: when the two of them are still pregnant with their children, they have a conversation with the old park keeper Sol Jozefowicz who, it can be inferred from his name, is very probably of Eastern European origin. When the two women ask him, in the context of their conversation about abortion, whether he considers "the murder of innocents [...] funny" (p. 79), his answer is simply "Not in my experience, no, Mrs Iqbal" (p. 79). At this, "it strikes all women – the way history will, embarrassingly, like a blush – what the ex-park keeper's experience might have been. They fall silent." (p. 79). This very short episode shows that young Clara and Alsana are by no means indifferent to historical events, but that it is the authenticity of the experience in question which makes an impression on them.

### **Assassination of Indira Gandhi (1984)**

Proving her singular sense for irony once again, Zadie Smith connects two crucial events in the Iqbal household with Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. This is the time when Samad is having an affair with his sons' music teacher and, as a consequence of his increasingly bad conscience on account of his immoral actions, decides to send one of his sons back home to his relatives in Bangladesh in order to provide him with a traditional Muslim education. He does not, however, initiate Alsana into his plans as he correctly fears that she is very much opposed to them. Thus, when one night he returns from work to find Alsana crying, it comes as a surprise to him that she is actually crying because she has just heard of Mrs Gandhi's death and not because she has found out about Samad's furtive doings.

This assassination and its consequences come at the very worst time for the Iqbals, as the outbreak of religiously motivated violence in both India and Bangladesh also puts Magid at risk. Thus, Alsana reacts even more furiously on finding out that Samad put



Magid on a plane to Bangladesh in the dead of night and she decides never to speak directly to Samad again until her son has returned. This, of course, reduces their marriage to a purely formal and superficial arrangement which even after Magid's return can never really be mended again.

In addition to the reference to the violent death of Indira Gandhi this scene also includes an allusion to India's colonial British past by indicating the omnipresence of BBC radio in the colonies:

Four familiar beeps, the beeps that follow the English into whatever land they conquer, rang round the kitchen, and then in Received Pronunciation Samad heard the following: "This is the BBC World Service at 03.00 hours. [...]" (p. 197)

### **Burning of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Islamist protests in Bradford, 1989**

By relating this historical event from the perspective of fifteen-year-old Millat and his "Crew", Zadie Smith once again chooses to cast a humorous and ironical light on this incident which, in fact, had a lasting influence on Salman Rushdie's life and subsequent works as well as quite a lot of political significance for the Muslim world. Millat and his friends, however, do not seem to grasp the dimensions of the event they are going to witness. Apart from the fact that they have not even read the book which the commotion is all about, they generally seem to be a confused bunch of kids who are desperately searching for something to believe in or someone whose example they can follow. They are easily carried away by the emotion welling up in their surroundings on this occasion and keep quoting the opinions they have picked up without further reflecting on them:

'It's a fucking insult!', said Millat, spitting some gum against the window. 'We've taken it too long in this country. And now we're getting it from our own, man....'

'My uncle says he can't even spell,' said a furious Hifan, the most honestly religious of the lot. 'And he dares to talk about Allah!'

'Allah'll fuck him up, yeah?' cried Rajik, the least intelligent, who thought of God as some kind of cross between Monkey-Magic and Bruce Willis. (p. 233)

This extract shows that to them, it is above all the possibility of joining a significant mass of like-minded "brothers" which accounts for their motivation to join the riots in Bradford. Their goal is to remind the country in which they were born - but which does not seem to accept them as equal citizens - of their existence and that they are there and eager to make a difference.

While Millat can be found in the middle of the rioting masses, Samad and Alsana are watching the events on television and are discussing the same issue. Here, it is Samad who, like his son, has not read the book in question but claims that he knows exactly what the situation is about: “It is a matter of protecting one’s culture, shielding one’s religion from abuse.” (p. 235). Like on most occasions, Alsana’s opinion aims exactly at Samad’s sore point as she agrees with the argument they hear on television that “the book concerns the struggle between secular and religious life” (p. 235). Even though Alsana is the one in their marriage who does not consider herself a religious person and does not care much about the protection of her or, indeed, any religion, she can see through Samad’s inner conflict very well, owing to her traditional Muslim education. Therefore, Alsana is not to be misled by his denying any “emotional difficulties” (p. 235). She is not impressed either when she discovers Millat on television in the middle of the crowd. True to her conclusion that “either everything is sacred or nothing is” (p. 237), she collects items from Millat’s room which she knows are of great emotional value to him and sets fire to them in the back garden in order to teach him a lesson. This example shows very clearly how every one of the protagonists interprets the course of events according to his or her own concerns and personal problems.

### **Fall of the Berlin Wall, November 1989**

A wall was coming down. It was something to do with history. It was *an historic occasion*. No one really knew quite who had put it up or who was tearing it down or whether this was good, bad or something else; [...] but it was educational all the same; as good an excuse for a get-together as any. It was a Thursday night, Alsana and Clara had cooked, and everybody was watching history on TV. (p. 237, 238)

Similarly to the above mentioned episode, this paragraph also illustrates very well how the protagonists’ interest in history is unavoidably linked to their respective situations and personal experiences. Like everybody else in their families, Archie and Samad are not really informed about what is going on but they immediately start to interpret the occurrences according to their favourite topics: Archie starts to talk about the war he and Samad participated in as young soldiers, while Samad prompts him and adds the story of his ancestor Pande to prove their point that personal experience is more valuable than theoretical knowledge about historical events. Clara, on the other hand, is ready to take notes and profit from this educational broadcast, whereas Alsana is busy scolding her

husband and her son Millat, who is simply and openly bored by this choice of TV programme.

As everybody seems to fall back into their usual patterns of arguments, Irie seems to be the only person who remains genuinely interested in the current situation in Berlin. This can be seen as another piece of evidence for the fact that she will be the first and probably the only one of the protagonists who is strong enough to leave the past behind and actively strive towards a better future, breaking out of this circle of ever-repeating histories.

### **II. 3.1.5. History as an obstacle for the future**

History is seen as a problem between the generations by most characters of *White Teeth*: “No one in the Jones household [...] let speech flow freely from adult to child, child to adult, as if the channel of communication between these two tribes was untrammelled, unblocked by history, *free*.” (p. 319, italics in original). Not only the Joneses seem to be obsessed with history and family stories, but also Samad is especially prone to losing himself in glorified memories of his own past and that of his ancestors. None of these characters is able to leave his or her past behind so that they can optimistically look forward to the future, or even enjoy the present situation in their lives.

The fact that the Chalfen family do not seem to have this problem is one of the most significant reasons for Irie’s fascination for them. Until, that is, she starts to suspect that even this family is not as free from obstructive secret histories as they seem to be on a first, superficial glance. As it is revealed in the end, for example, that Marcus Chalfen has been the protégé of the notorious Dr Perret and in fact owes his unusually fast and steep career to him, Irie’s suspicion proves to have been justified.

Taking her experiences in the Chalfen household as an impulse to deal with her own family’s problems with history, Irie eventually succeeds in overcoming the restrictions of these histories after having taken considerable time to come to terms with the histories and stories that seem to stand in her parents’ way to a happy present. At first, she is troubled by the discovery of an abundance of stories that have obvious importance to her parents but are left untold to Irie. A central experience in this respect is the

already described scene in which she finds out that her mother Clara has got false teeth, a fact which she had not known about until the age of sixteen:

To her, [...] this was another example of the Jones/Bowden gift for secret histories, stories you never told, history you never entirely uncovered, rumour you never unravelled, which would be fine if every day was not littered with clues (p. 379).

Thus, finding out at such a late stage about this quite important part of her mother's identity is the last straw and adds the final impulse for her to leave home. At her grandmother Hortense's place, however, she finds herself confronted with a strange man named Ryan Topps and similarly mysterious hints about Clara's past coming from Hortense, as I have already pointed out earlier in this chapter.

These events only further strengthen her decision to let the past rest and to leave it behind in order to be able to finally face the future with nothing holding her back or blocking her. Her child, who in a short prolepsis at the very end of the book is described as being "fatherless" (p. 541) because nobody will ever be able to determine which one of the twins is the girl's biological father, therefore is in the lucky position to be free from the weight of family history: "free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings" (p. 541).

It can be argued that this comparison to Pinocchio points to the fact that this state of "fatherlessness" is not entirely positive and desirable, either, as the story of Pinocchio shows that he was unhappy because he lacked a real father and started a long journey full of privation and pain in order to find him. On the other hand, the situation of Irie's daughter can be seen from the positive perspective of freedom of choice: including Josh, who acts as her father as he raises her together with Irie, there are three fatherly figures in her life whom she could all choose to see as her "real" father. This leaves Irie's daughter the choice of either being able to choose the one for her father whose historical burden is least troublesome to her, or not to decide at all but to create her ideal father by picking those elements of each man which suit her best.

Irie herself is convinced that the absence of downweighing family history is the best thing a child could have, as the following episode shows, in which she finally loses her temper and shouts at her parents and the Iqbals that it is possible to lead a less difficult family life, just like other families:

They open a door and all they've got behind it is a bathroom or a lounge. Just neutral spaces. And not this endless maze of present rooms and past rooms and the things said in them years ago and everybody's old historical shit all over the place. [...] 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. [...] They don't spend their time trying to find ways to make their lives more complex. They just get on with it. (p. 514/515)

This frustration which manifests itself in Irie's angry speech helps her to overcome her initial sadness about the fact that her child will never be able to find out which one of the twins is her father. Seen in retrospect, she has therefore provided the neutral historical background for her daughter which she would also have wished for herself, and so unintentionally did the best she could have done for her child.

As the flashforward to Irie's little family shows at the end of the book, they could be seen as the perfect modern multicultural patchwork family: the mother British Jamaican, the biological father Bengali, the stepfather a British Jew, and the child a happy and carefree mixture of all these combinations. Whether peaceful and happy coexistence can really be that easy for everyone in such a hybrid, multicultural environment has to be doubted, however, and this topic will be explored later on.

### **II.3.2. Religion**

Whereas religion is a very complex and fertile topic which can lead to stimulating discussions and even ferocious conflicts, especially when radical Islam or other extreme groups clash with moderate Western Christianity or atheism, Smith chooses to stay rather on the surface of the problem in *White Teeth*. Religious differences tend to serve as the source of comic situations, or extreme and unusual approaches are being ridiculed, but it seems that the topic is never really taken seriously. It can be assumed, however, that the approach would very probably have been a different and more serious one if *White Teeth* had been completed after the attacks of September 11, 2001, or especially the London attacks of July 2005, which were carried out by British-born members of radical Muslim organisations.

As *White Teeth* is set in an environment which can be called multicultural, it is merely a logical consequence that the protagonists also represent a number of different faiths and religions. The most interesting fact, as far as religion is concerned, is that in the case of some characters the intensity of their respective faiths very much changes over the years, or even vanishes altogether. Shiva, a colleague of Samad's at the

restaurant and “the only Hindu on the staff” (p. 56) even converts to Islam later in the novel for reasons which I will elaborate on when dealing with the radicalist Muslim organisation KEVIN. None of the characters, however, are portrayed as having what could be called a healthy and beneficial attitude to religion. On the one hand, there are those who are completely oblivious of the actual world around them because they are so blindly immersed in their faith (for example, Hortense and Ryan Topps, or some members of KEVIN), while other characters are constantly at war with the values and restrictions that their religion involves (Samad, and later also Millat, for example). Other characters refer to themselves as “lapsed” (Poppy and Joyce both claim to be “lapsed-Catholic”, p. 309), as atheists (Clara and Irie) or are even described as “ungodly” (Alsana, p. 227). As these examples illustrate, there are very few characters to be found in the novel to whom religion does not present a problem, in one way or another. Among these exceptions are Irie, whose “atheism [is] robust” (p. 395), and Archie, whose nature seems to be so indifferent and lethargic that he can simply not be moved to any expression of faith in anything except for his surrender to fate by delegating his decision making processes to a coin that he flips.

### **II.3.2.1. Jehovah’s Witnesses**

#### **Hortense**

The most unflinchingly ardent member of a religious group in *White Teeth* definitely is Hortense Bowden, who is a blindly devoted and very active Witness of Jehovah. Her mother Ambrosia was converted while pregnant with Hortense, so one of the family myths is that “the Truth [...] flowed through the blood stream directly from Ambrosia to Hortense” (p. 359). In any case, Hortense never once questioned the teachings of the Witnesses but, on the contrary, devotes her whole life to praising the Lord and trying to convert and “save” all the non-believers. In addition to her firm and persistent faith, she even seems to have learned the teachings of the scripture by heart already in her mother’s womb: later in life, she can “cover pages with her hand and quote them from memory, though she [has] never read them before” (p. 359). As all her life is oriented along the words and will of Jehovah, Hortense also regards Clara as “the Lord’s child, Hortense’s miracle baby” (p. 33), which she conceived as a consequence of having “heard the Lord’s voice” (p. 34). According to her view, it is clear that the sole purpose of Clara’s existence is to praise the Lord and His creation and to help Hortense spread Jehovah’s truth among the sinners. Thus, Clara is sent doorstepping for the Witnesses

and is very much involved in Hortense's religious life, until she starts to rebel against her mother's strict rule. Hortense is so radical that as a consequence to Clara's rebellion she rather chooses to disown her own child than to live with someone who refuses to acknowledge the teachings of Jehovah.

