

Roots and Routes: Exploring Identity and Multiculturalism in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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ABSTRACT

In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith has attempted to present multicultural London mainly through the detailed portrayal of three families – the Joneses, the Iqbals and the Chalfens which brings forth different ethnicities, like the white English, Asian, Caribbean and Jewish. The first generation of these immigrant families spends their time brooding over their past and their culture, but the problem arises with the second generation of these immigrant families. When they look back to their distorted past, it becomes more difficult for them to step forward without solving the dilemmas of their minds and without asserting their individual identity. As Wan-long Hong has said, a stable multicultural society must have a core culture surrounded by various satellite cultures, the aim of this paper is to discuss what happens when both the majority and the minority of a core culture thrive from a sense of instability and take on their journey towards identity and how these quests tie the characters from different ethnic backgrounds in a common bond. Though multiculturalism has been much criticised in recent times for promoting differences and for supporting hegemonic practices, Zadie Smith has demonstrated a totally different concept of multiculturalism where the differences turn out to be the basis of a common chord among these characters. This paper also undertakes to advance the idea of whether root always confers an identity which is related to it and also how Zadie Smith's characters have, on the one hand, complemented and, on the other hand, contradicted Gayatri Spivak's disapproval of root.

Territory stands as the basis of national identity. This element of national identity can be traced back to the beginning of history and has been represented through several literary works. No one can deny the intimate connection between self and soil, individual and nation. The workings of national identity become more evident when one is far from one's soil, miles away from one's nation, surrounded by half-known people of other nationalities in an unknown country. Zadie Smith has represented this in her work *White Teeth* (2000) through the families of the Iqbals, Jones and the Chalfens. The England in this text is diverse not only culturally but ethnically as well. The text has been described as a landmark novel for multicultural Britain and 'a generic mix reflecting the transcultural state of present-day Britain.' It revolves mainly around the families of Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi Muslim, and Archie Jones, an Englishman, who met in 1945 as the soldiers of a tank crew in the final days of World War II and became lifelong friends. This continues upon their return to England after the war and during the period in which they marry and have children. Through this novel, Zadie Smith has tried to portray an individual's interaction with the past and how colonialism has strongly impacted identity construction. Smith mainly portrays how the immigrants, their descendants, and Englishmen feel the implications of England's colonial past in constructing

identity. About a peaceful multicultural society. Wan-long Hong has said:

"A stable multicultural society must have a core culture surrounded by various satellite cultures. The various ethnic groups living in a same region, irrespective of how divergent their traditional cultures are, must share a fundamental consensus on certain issues and some common characteristics. The consensus and characteristics gradually evolve into a way of life and conduct which make up the core culture of the society. All the traditional cultures of the groups are the satellite cultures. Everyone retains his or her traditional culture. As a result, people feel content, and the society may enjoy peace." (Hong)

While Gayatri Spivak has disapproved of the idea of root altogether by saying:

If there's one thing I totally distrust, in fact, more than distrust despise and have contempt for... it is people looking