Hortense, who even interprets her own birth during the earthquake in Kingston in 1907 as a sign of the Lord, has only one goal in life: she wants to witness the end of the world and "sit in the court of the Lord on Judgement Day" (p. 30). In the course of Hortense's long life, as many as four different dates for the end of the world are announced. Every time, she is convinced that this time it is the right date, and she concentrates all her energy on securing a place for herself among the saved who "would gain paradise on earth" (p. 38), as well as trying to save those she loves from damnation and preparing herself to see "the entrails of sinners wrapped around the trunks of trees" and the "rivers of blood to overflow the gutters in the high street" (p. 32). The tone which Smith uses to describe Hortense's intense devotion to her faith is a very ironic one all through the novel, and she constantly makes it clear that any kind of extreme religiosity is something which cannot be taken seriously. By comments like the following, she frequently shows the ridiculous forms which religious extremism can take:

There were eight months to the end of the world. Hardly enough time!  
There were banners to be made, articles to be written ('Will the Lord  
Forgive the Onanist?'), doorsteps to be trod, bells to be rung. (p. 33)

All throughout the book, also Hortense herself appears in comic episodes and is, for example, described as wearing "two pairs of knickers at all times like a wary potential traffic-victim" (p. 397) because in the face of the end of the world, "she intended to whip off the one closest to her and replace it with the outer pair, so that Jesus would find her fresh and odourless and ready for heaven" (p. 397). She therefore makes a very eccentric, but also harmlessly comic impression on the reader in spite of her religious radicalism.

## **Clara**

From her earliest childhood on, Clara is very much involved in the community of the Jehovah's Witnesses on account of her mother Hortense's strong belief that Clara is a godsend created to serve the Lord. At her London school, this of course immediately makes her an outsider and confronts her with the difficult task of somehow trying to reconcile the need to fit in with the demands her mother makes on her:

Week after week she shuffled through the school, head hung to the ground, handing out magazines, murmuring 'Only Jehovah saves'; in a school where an overexcitable pustule could send you to Coventry, a six-foot black missionary in knee socks attempting to convert six hundred Catholics to the church of the Jehovah's Witnesses equalled social leprosy. (p. 29)

As she obviously fails in her attempts to integrate into the social life at school, she concentrates her attention on the only other, equally conspicuous outsider of the school, Ryan Topps. A relationship to a boy, of course, is very much against her mother's rules and thus encourages Clara in her rebellion against the Witnesses' narrow world. Ryan himself, however, gets involved with the Witnesses through Hortense and consequently does not serve Clara as a means of escaping this environment any more. Seen in this context, her running off with Archie Jones looks like an act of desperation, in which Clara perceives her one and only chance to get away from her mother's influence. However, long after her escape by marrying Archie and despite her strict avoidance of any contact with her mother, she feels the remnants of a deeply-rooted faith against her will. Even though she tries to fight them, there are still impulses which she has internalised to such an extent that she cannot get rid of them:

But how fragile is Clara's atheism! Like one of those tiny glass doves Hortense keeps in the lounge cabinet – a breath would knock it over. Talking of which, Clara still holds hers when passing churches the same way adolescent vegetarians scurry by butchers; she avoids Kilburn on a Saturday for fear of streetside preachers on their upturned apple crates. (p.395)

While striving to preserve her own delicate atheism, which she worked so hard to achieve, Clara is even more anxious that Irie doesn't get caught up in the clutches of Jehovah's Witnesses. This is one of the main reasons why she tries to avoid any contact with her mother, and is especially careful to keep Irie away from Hortense. Instead of having a positive influence on their lives, religion thus serves as a destructive force which is the source of bitter conflicts and even divides families.

### **Ryan Topps**

Apart from his unattractive and even rather ridiculous physical appearance, Ryan is also a very unusual character when it comes to his religiosity. He changes very drastically and very suddenly from a teenager who cares for nothing but motorcycles to a radical follower of Jehovah's Witnesses. It seems as though he simply and almost



effortlessly switches from one object of devotion, namely his motorcycle, to another – Jehovah.

This obviously naïve ease with which he simply replaces one passion with another and his blind belief in the scriptures and the teaching of the elders, as well as his comic physique make him a rather ridiculous character. Smith emphasises this by employing a very ironic tone whenever describing him, which she contrasts with the immense adoration which Hortense has for Ryan. Whereas Hortense, however, is a charming and loveable character despite her stubbornness and her strange quirks, Smith does not leave any doubt what she would like her readers to think about Ryan Topps and, consequently, about religious movements like Jehovah's Witnesses:

[H]e had a mono-intelligence, an ability to hold on to a single idea with phenomenal tenacity, and he never found anything that suited it as well as the church of Jehovah's Witnesses. Ryan thought in black and white.  
(p. 509)

Beyond the fact that characters like Topps make a cranky and even ridiculous impression, Smith points to the potential dangers which they can constitute in society. It is also illustrated how this danger becomes even greater when characters like Topps are not taken seriously on account of their comic appearance.

### **II.3.2.2. Islam**

#### **Samad**

Samad Iqbal is among the protagonists who have the most difficult relationship with their religion. To him, his faith is very closely intertwined with his whole set of morals, the cultural aspects of his background, his sexuality, and generally pervades every sphere of his existence. As his life is dominated by his decision to immigrate to Britain from Bangladesh, however, he is forced to integrate Western as well as Eastern lifestyles and morals into his set of attitudes, which poses an increasing number of problems for him. Even though he uses all his strength and abilities to live according to the rules of Islam, he never quite manages to reach this goal and therefore he is never at peace with himself.

Especially when it comes to questions of sexuality and physical comforts in general, he seems constantly torn between extremes and in situations of crisis even tries to negotiate 'deals' with God: for example, one of these deals includes giving up "masturbation so that he might drink" (p. 139). This seems to work for a while so that

Samad is able to enjoy his regular beer together with Archie, but as Smith remarks with an ironical undertone:

He was in the wrong religion for compromises, deals, pacts, weaknesses and *can't say fairer than that*s. [...] His God was not like that charming white-bearded bungler of the Anglican, Methodist or Catholic churches. His God was not in the business of *giving people breaks*. (p. 140).

In the course of events, this fact also dawns on Samad and causes him to never be at peace with himself. In his religious struggle, guilt seems to be the prevailing feeling, as even his colleague Shiva realises: “You should never have got religious, Samad. [...] All that guilt’s not healthy.” (p. 144).

Until he finally is an elderly man who no longer has the energy to fight, Samad is caught in this same moral conflict. The only stable parameter in his life seems to be his adoration for his great-grandfather Mangal Pande, who to Samad almost seems to take on the dimensions of a saviour or prophet. While Samad, however, can never reach the level of spirituality and determination which he ascribes to Pande, Smith ironically exemplifies the negative and harmful sides of religious fervour by describing Pande as “half drunk with bhang and wholly drunk with religious fanaticism” (p. 254).

## **Millat**

Millat’s development from a popular womaniser who loves to party, indulges in drugs and alcohol and seduces white girls by the dozen, to a radical Muslim who grows a beard and prays five times a day is especially interesting, as it mirrors a wide-spread phenomenon in contemporary Britain. In the last few years, an increasing number of young British men with a second-generation immigrant, mostly South-East Asian, background, turn to radical Islamist groups. The reasons for these boys and young men are manifold, but always include the element of rebellion against the parent generation who, in their children’s eyes, are trying too hard to integrate into British society. A second common motive for joining an extremist group is the wish to find somewhere to belong, which stems from a feeling of being stuck in-between the culture of their parents’ homelands, which in most cases the young second-generation immigrants have never even been to, and the English cultural environment, into which they are never quite accepted because of their ‘exotic’ origins. This state is described in *White Teeth* as follows:

Millat was neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian, Englishman or Bengali; he lived for the in between, he lived up to his middle name, *Zulfikar*, the clashing of two swords. (p. 351, italics in original)

Furthermore, a possible factor that comes into play is an underlying political motivation: the experience of injustice and corruption in their parents' land of origin can create a sense of guilt in the young people growing up in Britain, making them aware of their privileged situation and creating in them a wish to make up for this injustice in some way<sup>48</sup>. In Millat's case, therefore, his subconscious motivation could also include the wish to show his solidarity with his twin brother Magid, who has to grow up and live in unstable conditions in Bangladesh.

An important first impulse for Millat to sympathise with radical Islamist groups is his taking part in the religiously motivated protests against Salman Rushdie. The development of radical Islamist groups also profits a great deal from the fatwa against Rushdie and the subsequent manifestations of disapproval among various immigrant groups: all of a sudden they realise that they are not alone, but become "aware of how powerful their disapproval could be, and what energy they could create when organised" (Kureishi, p. 7). It seems that this energy that stems from the feeling of collective power and communal spirit is also a very important source of attraction for Millat.

Millat's religiosity, however, cannot be taken seriously because it seems that all his actions, whether it is bringing home white girls knowing that this upsets his parents, or joining KEVIN, are intended as a rebellion against his parents, especially his father, and as a means of finding his own way in between British and Bangladeshi culture. Therefore, his decision to join KEVIN does not necessarily have to do with religion at all, as Kureishi explains:

It's a difficult trick, to be simultaneously disobedient and conformist, but joining a cult or political organisation can fit both needs. The puritanical young can defy their fathers, but keep to the law of the ultimate Father. They are good, virtuous children, while rebelling. (Kureishi, p. 8)

Millat's example corroborates Kureishi's analysis very accurately, as he not only reproaches his father for not being a proper Muslim but "a bloody hypocrite" (p. 334) but also treats his twin brother with hostility for being an "unbelieving Muslim" (p. 465). One of the reasons he joined the movement, however, also turns out to be the reason why he can never fully identify with KEVIN: "Millat loved clans. He had joined

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<sup>48</sup> Cf Kureishi, Hanif: *The Word and the Bomb*, p. 6ff

KEVIN because he loved clans (and the outfit and the bow tie), and he loved clans at war.” (p. 442). He knows that this love for clans and gangster movies is part of the Western lifestyle which he is supposed to “purge” himself of (p. 444), but still he cannot suppress it. “Worst of all”, however, is “the anger inside him. Not the righteous anger of a man of God, but the seething, violent anger of a gangster [...] determined to run the clan” (p. 447).

It is obvious that KEVIN cannot provide a solution for Millat to get rid of the anger which is bottled up inside him and which seems to be directed against his whole environment. Rather, it seems that in his case, he needs time to gain better insight into his situation and the cause of his conflicts, as well as ideally a chance to prove himself in professional life.

## **KEVIN**

The radical Islamist movement “The Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation”, who “are aware [...] that [they] have an acronym problem” (p. 295), appear ridiculous from their very first appearance in the novel. This is to a great extent due to the first impression which their acronym makes, but also stems from their unworldly and blindly radical approach to religious questions. In addition to that, their founder, Brother Ibrahim, is presented as an absurd character who does not even make a deep impression on his most eager followers:

No one in the hall was going to admit it, but Brother Ibrahim was no great speaker, when you got down to it. Even if you overlooked his habit of using three words where one would do, [...] he was still physically disappointing. He had a small sketchy beard, a hunched demeanor, a repertoire of tense, inept gesticulations and a vague look of Sidney Poitier about him which did not achieve quite the similitude to command any serious respect. (p. 467/468)

This ridiculous appearance is symptomatic for the whole organisation: neither its leader nor any of its members make a convincing impression as far as their motivations and underlying faith are concerned. Smith uses them as a further instrument to ridicule fundamentalism and uncritical religiosity, just like she uses the Witnesses of Jehovah.

Another point which gives reason to question this religious group is the wide range of reasons which different members claim to have for joining KEVIN, most of which do not include religious motivation. Samad’s fellow waiter Shiva, for example, who converts from Hinduism to Islam quite late in life, lists a number of very secular reasons

for this conversion and his immediate involvement with the radical Islamist organisation:

Shiva had joined KEVIN for three reasons. First, because he was sick of the stick that comes with being the only Hindu in a Bengali Muslim restaurant. Secondly, because being Head of Internal Security for KEVIN beat the hell out of being second waiter at the Palace. And thirdly, for the women. (p. 502)

Thus, he very clearly confirms that faith never was his primary concern in the first place, but that he simply uses KEVIN to satisfy his individual needs. The wish to fit in and belong to a strong group, however, also plays an important part in his decision making process, just as it does in Millat's.

As I will elaborate on in detail in the chapter on racism, frustration and aggression as a result of being, or having been, a target of racist violence are also among the main reasons for prospective members to join KEVIN. This is exemplified by the fate of the butcher Mo Hussein, which will be presented as the most striking example.

Millat's example, on the other hand, shows a certain contradiction in values: his enthusiasm for Hollywood gangster movies proves to be indelible, and therefore his above cited love for "clans" motivates him to join this militant religious group. This uncovers the fact that while KEVIN, as a group, pretend to be fighting the cultural values which Hollywood productions and the like disseminate, they actually gain members through these same channels<sup>49</sup>.

### **Alsana**

Those of *White Teeth*'s readers who, like Samad, have expected Alsana to be a devout and traditional Muslim wife are soon proven wrong: it turns out that even though Alsana received a thorough religious education and knows more about the Koran<sup>50</sup> than Samad does, she is not a religious person at all:

Ungodly Alsana, who was yet a nifty hand with the word of God (good schooling, proper parents, oh yes) lacking nothing but the faith, prepared to do what she did only in emergency: recite. (p. 227/8)

Rather, she likes to provoke her husband's anger with sarcastic remarks and ungodly actions. This is vividly illustrated, for example, by the list of things Alsana decides to

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<sup>49</sup> cf.: Head, Dominic, p. 113

<sup>50</sup> Smith uses the Arabic spelling "Qur'an" throughout the book, which I have decided not to take over for reasons of readability

take with her when they have to leave their house because of a bad storm and Samad asks them to take only “*the life or death things*” (p. 221, italics in original):

Sewing machine  
Three pots of tiger balm  
Leg of lamb (frozen)  
Foot bath  
*Linda Goodman’s Starsigns* (book)  
Huge box of beedi cigarettes  
Divargit Singh in *Moonshine over Kerala* (musical video)

Samad slammed the boot down. [...] ‘Nobody even thinks to pick up the Qur’an. Key item in emergency situation: spiritual support.’ (p. 222, italics in original)

The question of whether it is the Western European influence which has robbed Alsana of her religiosity, or whether she has always been sceptic towards the religious elements of her education but only dares to openly voice this scepticism in the liberal atmosphere of Britain, remains unclear. The second possibility is rather more probable, however, because she surprises her environment with sarcastic remarks from the day of her arrival in Britain, as a very young woman already. In terms of faith, she represents a very modern approach in spite of her traditional education. Clearly, her husband Samad is taken by surprise by this attitude and never learns how to cope with it. Alsana herself, however, seems to make the best of her situation in Britain: in the company of friends like Clara, for example, she can voice her opinion freely and be respected, while she submits to celebrating certain religious festivities together with the Iqbals’ tradition-loving friends and family from Bengal.

### **Magid**

Magid, in spite of having been sent to Bangladesh in order to receive a traditional education according to the Islamic faith, does not return from the homeland of his ancestors as the “upholder of traditions” (p. 425), so badly desired by his father. Instead, he has become an atheist who, just like his twin brother Millat, but out of completely contrary beliefs, likes to provoke his father with actions like ordering a bacon sandwich at O’Connell’s poolhouse, whose Muslim owner Abdul Mickey normally does not serve pork:

‘A bacon sandwich, please, Archibald.’

‘Bac-? Er... right. Right you are.’

Samad’s face blew up like one of Mickey’s fried tomatoes. ‘So you mean to mock me, is that it? In front of my face you wish to show me the kaffir<sup>51</sup> that you are. Go on, then! Munch on your pig in front of me!’ (p. 454)

As an atheist, Magid is far more interested in and enthusiastic for Marcus Chalfen’s experiments with genetical engineering than anything to do with religion in general or Islam in particular. He is so impressed with the cloned FutureMouse which Marcus produces that he even compares his love for science with the devotion to God in his reflections:

No second-guessing, no what-ifs, no might-have-beens. Just certainty. Just certainty in its purest form. And what more, thought Magid [...] – what more is God than *that?* (p. 490, italics in original)

What makes matters even worse for Samad is that Magid does not only reject Muslim faith and likes to impersonate the calm, educated, secular and scientifically oriented Englishman, but seems to have become a follower of the scientific cult which will be described below, “Chalfenism”. When he starts to function as a kind of promoting agent for Marcus, this job takes on the dimensions of preaching: Magid himself states that “all [he] wanted to do [...] was bring Chalfenism to people” (p. 427), boldly using vocabulary associated with religious mission and conversion.

The superior posture which he takes on infuriates most of his family members and friends, with the exception of Marcus and Joyce Chalfen. With this attitude, he especially hurts his father, but also finds himself “on a direct collision course with [his] brother” (p. 455). When the eventually inevitable collision of the twins takes place, Magid deeply insults his brother by claiming to regard Marcus’ success in genetic engineering “as correcting the Creator’s mistakes” (p. 464). In this case, too, conflicts arising from different approaches to religion significantly contribute to the estrangement and division between a father and his sons, as well as twin brothers who used to be inseparable.

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<sup>51</sup> used in islamic context, a “kaffir” is an infidel, a non-believer (source: *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Cf.: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/kaffir> )

### II.3.2.3. “Chalfenism” - Science as a religion?

Marcus Chalfen is described at one point by his wife as “an intellectual Jew” (p. 309), but does not seem to be practising his religion or, as a matter of fact, have any close connection to it at all. Instead, he is a follower of the cult which his family has built up around itself and called “Chalfenism”. At a first glance, this obsession does not seem to be more than a humorous wordplay, but on closer inspection the terminology he uses more and more resembles that of a religious cult based on intellect. The following episode shows how Marcus’ obsession with science and intellect develops and expands to dimensions which otherwise religion could take on in a person’s life:

It hurt him that even his own son was not as Chalfenist as he’d hoped. And over the past few months he had built up great expectations of Magid [...]; maybe he had begun to hope, begun to *believe*, that Magid would be a beacon for right-thinking Chalfenism even as it died a death here in the wilderness. They would *save* each other. *This couldn’t be faith could it, Marcus?* He questioned himself directly on this point as he scurried along. [...] No faith, no, Marcus, not the kind with no eyes. Something stronger, something firmer. *Intellectual* faith. (pp. 421/422, italics in original)

Not only does Marcus himself interpret his passion for “right-thinking” as a manifestation of faith, but also the terminology of this extract provides a strong reference to the religious aspect: the use of words like “believe” or “save” unmistakably point to the religious sphere in this context.

Furthermore, it is worth noticing that Marcus speaks of a kind of faith “with no eyes” (p. 422), obviously referring to religious faith. Through this remark he makes it clear that, in his point of view, religious faith is inferior to his so-called “intellectual faith” because it is not founded on scientifically measurable data which can be explained and proven. In the eyes of religious protagonists such as Samad, on the other hand, Marcus shows inconceivable disrespect towards God and His creation in his attempt at creating new and especially designed life in the form of his “FutureMouse”.

### II.3.2.4. Christianity

Christianity plays a very minor role in *White Teeth*. For example, none of the main characters are described as belonging to the Church of England, which might seem surprising given that the novel is set in London. Catholicism is also only mentioned in passing a few times, and is always presented as a mellow kind of religion which does not trigger any intense emotions in its followers. On the contrary, it is shown as a



religion which encourages the believers to repress feelings of any kind, which generally results in “church to be a stiff-collared miserable affair” (p. 304). This absence of emotion in British Catholic services becomes most obvious in contrast to “the devotion of Jamaican Christians” (p. 304), who are described as forming “a jolly church, where one could sniff or cough or make a sudden movement without the vicar looking at one queerly” (p. 304).

This joyful picture, however, is immediately put into perspective by Smith, who does not leave out the painful background of Christianisation by the English, in the course of which the colonisers took advantage of the innocence of the native peoples in every way. The specific example of Ambrosia Bowden, who was on the one hand taught how to read the bible and on the other hand sexually abused by British men, plainly illustrates these double moral standards of the Christian colonisers in general and the British in particular.

The notion that the Christian churches cannot really be taken seriously is expressed again in Smith’s ironic description of Samad’s enormous trouble to unite his devotion to the Muslim faith with his secular wishes and his longing for compromises, as I have already cited above. In the above mentioned quotation, Smith uses the words “charming white-bearded bungler” (p. 140) to describe the Christian picture of God. By using this derogatory expression, Smith very drastically emphasises the fact that in comparison to other images of God, the loving and forgiving Christian God is not to be taken seriously. Samad, of course, would profit from this picture of a God who is easy to please, as this makes his own desperate struggle, which I have described above, seem more justified. The apparent ease with which a Christian God lets Himself be abandoned, can also be shown by Poppy Burt-Jones, who lightly refers to herself as a “lapsed” Roman Catholic (p. 178). Especially in contrast to the struggling Samad, Poppy does not seem to perceive the absence of faith in her life or the immorality of her seducing a married man as problematic.

#### **II.3.2.5. Fate**

As a last point in this chapter, fate ought to be mentioned as a central concept which most of the main characters of *White Teeth* believe in, regardless of what religion they practice or whether they even think of themselves as religious persons or not. The fact that they believe in determinism, however, does not mean that the characters all share

the same attitude towards it. The following examples will show how the belief in a predetermined course of life further divides the already very diverse characters.

Those of the protagonists whose belief in fate is most firmly connected to their religiosity are Samad and Hortense Bowden. Both are of the conviction that God's will has to and will be fulfilled, but whereas Hortense completely trusts in the will of the Lord and unprotestingly follows all the instructions which the elder Witnesses have received from God, even those to prepare for the end of the world, Samad is constantly fighting to stay on the right path which God has selected for him.

The generally passive and indifferent Archie has found a way of making decisions without actually having to decide anything: he simply throws a coin and lets chance determine his further proceedings. This is how he even decides for committing suicide, but he has not taken into account the powers that have more decisive force than his coin:

Whilst he slipped in and out of consciousness, the position of the planets, the music of the spheres, the flap of a tiger-moth's diaphanous wings in Central Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit Happen had decided it was second-chance time for Archie. (p. 4)

As is typical of him, Archie takes a neutral position in his attitude towards fate. As a matter of fact, he seems to let himself be a plaything of fate without even reflecting or having an opinion on this matter.

The scientifically oriented Marcus and Magid are situated on the opposite extreme end from Samad and Hortense. Marcus is fascinated with his own achievements in genetic engineering because it enables him to "eliminate the random" (p. 341). This, in his opinion, puts him into a position where his own will replaces the greater plan of things, or God's will, or fate itself. Magid is equally fascinated by Marcus' genetically manipulated mice because nothing is left to "shaky fate" (p. 489). Considering his personal background, his further association is not surprising: Magid again expresses his wish "to be more like the English. The English fight fate to the death" (p. 288).

Millat, with his sense of strength thanks to the support by KEVIN, as well as his ineradicable enthusiasm for gangster movies, finds it "tempting to use the four-letter F-word. Fate. Which to Millat is a quantity very much like TV: an unstoppable narrative, written, produced and directed by somebody else" (p. 526). Irie, on the other hand, actually is the only one of the main characters who does not in any way believe in determinism. She fervently fights for the possibility and the right to decide on her own

future without any predetermined restrictions. At the end of the novel, however, Smith ironically states that “Irie and Joshua become lovers in the end; you can only avoid your fate for so long” (p. 541), thereby putting Irie’s aspirations into perspective.

The fact that during the final scene of the novel, Marcus Chalfen’s genetically manipulated “FutureMouse” (p. 493) escapes from its cage, however, adds a very hopeful note to the matter of determinism: While its biologically programmed fate is planned in every detail, it can nevertheless alter the way its life goes on until it meets its ultimate and genetically preconditioned death.

### **II.3.3. Identities**

In this chapter, I will show how the definition of identity in theory, and therefore also the determination of actual identities in practice are constant subjects of negotiation and change. For obvious reasons connected to their status, it is especially difficult for immigrants to settle for an identity which completely encompasses all different aspects of their existence. As a consequence, it seems logical to make the assumption that immigrants are also especially prone to suffering from identity crises. What factors can trigger this kind of identity crisis and whether this assumption proves to be true with regard to the characters of *White Teeth*, I will go on to discuss in the following.

#### **II.3.3.1. Concepts of identity**

When looking at the different definitions of the term “identity” in various theoretical works of approximately the last forty years, it becomes clear that it has never been an easy task to find an exact and universally applicable definition of identity. The prevailing definition has undergone several significant changes over time: whereas in the earlier works on this topic it was claimed to be possible for a person to possess one single, continuing identity, in recent works the existence of a stable identity which implies the “sameness of a person or of a social group at all times and in all circumstances” (Bennett, Grossberg and Maurice, p. 174) is regarded as impossible. This constant state of flux and change in defining factors is likely to constitute significant problems for those individuals whose identities are very difficult to pin down. In the following, the short theoretical background information I am going to give at the beginning of this chapter is intended to make clear the complexity of the situation and lead to a better understanding of those characters in *White Teeth* who find it

especially difficult to come to terms with their hybrid and seemingly unstable identities. Furthermore, in this chapter I will merge information which has been mentioned in the other chapters on religion and history, as all these factors influence the respective identities of the characters to a significant extent.

In the 1970ies, which is the time at which the plot of *White Teeth* opens, it was believed that the identity of a person could be ascertained by their social role and their individual life history (cf. Dashefsky, p.5). The term “social identity” was defined as referring to “how others identify the person in terms of broad social categories or attributes, such as age, occupation, or ethnicity” (Dashefsky, pp. 5,6), as well as consisting of the individual’s answer to “the question ‘Who am I?’” (Dashefsky, p. 6). Once these parameters were determined, it was claimed that this would result in a stable definition of the individual, based on self-assessment as well as on the observation by their social surroundings.

In the meantime, however, “the pre-modern conception of the human subject which regard[ed] an individual’s position in life as determined by and embedded in the divine order of things” (Gesslbaur, 2002) has been considered outdated for a long time now, and thus the concept of a stable and unified identity is no longer valid. As a logical consequence, it has become increasingly difficult, and in fact quite impossible, to define a single, universally applicable notion of identity as such.

Most recent studies of (post)modern identity even seem to agree on the fact that “the self [is] a complete illusion” or “a social construct, an idea that tells us more about a person’s position in society than about the person’s ‘essential identity’” (Brewer, p. 1). This implies that even though the social position still is part of a person’s identity today, this alone can by no means serve to define this person’s real identity – not least because it is not believed any more that such a thing as “true” identity can even exist. In the face of the increasing difficulty to pin down one definition of one’s identity, therefore, the question arises whether it actually makes sense to even attempt doing so: Examples taken from *White Teeth* will show later on in this chapter that in the case of constant failure at defining and pinning down one’s identity, the results are self-doubt, insecurity and frustration, which are very difficult, and in some cases even impossible, to overcome.

In the following, various possible approaches to identity will be exemplified by means of quotations taken from *White Teeth*. Thus, the applicability of different scientific concepts will be discussed, as well as the above mentioned difficulty of determining one fixed definition.

### **Personal identity**

Most importantly of all its characteristics, personal identity is strongly dependent on “the sameness and continuity of the individual” (Bennett et al., p. 172). This consistency, however, is equally difficult to achieve as to maintain, as I have just shown above. Other defining factors which come into play include, among others, “character, personality, experience, social position” (Bennett et al., p. 172) as well as essential elements of other dimensions of identity such as religion, ethnicity or culture. Therefore, it proves to be especially difficult for individuals who possess an immigrant background to define their personal identity as a relatively stable concept. As Samad’s example in *White Teeth* shows most clearly, finding and stabilising one’s identity can be a lifelong struggle which is never quite completed.

Samad’s first identity crisis which is described to the reader takes place at the time of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, during which he is serving as a soldier in the British Army:

I’m a cripple [...]. And my faith is crippled, do you understand? I’m fit for nothing now, not even Allah, who is all powerful in his mercy. 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? (p. 112)

In this instance, physical appearance, religion and ethnicity play the most important roles in Samad’s understanding of identity. The problem which seems to be weighing most heavily on his mind is his feeling of being stuck in a state in-between, of being neither really Indian, nor really English. In spite of his constant struggle, this feeling of being unwanted in and unfit for the society he lives in never leaves him throughout his whole life. He cannot accept the hybrid nature of his own identity but wants it to be “pure” with all might, which is an impossible state to achieve and thus only leads to greater suffering on his side. The following quotation from *White Teeth* also shows how Samad is fighting in vain for a fixed, stable identity, as he is portrayed as wanting to wear

a sign [...] that said “I am not a waiter. I have been a student, a scientist, a soldier, my wife is called Alsana, we live in East London but we would like to move North. I am a Muslim but Allah has forsaken me or I have forsaken Allah, I’m not sure. I have a friend – Archie – and others. I am forty-nine but women still turn in the street. Sometimes.” (p. 58)

This example lists further important elements which personal identities are made up of: profession, education, social role and status, religion, sexuality and outward appearance. The instability of Samad’s identity is made obvious by the frequently occurring words “but” and “or”, which express his insecurity and discontent when it comes to a description of himself. As his vision of himself obviously lacks the above cited continuity of the self, it is not surprising that his unsatisfactory attempts at self-definition merely lead to frustration and an identity crisis which he cannot overcome.

There is only one stable point on which Samad can base the definition of himself, namely “his great-grandfather’s role in the Indian Mutiny of 1857, which Samad regards as the defining point of his cultural identity” (Meinig, p. 246). Unfortunately, however, his social environment, especially his family and close friends like Archie, do not share his enthusiastic viewpoint of this history. As Pande, in everybody else’s eyes, is nothing but “a drunken fool” (p. 254) and nowhere near being the national hero that Samad sees in him, he proves to be a bad choice for a role model. Constantly having to defend Pande and trying in vain to persuade people of his heroism merely adds to Samad’s frustration, instead of providing a stable basis for the definition of his self.

Another factor which adds to Samad’s struggle for definition is his age: in Archie’s and Samad’s generation, the belief that an identity is fixed is still deeply rooted in their minds. As I have shown above, this corresponds to the status of science in the 1970, but whereas scientific approaches have changed rapidly over the following years, it has become increasingly hard for the two men to adapt to the new concepts. Again, it is especially Samad who finds it difficult to accept and reconcile the various aspects of his personality.

### **Ethnic and national identity**

As so often, the boundaries in the definition between ethnic and national identity are rather vague and blurred. In this paper, I will adopt the viewpoint of various scholars, among them Stuart Hall and Bernd Simon, who regard “nation” as a culture defining concept which includes parameters such as “language, religion or geography” (Simon, p.

15). However, to a certain extent, the concept consists of an “imagined community” (Simon, p. 15) as the definitions of these parameters can to a large extent be socially constructed.

The term “ethnicity”, which is originally “derived from [Greek] *ethnos* meaning “nation, people”” (Bennett et al., p. 112) came to include “nationality, religion, history, language, and culture” (Bennett et al., p. 112). It was claimed that “what ethnic group members have in common is their *ethnicity*, or sense of peoplehood, which represents a part of their collective experience” (Dashefsky 1976, p. 3; italics in original). This collective experience, of course, can also be referred to as the shared history of an ethnic group.

Most recently, however, the range of “ethnicity” has shifted to “being used interchangeably” with the term “race” (Bennett et al., p. 112) and the adjective “ethnic” has been established as meaning “not white” (Bennett et al., p.112). In the following, I will therefore use the term “national identity” to refer to concepts like “British identity” versus “French identity” or “Bengali identity”, etc.

### **British identity**

Not only a great number of scholars, but also journalists and writers who occupy themselves with this topic have stated countless times the impossibility of clearly and unambiguously defining “Britishness”. It is not even clear whether this term actually exists and, if it does, what “Britishness” means in relation to “Englishness” and how and where these two overlap. In most theoretical works on British identity, careful definitions prevail which are phrased as openly as possible: Walton<sup>52</sup>, for example, states that “the English tend to deploy ‘English’ and ‘British’ interchangeably, as if there were no difference” (Caunce et al., p. 1) whereas the “Welsh, Scots and Northern Irish, along with Britons whose identity (for themselves and others) is inflected through skin colour as well as (for example) accent, language and religion” (Caunce et al., p.1) are forced to “negotiate their perceptions of self through flexible and changing ideas about relationships between Britishness and alternative but overlapping collectivities” (Caunce et al., p. 1).

Due to this obvious confusion, some scholars even go as far as speaking of an “absence of established or acceptable terminology for the state of being a British or United Kingdom citizen” (Caunce et al., p.1) and, as a consequence, deplore the fact that

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<sup>52</sup> cf. Walton in Caunce et al., 2004

Britain has come to be “a state without an inclusive term for its citizens” (Walton, p. 1). Seen from a less dramatic perspective, the difficulty with exact definitions of Britishness is simply due to the fact that today, “British identity” is commonly perceived and used as “an umbrella term which gathers under it a large number of bi-racial and combined ethnicity people, as well as all kinds of ethnic and religious groups” (Alibhai-Brown cited in Moss, p. 13). This existence of a very general and vague generic term therefore requires all citizens of Great Britain, whichever their background may be, to construct their identities with regard to their sense of Britishness and of other defining factors, as I have already mentioned above. Depending on their starting points, then, this act of negotiation proves to be more or less problematic and painful for the Briton in question.

Part of this negotiation, which applies to every kind of identity, is also based on the comparison to the so-called ‘other’. British national identity, therefore, is “founded on [...] reactions to the perceived ‘otherness’ of the French, the emergent United States of America and foreigners more generally” (Counce et al., p. 3). This poses a problem for immigrants from former British colonies, and can be seen as one of the most important factors that add to the difficulties described above, which especially Samad faces in defining his identity: ‘Britishness’ is a familiar notion to all citizens of former colonies, as their ‘mother country’ always used to be present in their education and especially in the histories and stories they were told. Schools in British colonies did not only teach British history, but also customs, values, and, most importantly, the English language. As a consequence, defining their identity by dissociating themselves from the Britishness which has been familiar to them for all their lives seems nearly impossible for immigrants from former British colonies.

At the same time, colonialism and especially the end of the British Empire also influenced the English to a great extent. As their status of rulers of a great empire used to be a defining factor in their collective identity, the end of this empire forced them to rethink their identity. This process of redefinition is still ongoing today, and also includes problems like coming to terms with migration into Britain, integration of several generations of immigrants, and so on.

### **British identity in *White Teeth***

Most of the main characters of *White Teeth* are representatives of different ethnic groups or of the “bi-racial and combined ethnicity people”, as cited above, or have close connections or relationships with people of different ethnicities. They will therefore



serve as examples of the different ways how Britishness is conceived and negotiated by people with such diverse backgrounds, whose daily lives pose different problems and challenges according to those backgrounds.

Archie, who is one of the few characters in *White Teeth* who is of unquestioned white British descent, defines the home country he is fighting for as follows during his service in the Second World War:

‘For England. You know,’ said Archie, searching his brain, ‘democracy and Sunday dinners, and ... and ... promenades and piers, and bangers and mash – and the things that are *ours*.’ (p. 120)

It is noticeable that also Archie has to “search his brain” in order to find suitable examples for Englishness. The few things he finally does come up with, however, seem to constitute a rather disappointing list of items that, with the exception of bangers and mash, are not very singular characteristics of England but can with little effort be found in a great number of other (European) countries.

Those of the characters with an immigrant background, on the other hand, naturally define Englishness by comparison to their countries of origin. The results of these comparisons very strongly vary, according to the personality of the person in question, but the features of Englishness which are important to them, are invariably being evaluated and judged as positive or negative in contrast to the respective expectations or experiences. In contrast to the native English characters, those with an immigrant background are never indifferent towards manifestations of Englishness. In general, it can be stated that immigrants spend more time and energy reflecting on these issues and tend to have more critical, but also more enthusiastic responses to certain factors which they come to consider typically “English”.

For example, despite her rather critical attitude towards the English people she gets to know and meets on a daily basis, Alsana has come to love certain English institutions and products, which she fervently defends if anybody dares to question them:

It was almost impossible to change Alsana’s mind about the inherent reliability of her favoured English institutions, among them: Princess Anne, Blu-Tack, Children’s Royal Variety Performance, Eric Morecambe<sup>53</sup>, *Woman’s Hour*. (p. 221)

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<sup>53</sup> English comedian: “one of the most famous comedians of this [the 20<sup>th</sup>] century, part of the dynamic duo Morecambe and Wise” (Cf.: [www.morecambe.co.uk/ericmorecambe.html](http://www.morecambe.co.uk/ericmorecambe.html))

To her, it seems, what makes up the special value of English institutions and therefore, as one might guess, the decisive difference to what she was used to back in her home country, is their reliability. The selection she makes of these institutions not so much represents Englishness, but rather tells a lot about her own personality.

On the other hand, while Samad's best friend is the Englishman Archie, he has come to despise and probably even fear certain elements of British culture which to him make up the most important features of the country he has chosen to live in:

'I should never have come here – [...] Never should have brought my sons here, so far from God. Willesden Green! Calling-cards in sweetshop windows, Judy Blume in the school, condom on the pavement, Harvest Festival, teacher-temptresses!' (p. 145)

In contrast to his wife, who seems to enjoy secular amusements such as comedy and women's magazines, Samad cannot cope with the elements of English culture that allow a relaxation of morals and a more open approach towards sexuality. Since he includes the popular British writer Judy Blume, who is also read at schools in other European countries, however, it becomes clear that these features stand for general Western European values rather than for specifically English traits.

Samad's proneness to interpret everything in a religious context and his oversensitivity with regard to that topic is also reflected by his reaction to the stereotypically English manifestation of exaggerated politeness:

'How many times [...] is it necessary to say *thank you* in a single transaction? [...] They call it English politeness when it is simply arrogance. The only being who deserves this kind of thanks is Allah himself!' (p. 351/2, italics in original)

A few chapters later, Smith's narrating voice satirically comments on that same phenomenon in English social behaviour when describing New Year's Eve in London:

It was the night when England stops saying *pleasethankyoupleasesorrypleasedidI?* And starts saying *pleasefuckmefuckyoumotherfucker* [...] The night England gets down to the fundamentals. (p. 491, italics in original)

This politeness, which to the immigrant Samad seems false and arrogant, Smith here also uncovers and reveals to be only a convention on the surface, as she insinuates that once English people get drunk and lose their culturally conditioned inhibitions, they start

to discard this superficial politeness and show their real personalities. A comparison of these two observations shows that as an immigrant and therefore an “outsider”, who automatically possesses a certain distance to the culture he is observing, Samad almost automatically reflects on expressions or customs unfamiliar to him. His more critical and unbiased perspective allows him to gain closer insight into certain communal features which English people themselves either simply do not notice because they are too immersed into their own cultural environment and do not have enough experience at their disposal to make a critical comparison, or deny or even suppress these elements of their cultural identity because they feel uncomfortable with them.

On the other hand, while it might seem from an outside perspective that British identity is rather easy to define and homogeneous, on a closer look it appears that in fact, beneath a certain superficial level, “real”, or “pure”, ethnic affiliation must remain a myth. This is exemplified by Smith’s revelation of the Chalfens’ true background, which, however, is hidden to Irie:

She wanted their Englishness. [...] 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) (p. 328)

While most other characters seem to be looking for “pure” or “real” Englishness, whether to immerse in it like Irie, or to reject and be able to fight it like Samad, Alsana has identified the reason why this search cannot be successful:

‘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.’ (p. 236)

### **Hybrid identity**

Ethnic diversity and multiculturalism naturally and unavoidably lead to a hybridisation of culture and of identities. While the term “hybrid” used to be derogatory and to have the negative connotations of “impure” or “bastard” (cf. Gaggl, p. 27), it is nowadays used in a neutral sense to describe a mixture of two or more cultures, or a person of mixed ethnic parentage. Instead of being seen as an incomplete mixture of two entities, however, hybridity “is the third element produced by the interaction of cultures, communities, or individuals” (Moss, p. 12) and must therefore be seen as a new, equal entity.

The conception of hybrid identities has also changed in the course of time: people of mixed parentage used to be expected to choose between either one of the parts of their identity. During the black consciousness movement, they were not even given a choice but expected to take “pride in being a person of colour” (Tizard, p. 4) and to “regard themselves, and be regarded by others, as black” (Tizard, p.4). Even though this picture of “clearly differentiated ‘races’ who are, in essence, binary opposites” (Tizard, p. 5) has changed and is therefore no longer expected to pose an unsolvable problem for people of mixed ethnic parentage, it is still assumed that “hybridizations like ‘Asian-British’ [...] contain also their own internal dynamics of heterogeneity and... tension” (Head, p. 108).

It is beyond doubt that an identity in-between two cultures can still be problematic to negotiate. Since the 1950ies, “the degree of hybridity in England is steadily increasing” (Moss, p. 12) and is therefore nowadays widely accepted and, at least in urban areas, not considered as unusual any more. Thus, characters like Irie and also Magid and Millat have good prospects of being able to establish their own identities in accordance with both sides of their heritages, even though they might still be struggling at their young age.

This development with regard to hybridity can also be shown by the examples of Hortense and her granddaughter Irie, who are both of mixed Jamaican and English origin. While Hortense was conceived when her Jamaican mother was raped by an Englishman and later decided for a black identity, completely denying her English ancestry, Irie’s example shows “the shift from a forced hybridity in Jamaica to a chosen hybridity in England” (Moss, p. 13). This “chosen hybridity” is best exemplified by the picture the reader gets of Irie’s future, which I will elucidate in greater detail in the next chapter: Irie herself is of Jamaican-British descent, her daughter was fathered by Magid or Millat, but in any case a Bengali living in Britain, and her partner and the child’s stepfather is the white British Jew Joshua Chalfen.

### **Postcolonial identity**

Before the struggle with postcolonial identities of citizens of former British colonies will be treated, it is necessary to note that also the British themselves slid into a state of severe identity crisis after their main pillar for identification dissolved with the empire, as they had mainly “found their identity as constructors of Great Britain, creators of the British Empire” (Kumar, p. ix). As Kumar further emphasises, in this case it is especially and specifically the English who feel threatened by disintegration, not only because of the end of their empire, but also because of “the move towards European

unity and the calls for a radical pluralization and diversification of English society” (Kumar, p. x). Even though this identity crisis may not be discernible on the surface or may even be denied, it certainly makes up one important reason for racist violence, which I will describe in the next chapter.

In *White Teeth*, Smith speaks of exactly this same fear of dissolution. In her case, however, it is the immigrants who fear dissolution:

It makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, *disappearance*. (p. 327, italics in original)

Fear constitutes one of the most important problems when it comes to postcolonial identities, which is also due to the fact that “post-colonial identity is properly conceived as *process* rather than *arrival*” (Head, p. 107, italics in original). The uncertainty and insecurity arising from this unstable condition further add to this fear. However, immigrants should realise that this state of in-betweenness does not have to be negative at all:

The migrant seems in a better position than others to realise that all systems of knowledge, all views of the world, are never totalising, whole or pure, but incomplete, muddled and hybrid. To live as a migrant may well evoke the pain of loss and of not being firmly rooted in a secure place; but it is also to live in a world of immense possibility with the realisation that new knowledges and ways of seeing can be constructed out of the myriad combinations of the ‘scraps’ which Rushdie describes — knowledges which challenge the authority of older ideas of rootedness and fixity. (McLeod 2000, p. 215)

In *White Teeth*, the best example for this is, again, Irie: she is interested in her family’s past and history, even if it is a painful history at times, but she does not let herself be blocked or inhibited by this. Instead, she has a clear vision of her future and steadily works to achieve what she is dreaming of. Thus, “[t]he complex problem of post-colonial identity and national affiliation [...] begins to find some kind of resolution in the intricate, but satisfying plot of *White Teeth*. In terms of literary history this seems especially significant since evocations of post-colonial migrant experience in post-war Britain have been haunted by a sense of failure.” (Head, p. 107)

### **II.3.4. Multiculturalism: “The great immigrant experiment” (p. 326)**

#### **II.3.4.1. The immigrant experience and its consequences**

There are certain passages in the novel in which Zadie Smith makes multicultural life in London seem natural, peaceful and beneficial for all sides involved – for a moment. However, she never fails to make it clear that this is a very deceptive picture and that on a second glance, it is obvious that behind this seeming idyll lie stories of conflicts, pain, aggression and failure:

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 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. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks. (p. 326)

Even though Zadie Smith claims that multiculturalism is not explicitly an issue in her novel, it is of course impossible to write a novel whose main characters are black British without addressing problems of race, racism, immigration and integration, just to name a few aspects closely related to this topic. In this chapter, I want to show how the concept of race is dealt with in terms of the characters' own attitudes towards their (first or second generation) immigrant backgrounds and present home country, as well as with the way in which their white British surroundings react to them. Those of the characters of *White Teeth* who have an immigrant background had many different reasons for immigration and found even more different ways to cope with their situation. In the following chapters, I want to elaborate on the ones I consider most significant.

#### **“Incredible lethargy” (p. 31): Darcus Bowden**

Darcus Bowden, Hortense's husband and Clara's father, plays only a very minor role in the Bowdens' new life in Britain, even though he was the first of the family to emigrate and settle in London while Hortense and Clara followed a few years later. Immigration, however, seems to have had a very unhealthy and undesirable effect on him:

The original intention had been that he should come to England and earn enough money to enable Clara and Hortense to come over, join him and settle down. However, on arrival, a mysterious illness had debilitated Darcus Bowden [...] which manifested itself in the most incredible

lethargy, creating in Darcus [...] a lifelong affection for the dole, the armchair and British television. (p. 31)

Thus, the unfortunate Darcus is treated by his wife and daughter rather like a piece of furniture than an actual member of their family. The reader can only guess what personal drama lies behind the very ironically described “mysterious illness” of this man, whose deterioration to “an odoriferous, moribund, salivating old man entombed in a bug-infested armchair” (p. 30) cannot have been what he had in mind when he first came to Britain. Whether his sudden lapse into lethargy was brought on by encounters with racism in his search for professional and social integration, or whether there were other reasons for this development remains unclear. The only thing the reader can be sure of is that Darcus Bowden failed at the “great immigrant experiment” (p. 326), obviously having lacked the amount of strength and energy which it takes to overcome the countless hurdles on the way to a new and better life in Britain which every immigrant hopes for. Darcus, unfortunately, never found what he was looking for in the new country and certainly never became a happy man. Instead, he spends the last years of his life representing the negative stereotype of an immigrant, as he constitutes the exact image of what a racist will expect and accuse an immigrant to be: lazy, spending his days in front of the TV and living off the British health and social system.

#### **“Corrupted by England” (p. 144): Samad Iqbal**

For Samad, emigrating from Bangladesh to Great Britain brought about a higher standard of living for himself and his family on the one hand, but on the other hand it certainly had very negative effects on his psychological and spiritual wellbeing. He feels that in England his faithfulness as a Muslim is constantly threatened by the lack of morality he senses all around him. Despite the fact that he, of course, means well for all his family and especially for his sons, all the actions he takes in order to protect them from having to fight the same battle which he himself faces seem to have a catastrophic outcome: he destroys his marriage by hiding his plans to separate the twins from Alsana, who cannot forgive him for secretly “stealing” one of her children. Additionally, the son whom he sent to Bangladesh in order to provide him with a traditional education returns to England an accomplished and well-mannered, very British citizen, while his brother who stayed in England joins a radical Islamist organisation which Samad equally disapproves of. It seems that Samad, even though he tries really hard to do what he thinks is best for his family, fails in spite of all his good intentions because he cannot do

the one thing which would have saved his sons a lot of conflicts and self-doubt, namely set an example of how to come to terms with this hybrid cultural background.

When Magid and Millat are still quite young, Samad tries to fight for their cultural acceptance as Bangladeshi Muslims at school, but in the face of a general lack of enthusiasm for this topic from the other parents he soon gives up. Additionally, he gets sidetracked by the beautiful English music teacher Poppy, who successfully tempts him to abandon all his beliefs and morals and start an extramarital affair with her. Their relationship, however, is doomed from its very beginning. The main reason for this, according to Samad's fellow waiter Shiva, is not the fact that Samad is cheating on his wife, but the fact that Poppy "wanted [Samad] as a servant boy, as a wallah peeling the grapes" (p. 202). Even though Samad does not want to accept this reason, he must admit that having an affair with a white English woman probably was the worst thing he could have done to his already weakened self-esteem and the inner conflict which is seething in him.

Apart from well-meant comments on his likeness to Omar Sharif (for example made by Poppy at their first personal encounter, p. 136), Samad has to endure being called nicknames such as "Sultan" (p. 85) or is even insulted as "the Indian Sultan bastard" (p. 85). What seems to pain Samad most about this is not the insult in itself, but rather the fact that "It's not historically *accurate*[...]. It is not, even *geographically* speaking, accurate." (p. 85, italics in original). As I will mention in greater detail later, he is also called a "Paki", which is equally inaccurate in terms of geography, of course, as Samad and his family are from Bangladesh. However, this insult is so widely in use that even to Samad it does not seem worth the energy to fight it.

As I have already shown in greater detail in the chapter on identities, Samad appears to be the character in *White Teeth* who is most troubled by his situation as an immigrant in England. He seems constantly torn between old and new, past and future, tradition or change, gut instinct and intellectual understanding. Towards the end of the novel, it seems that as he is growing older, the desperation and aggression with which he is fighting against parts of his own personality is slowly wearing off and makes way for a sense of resignation:

Partly because he is tired. Partly because he is old. [...] He knows what it is to seek. He knows the dryness. He has felt the thirst you get in a strange land – horrible, persistent – the thirst that lasts your whole life. (p. 530)



### **“Original trauma” (p. 161): Magid and Millat**

The fact that their father has a very troubled personality and is thus not able to provide them with an example of how to successfully combine their Bangladeshi heritage with the British lifestyle leaves the twins to fight on their own in order to find a way through that dilemma left to them by their father. Even though as twins they are very close to each other, they choose completely opposite approaches to overcoming the “trauma” which they inherited. Magid, who is sent to Bangladesh by his father in order to receive a traditional Muslim education, returns to England “more English than the English” (p. 365), while Millat, who continues to grow up in a North London environment, develops from the charming heart-throb of every girl in his school to a radical Muslim who grows a beard and prays five times a day.

Growing up in London, the twins naturally have to face racist comments as part of their daily routine, but at first they do not seem to be conscious of these or, if they already are aware of racism at their young age, they do not seem to mind much, as the following scene on a London bus illustrates:

‘Our stop!’ cried Magid, shooting to his feet and pulling the bell cord too many times.

‘*If you ask me,*’ said one disgruntled OAP to another, ‘*they should all go back to their own...*’

But this, the oldest sentence in the world, found itself stifled by the ringing of bells and the stamping of feet, until it retreated under the seats with the chewing gum. (p. 163, italics in original)

As a nine-year-old, however, Magid reveals his wish to blend in with the crowd and be like everybody else when he tells his friends that his name is “Mark Smith” (p.151):

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 his father to be a doctor, not a one-handed waiter; and this month Magid had converted all these desires into a wish to join in with the Harvest Festival like Mark Smith would. Like everybody else would. (p. 151, italics in original)

This incident shows how the children lose their natural lack of concern for their cultural identity and become obsessed with the desire to be like everybody else, to be “normal”. Their environment, however, shows them more clearly every day that they are different and stand out from the crowd in a way which can no longer be softened by the fact that

they are very young children. From that point on, they have to negotiate their own place in between the British and the Bangladeshi culture.

Soon after the above mentioned episode takes place, Magid is sent to his relatives in Bangladesh. This obviously seems to help him come to terms with his identity, as he returns to England a very mature and self-assured personality. The fact that he has developed into the total opposite of what his father had hoped for him by sending him back to the home country, can be seen as his personal way of rebellion against his father and the values which he represents.

His brother Millat does not seem to have any problems with his background at school, on account of his beauty and special charisma: "In Glenard Oak Comprehensive, black, Pakistani, Greek, Irish – these were races. But those with sex appeal lapped the other runners. They were a species all of their own" (p. 269).

When Millat gets older, however, he is no longer satisfied with his status as most desirable boy in school, which makes the other students regard him as different and special for reasons beyond his ethnic heritage. Instead, he starts to have a feeling which is very common in young people, especially young men, with an immigrant background: he feels that he does not even get a chance to prove his abilities, let alone a chance to choose a profession because young people like him are not expected to rise in social status anyway.

In the following key scene, which shows Millat on his way to the burning of Salman Rushdie's book "*The Satanic Verses*", these feelings and the prejudices he is exposed to every day are revealed to be the cause for Millat's inherent anger and, ultimately, his motivation for joining the radicalist Islamic movement.

He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; [...] that he should go back to his own country; [...] that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat [...] was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country, until the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands. (p.233/34)

Even though this passage comes across in quite a humorous way, it is a very crucial one to the book in that it describes the very serious problems which Millat and countless other people with an immigrant background experience every day and have to overcome

at some point in their everyday life. Young people from immigrant families, regardless of the fact whether they are first, second or even third generation, feel that they are being criminalised and not even given a chance to work their way up in society. As a consequence, they easily develop a grudge against society and the system that they blame for their hopeless situation and are particularly prone to falling for the enticements of radical groups like, in the case of Millat, the Islamist movement KEVIN.

In contrast to Irie, who manages to move on and faces an encouraging future at the end of the novel, neither Magid nor Millat are able to take this step forward despite their furious struggling. When they finally meet again after eight years of separation, they have become so estranged from each other that they cannot achieve mutual understanding, let alone a reconciliation, which makes it impossible for them to leave their histories behind and move ahead:

Because we often imagine that immigrants are constantly on the move, footloose, able to change course at any moment, able to employ their legendary resourcefulness at every turn. [...] But Magid and Millat couldn't manage it. They left that neutral room as they had entered it: weighed down, burdened, unable to waver from their course or in any way change their separate, dangerous trajectories. They seem to make no progress. The cynical might say they don't even move at all. (p. 465)

This episode shows that neither Magid nor Millat, even though they employ different and even contrary strategies, actually succeed in finding their respective place in the society they live in. Instead of striving to make the best out of their situation in-between two cultures and to select the beneficial aspects from both sides, they let history weigh them down. Their immobility is therefore a product of their compulsion to fight against or to suppress one of the two cultures, without realising that in order to move on, they need to accept both sides of their heritage.

### **Escaping “social leprosy” (p. 29): Clara Jones, née Bowden**

As if the simple fact that she is black had not been reason enough for her to become an outsider in an Irish Catholic School, in addition to that Clara is also forced to spread the news of the Jehovah's Witnesses among her colleagues for her mother, which to her equals social leprosy. Grudgingly accepting this status, she first holds on to the other conspicuous outsider of the school, Ryan Topps, until he becomes an ally of her mother's and can thus no longer serve as a means of escape for Clara. Therefore, she does not need much convincing on Archie's part to agree to marry him, as she sees him as her one and only chance of escaping her existence as an outsider. As the focus of the

plot shifts from Clara to her daughter Irie in the course of the novel, it never becomes entirely clear whether Clara is satisfied with her choice and has really escaped into a better life with Archie's help.

Through Archie and his friend Samad, Clara makes friends with Samad's Bangladeshi wife Alsana and her niece, even though at a first glance the three women do not seem to have many things in common. Clara also starts to work at a local centre for young people with immigrant background, and therefore moves in a multicultural environment also professionally. She seems to feel very much at home in these spaces in between cultures and takes an interest in a broad and cross-cultural range of topics, a fact which is well illustrated by the classes she takes at night school: "British Imperialism 1765 to the Present; Medieval Welsh Literature; Black Feminism" (pp. 342/3).

Even though occasionally she is the victim of racist jokes or remarks, by Archie's colleagues for example, Clara does not seem to suffer from exposure to openly racist comments or actions. The only instance in which she does seem to bother about this kind of remark is in a confrontation with Joyce Chalfen, whom she perceives as a kind of ideal English Mother and thus as a competition for Irie's affection. In addition to her obviously being a rival, Joyce is also the type of person who, even though on a superficial level she seems to be perfectly openminded and tolerant, through her naïve and thoughtless way of treating others quickly reveals ignorance and a mass of deeply rooted prejudices.

The racist remarks which Joyce Chalfen makes thus constitute a source of distress for Clara, and she deplores her inability to respond to those insinuations in a more assured and dignified manner: To Joyce's question of where she thought that Irie got her brains from, she answers "My side. [...] I guess the English in my side. [...] It was probably Captain Charlie Durham. He taught my grandmother all she knew. A good English education. Lord knows, I can't think what else it could be" (pp. 354/5) – only to deeply regret that answer as soon as she is out of Joyce's sight:

Clara bit her lip once more, this time in frustration and anger. Why had she said Captain Charlie Durham? That was a downright lie. [...] Clara was smarter than Captain Charlie Durham. [...] Captain Charlie Durham wasn't smart. He had thought he was, but he wasn't. He had sacrificed a thousand people because he wanted to save one woman he never really knew. Captain Charlie Durham was a no-good djam fool bwoy. (p. 355)

The fact that Clara's first impulse was to answer this question with "my side", but then immediately corrected herself by stressing "the *English* in my side" (p. 354, my italics)

shows how strongly embedded the notion of white people's superiority is in society: even to Clara, who is usually proud of her Jamaican heritage, it seems unacceptable to state openly that her Jamaican ancestors should have been more intelligent than or in any other way superior to the white great-grandfather. In this case she gives way to societal pressure and provides the answer which is obviously expected.

### **“The big brown goddess” (p. 329): Irie Jones**

Irie grows up in a multicultural environment, with her mother being from Jamaica, her two best friends being the Bangladeshi Iqbal twins, and many of her fellow pupils at school having an immigrant family history. Even though, from a very early age, she has shared the same kind of experience with racism that I have already described when dealing with the twins' childhood, she does not (yet?) seem to mind, unlike Magid, for example. With puberty, however, she starts getting very self-conscious and feels ugly and unshapely – a fact which she blames on her Jamaican heritage: “she was landed [...] with Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangoes and guavas; [...] ledges genetically designed with another country in mind, another climate” (p. 265, 266). Millat, with whom she is passionately but equally hopelessly in love, adds to her desperation by showing a preference for English girls. This makes Irie even more “unwilling to settle for genetic fate; waiting instead for her transformation from Jamaican hourglass [...] to *English Rose* – oh, you know her – she's a slender, delicate thing not made for the hot suns” (p. 266, 267). Her wish to come as close to an English beauty as possible even makes her visit an African hairdresser where she tries to have her hair straightened, only with the result that she loses her hair because of the aggressive chemical treatment necessary for such a transformation.

Despite her mother's anxious attempts to persuade Irie that she looks fine, she still feels “all *wrong*” (p. 268) and blames this feeling on her mixed ethnic background: “There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land” (p. 266). The desperation with which Irie is seeking some kind of reassurance and recognition is very well illustrated by her reaction to the reading of some of Shakespeare's sonnets at school<sup>54</sup>: excited by the lines about “the dark lady” (p. 271), she tries to extend the common interpretation to correspond to her own wishes and include the possibility of the lady being black. Upon her teacher's insistence, however, that the blackness Shakespeare describes refers to the fact that the lady “just has a dark

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<sup>54</sup> Smith explicitly mentions “Sonnet 127” (p. 268) and speaks of “the sonnet” in the singular (p. 272), but the lines she subsequently quotes actually constitute a mixture of Shakespeare's sonnets 127, 130, 131 and 132.

complexion” (p. 272) but cannot have been African Caribbean for historical reasons, Irie has to give up and face her own disappointment as well as mockery on the part of her fellow students. Once more, her search for something to connect her personal background to the history of the country she lives in, and thus to provide her with a feeling of belonging and being rooted, ends in disappointment: “And the reflection that Irie had glimpsed slunk back into the familiar darkness.” (p. 272). Only after her stay with her grandmother Hortense, during which she finally comes into more intensive contact with the Jamaican part of her family history, does she seem to come to terms with her Jamaican roots and to be able to accept them as an equally important part of her personality.

At the end of the novel, the reader gets a glimpse of Irie’s future as the mother of a daughter whose biological father is one of the Iqbal twins but who grows up with Joshua Chalfen as her stepfather. Thus, her development which is already hinted at in various situations towards the end of the book, namely that towards “the figure of racial and cultural hybridity who best reflects the everyday nature of hybridity in the present” (Moss, p. 13), seems to have been completed.

### **Archibald Jones**

As in all other aspects of his life, Archie seems to have a very naïve approach to race. Even though he does share the most common prejudices of his fellow countrymen, he can be described as the English protagonist who shows the least traces of racism in all he says and does. What is more, he does not even notice when other people make racist comments in some situations because he simply does not seem to expect anybody to be racist. For example, he simply does not understand what his boss is talking about when he is quite obviously cautiously trying to tell Archie that he cannot come to the company dinner because of Clara:

‘I’m trusting you, Arch, to take what I’ve got to say in the right way.’

‘Mr Hero?’

Kelvin shrugged. ‘I could have lied to you, Archie, I could have told you that we’d made a mistake with the bookings, and there just wasn’t room for you; [...] – but [...] you’d have put two and two together-’

‘And made four.’

‘And made four, exactly, Archie. [...] Do you understand what I’m saying to you, Archie?’ said Mr Hero.

‘No, Mr Hero,’ said Archie.

(p. 71)

As a result of this conversation, in the end Mr Hero has to lie to the completely unsuspecting Archie and tells him that there were not enough places for everybody and that the decision not to invite him was made by drawing lots. Mr Hero's reason for taking this trouble is the fact that he obviously wants to spare his employees the unpleasant surprise which they had to endure at the company dinner the year before:

This strange way [Archie] had about him, always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans like he didn't even notice and now he'd gone and married one and hadn't even thought it worth mentioning what colour she was until the office dinner when she turned up black as anything. (p. 69)

Even the naïve and kind-hearted Archie, however, makes the very wide-spread distinction between immigrants in general and those he knows personally in particular: when Clara asks him whether she should cook curry when the Iqbals come to visit, he answers irritably that to him, "they're not *those* kind of Indians" (p. 54, italics in original), just as "in Archie's mind, Clara was not *that* kind of black" (p. 54, italics in original). Smith, of course, cannot resist adding the ironic point that the Iqbals "were, in fact, not Indian at all but Bangladeshi" (p. 54) and thus emphasises how little Archie obviously reflects on this topic even though his wife is Jamaican and his best friend Bangladeshi.

Therefore, Archie's not being racist cannot be seen as an entirely positive feature or as his personal achievement because in his case, this tolerance is not a product of reflection or a conscious decision on his part, but is largely due to mere indifference, combined with an instinctive, deep, almost childlike faith in humanity. Just like in most situations in his life, in this case, too, he remains a very passive character who never intends to hurt anybody but also never actively defends anyone. The two occasions on which he saves the scientist Dr Perret's life could be seen as exceptions of this rule, but closer investigation shows that in both instances Archie rather is a plaything of chance and simply reacts according to his reflexes.

### **Hybrid businesses: Indian restaurant (Ardashir), Irish-Iraqi pub (Abdul Mickey)**

Both Ardashir, the owner of the Indian restaurant in which Samad works, and Abdul Mickey, the Iraqi owner of a formerly traditional Irish pub, are good examples of successful businesses which make use of their multicultural and exotic atmosphere. As Samad points out, Ardashir's "Indian" restaurant is by no means a restaurant that could

be found in this way in India, but is designed according to what the English are convinced an Indian restaurant should look like:

[Ardashir] had taken the simple idea of an Indian restaurant (small room, pink tablecloth, loud music, atrocious wallpaper, meals that do not exist in India, sauce carousel) and just made it bigger. (p.59)

Ardashir's waiters have to endure patronising racist comments from guests all the time, even if most of the staff have not even been to India: whenever customers ask about "the geography of the food – its Eastern origin, its history – all of [this] would be happily fabricated by the younger waiters (whose furthest expedition East was the one they made daily, back home to Whitechapel, Smithfield's, the Isle of Dogs) or rendered faithfully and proudly by the elders in black biro on the back of a pink napkin" (p. 203). Ardashir himself not only exploits his white customers, but also his underpaid staff. When confronted about a long overdue payrise, he justifies his miserliness by pointing out that "that is business in this country" (p. 60). Thus, he clearly represents the type of businessman who can use his immigrant background entirely to his advantage, using his ethnic background to impress his English clientele, and using the English code of business morals in order to keep his waiters on a low income level.

Abdul Mickey, as his curious name already clearly indicates, runs a very hybrid business which also benefits a lot from its mixed cultural background. The history of the Irish-Iraqi pub which he took over from his father is closely connected to the history of Abdul Mickey's family, which could be seen as a representative for many other, similar immigrant family histories:

**1952** Ali (Mickey's father), and his three brothers arrive at Dover with thirty old pounds and their father's gold pocket-watch. [...]

**1968** After working for three years as delivery boys in a Yugoslavian dry-cleaning outfit, Ali and his brothers have a small lump sum with which they set up a cab service called Ali's Cab Service.

**1971** [...] He [Ali] buys the disused Irish pool house [...] on the Finchley Road and sets about renovating it.

**1972** In the Finchley Road only Irish establishments do any real business. So despite his Middle Eastern background and the fact that he is opening a café and not a pool house, Ali decides to keep the original Irish name. He paints all the fittings orange and green, hangs pictures of racehorses and registers his business name as 'Andrew O'Connell Yusuf'. Out of respect, his brothers encourage him to hang fragments of the Qur'an on the wall, so that the hybrid business will be 'kindly looked upon'. (pp. 245, 246)



This list of events in Ali's career contains several of the most common stereotypical features of careers of immigrants: he always sticks together with his family (his brothers, in this case), they work together with other immigrants (the Yugoslavian dry-cleaner), they start their own freelance career by setting up a cab service, and Ali's sense of business is characterised by his creativity and his unconventional ideas (seemingly randomly mixing elements of Irish and Iraqi culture in order to increase their range of customers). The pub's clientele is indeed very mixed, at least in an ethnic sense: not only do Archie and Samad frequent the place on a regular basis, but other regulars include, for example, the two ancient Jamaicans Denzel and Clarence. In fact, the one feature which all of Mickey's customers have in common is neither their ethnicity nor their status as immigrants, but rather their social status. As regards class, therefore, the crowd that meets in Abdul-Mickey's Iraqi-Irish pub every night is a very homogeneous one and the different cultural backgrounds, religions and traditions can peacefully coexist in this space which is so fiercely hybrid that it becomes almost neutral again.

### **Business as a target for racist violence: Mo Hussein the butcher**

Mo, the Bangladeshi halal butcher, joins the radical Islamist organisation KEVIN because he has been the victim of numerous attacks motivated by racist violence ever since he opened his shop. Thus, he comes to a point where he cannot take the assaults, which have become almost routine, any longer and not only wants to defend himself and his family, but also to strike back and experience a little bit of justice at last:

For eighteen years Mo had owned the most famous halal butchers in North London, [...] and in this period [...] he had been a victim of serious physical attacks and robbery, without fail, three times a year. [...] There was nobody who could help. The very first time, when he received a hammer blow to his ribs in January 1970, he naively reported it to the local constabulary and was rewarded by a late-night visit from five policemen who gave him a thorough kicking. [...] The culprits ranged from secondary-school children [...], specific neo-Nazis, [...] white-skirted secretaries in deadly heels. These various people had various objections to him: he was a Paki (try telling a huge drunk Office Superworld check-out boy that you're Bangladeshi); [...] But they all had one thing in common, these people. They were all white. And this simple fact had done more to politicize Mo over the years than all the party broadcasts, rallies and petitions the world could offer. (pp. 472/3)

Mo (whose nickname is short for "Mohammed Hussein Ishmael") the butcher here finds himself in an insolvable and absurd situation, as all these people who assault him are on

the other hand also his customers. He cannot stop serving white people because this would ruin his business, but neither can he defend himself, nor can anybody help him: his relatives are too scared, and the police obviously do not care and never show up when called. As a consequence and after years of struggling along all by himself, Mo finds a solution to his problem in the same radical Islamist group to which also Millat belongs. His, therefore, is a typical example of the vicious circle which racism, and as its extreme consequence violence, can create.

#### **II.3.4.2. Racism in everyday life**

Mo the butcher is one of many protagonists in the novel who not only have to face physical as well as verbal racist attacks but also experience that the authorities themselves turn out to be racist when asked for any kind of assistance. Alsana has to make the same experience when she is desperately trying to get her son Magid back from Bangladesh: “The relevant authorities said things like, ‘To be honest, love, we’re more worried about them coming *in*’” (p. 212, italics in original).

To most of the protagonists with a Bangladeshi background it also happens on numerous occasions that they are being called “Paki” as an insult. This, of course, shows how little the people who use this insult are informed and how little they even care about where the person they are shouting at really comes from – all they can obviously see is dark skin and an Indian looking complexion, which is reason enough to assume they are “Pakis”. As most of the insulted have had to realise, it is also completely senseless to try and explain, as I have shown above with Samad’s example.

It is very interesting to note, however, that racism does not only occur in interactions between white and black people, but also among the various different groups of immigrants themselves. Thus, for example, Alsana Iqbal at first voices objections against her husband’s best friend, Archibald, and his Jamaican wife Clara: “Some Englishman ... married to a black! [...] These are the people my child will grow up around? Their children – half blacky-white?” (p.61). A little later in the same chapter, it is revealed that Alsana not only has objections against black people but is generally prejudiced against a number of minorities:

Black people are often friendly, thought Alsana, smiling at Clara [...]. From every minority she disliked, Alsana liked to single out one specimen for spiritual forgiveness. From Whitechapel, there had been many such redeemed characters. Mr Van, the Chinese chiropodist, Mr Segal, a Jewish carpenter, Rosie, a Dominican woman. (p. 65)

Similarly, also characters like the Jamaican immigrant Hortense Bowden voice their hostility towards white British people, as can be illustrated by her reaction to her daughter Clara's marriage to Archibald Jones:

"Me always like Archibald. [...] Him was never my objection as such. [...] But it more de principle of de ting, you know? Black and white never come to no good. [...] When you mix it up, nuttin' good can come. It wasn't intended." (p. 385)

Smith, in her humorous way of portraying her protagonists, puts this comment into perspective, however, by adding the ironic detail that Hortense is "half white herself" (p. 327) as her father was the above mentioned Captain Charlie Durham and thus an Englishman who corresponded to the common stereotypes regarding the English.

The typically white fear of everything that is different and exotic, which manifests itself (among others) in the conviction that dark-skinned men are very likely to be dangerous, if not criminal, seems to have rubbed off on Samad as well: when travelling on a bus through the London district of Harlesden, which is known for the fact that it is largely inhabited by immigrants, he cannot help being scared, because "[you] watch with dread (if you are fearful like Samad, if all you have learnt from the city is to cross the road at the sight of dark-skinned men) as white fades to yellow fades to brown" (p. 164).

Samad shows several times that being Bangladeshi does not make him immune to prejudice against others, but Zadie Smith takes care that these situations are always resolved in a humorous way, as the following example, a conversation between Samad and Archie, shows:

'Last week, Zinat's son was found smoking marijuana. Like a Jamaican!' Archie raised his eyebrows. 'Oh, I meant no offence, Archibald.' 'None taken, mate. But you shouldn't judge before you've tried it. Being married to a Jamaican has done wonders for my arthritis.' (p. 190)

Indirectly, here, Archibald confirms Samad's prejudice that basically all Jamaicans smoke marijuana, by hinting at the fact that Clara, too, has introduced him to the habit.

The reaction of Poppy, the red-haired and freckled teacher of Samad's children, when being confronted with racism against white people can be seen as representative for the rather naïve kind of attitude towards race which seems to be prevalent among the educated white middle and upper classes:

Breathless, [Samad] whispered, 'And [Mad Mary] doesn't like white people.' Poppy's eyes widened. 'Really?', she said, as if such an idea had never occurred to her. (p. 176)

It obviously seems to be a common notion among the white British population that racism, and everything connected to it, is a phenomenon which is confined to white people's attitude towards black people. Therefore, it comes as a shock to people like Poppy to notice that not every immigrant sees white people as their role models and ideals, whose way of life, of speaking etc. they want to emulate. This is of course especially difficult to comprehend since everyday experience, as again an episode involving Poppy shows, often seems to confirm this point on a superficial level. The following scene takes place during one of Poppy's music classes, in which she tries to teach the children respect for "*somebody else's culture*" (p. 155, italics in original):

'Sometimes we find other people's music strange because their culture is different from *ours*,' said Miss Burt-Jones solemnly. 'But that doesn't mean it isn't equally good, now does it? [...] And we can learn about each other through each other's culture, can't we? [...] For example, what music do you like, Millat?' Millat thought for a moment [...] 'Bruce Springsteen, Miss!' (p. 155/156, italics in original)

In this scene, it becomes clear that Poppy was obviously counting on Millat naming some (in the widest sense) Indian kind of music, or at least something which sounds exotic and "different". Unexpectedly, however, Millat's enthusiastic but completely unexotic answer cannot be used to prove her point.

Smith shows in numerous scenes that racism is even expressed in interactions between immigrants and honestly well-meaning English people: Joyce Chalfen, for example, naïvely but frequently stumbles into situations in which she involuntarily makes offending comments about "brown strangers" (p. 326). When first meeting Millat and Irie, for example, she creates a misunderstanding by asking them where they come from:

'Well,' said Joyce [...] '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, putting on what he called a *bud-bud-ding-ding accent*.  
'You are meaning where from am I *originally*.'  
Joyce looked confused. 'Yes, *originally*.'  
'Whitechapel,' said Millat, pulling out a fag. 'Via the Royal London Hospital and the 207 bus.' (p. 319, italics in original)

Instead of showing offence, however, Irie and Millat do not seem to mind these comments much. Both teenagers have developed their own strategies as to how to cope with this latent racist attitude: Irie focuses on the free flux of communication and the intellectual atmosphere in the Chalfen household, which fascinates her and from which she benefits, while at the same time managing to remain at a critical distance once her initial enthusiasm for everything “Chalfenist” has worn off. Millat, on the other hand, quite simply uses the Chalfens to get rid of his aggressions by verbally abusing and provoking the whole family. Once he notices that they mask their helplessness in the face of his excesses with well-meaning and tolerance, he also starts exploiting their financial generosity and borrows, later even simply helps himself to, money without ever returning it.

Especially the character of the very English middle-class housewife Joyce Chalfen provides many examples for how racism, or racist patronising, often occurs in the disguise of “well-meaning”, “helpfulness” or even “tolerance”. Even though Joyce herself is convinced that she is only trying to help Irie and Millat, she regularly makes matters worse by making unreflected and ultimately racist remarks. Millat again simply ignores these comments, but Irie does get uncomfortable being told things like “you read a lot about how Afro-Caribbeans seem to find it hard to establish long-term relationships. That’s terribly sad, isn’t it?” (p. 322). Joyce, however, does not seem to realise that she is creating an awkward situation for Irie, even though she likes to present herself as a sensitive and understanding person.

An ironic detail has to be noted: not only English protagonists such as Marcus and Joyce, but also immigrant characters like Alsana are revealed to be prejudiced against homosexuals. Alsana only refers to her niece Neena, who openly lives in a lesbian relationship, as “Niece-of-Shame” (p. 283) and calls her girlfriend “Neena’s ‘nasty friend’” (p. 283). Whereas Alsana, however, voices her disapproval of this way of life very openly, Marcus and Joyce show their awkwardness and helplessness vis-à-vis the lesbian couple by making insulting and unreflected remarks like “Do you use each other’s breasts as pillows?” (p. 350). This demasks the Chalfens, who claim to be so well-educated, intelligent and sophisticated, as actually being just as narrow-minded as so many other, “ordinary” people are.

### **Genetic engineering: “a new kind of racial misperception” (Head, p. 112)**

The scientist Marcus Chalfen does not only display the same condescending attitudes as his wife, by very openly claiming to believe in his own and his family’s perfection, but also reveals a certain underlying racism in his interaction with Millat and especially Irie, whom he calls “the big brown goddess” (p. 329), for example. In addition to that, he is linked to a different, very explicit manifestation of racism, namely genetic engineering and biological selection. As it turns out that his mentor is the Nazi scientist whom Archie was supposed to have shot during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, Marcus Chalfen is also very directly linked to Nazi eugenics and ethnic cleansing. Thus, he becomes the figure who impersonates “the novel’s principal themes: [...] the moral problems which complicate [...] the attempted control [...] of ethnicity” (Head, p. 112). The fact that, in the end, he is “defeated” in the sense that his FutureMouse is set free, also paints a hopeful picture of a future in which ethnic cleansing belongs to the past.

### **II.3.4.3. The picture of multiculturalism in *White Teeth***

Critics of her witty style have argued that Smith only depicts the happy, hip, and colourful side of multicultural life and therefore renders an unnatural picture of life in modern London. In fact, however, Smith makes it clear throughout the novel that there always is an underlying current of awareness of the fears, problems, traumata etc. which immigrant life comprises (cf. Meinig, p. 243).

The most important focus, towards which the book shifts in the final chapters, lies on the situation of the immigrants of the second generation, i.e. Magid, Millat and Irie. While Irie, as shown above, proves to be strong enough to reconcile the different sides and roots of her personality with each other, the example of the twin brothers shows how painful and prolonged this process of negotiating a place for themselves can be. When the formerly so similar twins meet again after years of separation, they suddenly seem miles apart from each other in their respective developments and world views. What they still do have in common, however, is their inability to move ahead: both seem to be too blocked by history to be able to orientate themselves in society. For the moment, they seem to be stuck in the above mentioned Zeno’s paradox – they cannot escape history even though they are moving towards the future and its melting pot.

Meinig states that in this example, Smith “exploits the fact that Zeno’s logical line of argument runs against everyday experience” (Meinig, p. 241). In contradiction to Zeno’s argument that reality is “a seamless, flowing whole. A single, indivisible *One*” (p. 466, italics in original), Smith claims that it is the “oneness of the greenandpleasantlibertarianlandofthefree” (p. 465) which is illusory, as it is certain that “multiplicity is no illusion” (p. 466). This statement again points to the fact which has been mentioned in the chapter on identities, namely that the progression towards multiplicity and hybridity is unstoppable and will, sooner or later, reach a point where it is regarded as normality.

While the normality of multiplicity is obviously something desirable in Smith’s eyes, she does not hide from her readers that multiculturalism always triggers certain expressions of racism. Just as hybridity simply happens in her novel, however, she also presents this racism as a mere element of everyday life:

*White Teeth* does not foreground the culture of racism, nor does it erase it. This, it seems, is precisely what a post-post-colonial novel might do. This novel draws the everyday – in a comic portrait of a hybrid community and in a portrait of quotidian racism – in order to show both as the legacy of the history of multi-Britain. (Moss, p. 15)

Concluding the topic of multiculturalism, it can thus be stated that it is simply everyday life in the multi-ethnic, postcolonial metropolis London as Smith herself experiences it which she depicts in her novel. The different facets and issues which are presented by the numerous characters of *White Teeth* comprise pain, fear, disorientation, and struggles as well as comic scenes and moments of recognition.

### III. Conclusion

After I have analysed the most important aspects and topics of *White Teeth* in detail, the question remains whether it is possible, and whether, in fact, it is even necessary to define the novel's place in the literary canon or in postcolonial theory. As this paper attempted to show exhaustively, the main concern of *White Teeth* lies in the situation of immigrants of different generations in London at the beginning of the new millennium. Especially Zadie Smith's first novel is brimming with issues exactly matching the topics which literary critics and scholars generally qualify as postcolonial concerns.

In the first part of this paper, however, it has been stated that Smith fights against her novel, or herself as an author, being classified exclusively as representing a "multicultural" society. What Smith fights against is therefore the fact that she is being tied down to depicting multiethnic Britain, whereas she insists that what she writes about is merely urban British reality, the hybridity and multiplicity of which is part of everyday life and should not be treated as anything other than ordinary.

In *White Teeth*, she very openly ridicules those of her readers who would like to think of multicultural life as exciting, happy, colourful and carefree. She uncovers this as wishful thinking of people who are out of touch with this kind of environment and therefore see multiplicity as an exotic or even romantic feature, which is not in accordance with reality: Smith claims that it is

young professional women aged eighteen to thirty-two who would like a snapshot seven years hence of Irie, Joshua and Hortense sitting by a Caribbean sea [...], while Irie's fatherless little girl writes affectionate postcards to *Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid*. (p. 541, italics in original)

Clearly, *White Teeth* is a novel which fulfills, or at least attempts to fulfill, the "need for an alternative approach to ethnic diversity, an approach that will avoid glib multiculturalism on the one hand, and flat assimilation on the other" (Head, p. 108). It is also a novel which is capable of showing the difficulties of life in a multiethnic environment without slipping into melodrama or becoming kitschy.

Smith's own development from a Cambridge undergraduate who liked writing short stories to an established author who is included in anthologies of British Literature, is remarkable and certainly also due to the fact that she explicitly distanced herself from



critics who tried to force her into the narrow frame of a “multicultural” writer. Her personal background shows quite a few striking similarities to that of the character Irie in *White Teeth*: the year and place of birth, the North London environment she grew up in, as well as her mixed ethnic parentage all correspond to those of her fictional heroine. It can be assumed that Irie’s active search for her roots and her interest in family history, but also her orientation towards a future in which neither of the two will block her development, is based on Smith’s own experiences as a young adult. In this context, the following quotation from *White Teeth* can be seen as a message to all literary critics who only see in her the single dimension of a postcolonial writer and keep judging her writing with regard to her background and heritage:

In a vision, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won’t matter any more because they can’t because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too torturous and they’re just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it. (p. 527)

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## Zusammenfassung

Zadie Smith wird seit dem Erscheinen ihres ersten Romans *White Teeth* (Titel der deutschen Übersetzung: *Zähne zeigen*) im Jahr 2001 als eine der bemerkenswertesten jungen Autorinnen Großbritanniens bezeichnet. Sie hat mittlerweile mehrere Kurzgeschichten und drei Romane verfasst, die allesamt in zahlreiche Sprachen übersetzt wurden und einen festen Platz in der britischen Literaturlandschaft einnehmen.

In dieser Diplomarbeit wird zunächst Smiths persönlicher Hintergrund sowie ihr literarischer Werdegang beschrieben. Da sie selbst in dem multikulturellen Umfeld aufwuchs und lebt, welches auch in ihren Romanen eine zentrale Rolle spielt, ist ihr familiärer Hintergrund auch für ihre schriftstellerische Entwicklung von Bedeutung.

Weiters wird die Reaktion der britischen Medien auf Smiths Person und ihre Romane behandelt sowie die Tatsache, dass sie nicht nur von den Medien, sondern auch von Literaturkritikern häufig in Zusammenhang mit postkolonialer Literatur gebracht wird. In diesem literarischen Bereich kann ihr Werk mit dem zahlreicher anderer etablierter Autoren verglichen werden. Daher werden in dieser Arbeit die wichtigsten dieser Autoren kurz vorgestellt und Parallelen zu Smith gezogen.

Die Analyse von Smiths erstem Roman, *White Teeth*, umfasst sowohl formelle als auch inhaltliche Aspekte des Werkes. In formeller Hinsicht wird besonderes Augenmerk auf ihren Stil und die authentische Wiedergabe der gesprochenen Sprache gelegt. Auch die Symbolik wird thematisiert: Schon der Titel verweist auf die zentrale Rolle, die das Motiv der „Zähne“ im gesamten Roman einnimmt – sie stehen für die persönliche Geschichte und die Familiengeschichte der Charaktere sowie für historische Ereignisse und deren Auswirkungen. In weiterer Folge symbolisieren Zähne in *White Teeth* auch mit der Zeit angehäuften Lügen und Geheimnisse in Bezug auf die eigene Geschichte verschiedener Charaktere, die sich in vielen Fällen negativ auf deren Zukunft auswirken.

Wie bereits angesprochen, gehört Geschichte zu den zentralen Themen des Romans, die genauer analysiert werden. In Bezug auf die historische Dimension wird besonders die Tatsache hervorgehoben, dass sich sowohl historische Ereignisse als auch die persönliche Geschichte oft nach bestimmten Mustern wiederholen. Viele der Hauptpersonen des Romans leiden darunter und kämpfen gegen diese Wiederholungsmuster an, die meisten finden jedoch keinen Weg aus dem Kreislauf,

in dem sie sich gefangen sehen. Ein zweites bestimmendes Thema im Roman ist Religion. Einige der Charaktere schließen sich religiösen Organisationen wie zum Beispiel den Zeugen Jehovas oder radikalen islamistischen Gruppen an, andere wiederum verzweifeln an den strengen Regeln ihrer Religion oder aber halten im Gegensatz zu den gläubigen Familienmitgliedern an ihrem Atheismus fest. Inwieweit der persönliche Zugang zu Religion die eigene Identität prägt, wird im nächsten Kapitel erläutert, das sich mit Identitäten, deren Bildung und den zugrunde liegenden Konzepten beschäftigt. Der Fokus liegt hier auf der Frage, was eine postkoloniale Identität ausmacht beziehungsweise ob eine solche überhaupt von anderen Identitätsmustern abgrenzbar ist.

Das letzte Kapitel behandelt das Thema Multikulturalität, das nicht zuletzt deshalb von großer Bedeutung ist, da sich alle Charaktere in einem multikulturellen Umfeld bewegen. Daraus resultiert eine gegenseitige Beeinflussung, die auch in einer Wechselwirkung zu den drei anderen besprochenen Bereichen Geschichte, Religion und Identität steht. In diesem Zusammenhang wird auch der Rassismus thematisiert, mit dem sich vor allem die Charaktere mit Migrationshintergrund im täglichen Leben konfrontiert sehen. Hier ist von Interesse, wie die jeweiligen Figuren mit Rassismus umgehen, ob und welche Strategien sie zum Umgang mit Vorurteilen entwickeln und wie ihr Selbstbild durch Konfrontationen dieser Art beeinflusst wird.

Abschließend bleibt noch zu bemerken, dass Smith in *White Teeth* ein sehr lebendiges Bild der modernen und multikulturellen Metropole London zeichnet. Wie sie selbst häufig in Interviews betont, soll dieses Bild trotz idealisierter und ironisierter Passagen nicht als verklärte Ausnahme gesehen werden, sondern stellt die Londoner Realität so dar, wie Smith selbst sie erlebt.

## **LEBENS LAUF**

### **Persönliche Daten:**

Name: Christine Powischer  
Geburtsdatum/ -ort: 31. 03. 1981 in Wien  
Staatsbürgerschaft: Österreich  
Familienstand: ledig  
Email: christine.powischer@gmx.at

### **Schulbildung und universitäre Ausbildung:**

seit Oktober 2007: Teilnahme am Ausbildungslehrgang „Alphabetisierung und Deutsch mit MigrantInnen“ der VHS Ottakring (Abschluss: Juni 2008)

seit Oktober 2005: Diplomandin am Institut für Anglistik  
Titel der Diplomarbeit: “Zadie Smith’s novels in the context of British Postcolonial Literature”;  
Prüfungstermin/Diplomprüfung: September 2008

Oktober 2001 – Februar 2002: Auslandssemester (ERASMUS) an der Universidad Complutense in Madrid, Spanien

seit September 1999: Universität Wien: Studium der Anglistik (Lehramtsstudium/Diplomstudium, Hauptfach) und Romanistik (Spanisch), weitere Wahlfächer: Deutsch als Fremdsprache, Ostseeraumstudien (Schwerpunkt Polnisch)

1991 – 1999: AHS (neusprachliches Gymnasium) in Wien 23

1987 – 1991: Volksschule in Wien 12

### **Bisherige berufliche Tätigkeiten:**

Februar bis Juni 2008 Course Consultant (Sekretariatstätigkeit, Beratung und Betreuung der KursteilnehmerInnen) und Sprachunterricht (Abendkurs Deutsch, Niveau C1/2) am Alpha Sprachinstitut Austria

seit November 2006: Sprachunterricht (Deutsch) bei Berlitz Österreich (freie Mitarbeiterin)

- Einzeltraining (alle Stufen)
- Gruppen von bis zu 6 TeilnehmerInnen (alle Stufen)

September 2003 – Juni 2004 Sprachunterricht (Deutsch) am Österreich Institut Warschau, Polen:

- und November 2005:
- Gruppen von bis zu 15 Erwachsenen;  
Semesterkurse  
sowie Wochenend-Intensivkurse
  - Teilnahme an internen und externen  
Fortbildungsseminaren
- September 2003 – Konversationsstunden an einem  
Mai 2004: Gymnasium in Warschau, Polen (Robert-Schuman-  
Gymnasium, 8. Schulstufe)
- Mai 2004: im Rahmen einer Lehrveranstaltung der Germanistik  
(DaF) der Universität Wien: Organisation einer  
Projektwoche am Robert-Schuman-  
Gymnasium/Warschau zum Thema „Jugendkultur in  
Österreich“

### **Ferialpraktika und ehrenamtliche Tätigkeiten:**

- August 2001: Betreuung von Jugendlichen im Sommercamp des  
archäologischen Parks Petronell-Carnuntum („Leben bei  
den Römern“)
- Februar 2001: Sekretariats- und Labortätigkeiten am Institut für  
Angewandte Botanik an der Technischen Universität  
Wien
- Februar 2000: Sekretariatstätigkeiten in der Abteilung für  
Auslandsregistrierung bei Gerot Pharmazeutika
- Seit 1997:
- private Nachhilfestunden in Deutsch und Englisch
  - ehrenamtliche Mitarbeit in der Friedensorganisation  
*Servas International* (Gastgeberin, Mithilfe bei der  
Organisation von internationalen Konferenzen und  
Sommercamps, Übersetzungen, etc.)

### **Sprachkenntnisse:**

Deutsch (Muttersprache)  
Englisch (fließend in Wort und Schrift)  
Spanisch (sehr gut in Wort und Schrift)  
Polnisch (sehr gut in Wort und Schrift)  
Italienisch (Grundkenntnisse)

### **Sonstige Kenntnisse:**

EDV-Kenntnisse: MS Office  
Führerschein

### **Interessen:**

Sprachen, Reisen, Literatur, Sport (Tanzen, Badminton, Yoga), Musik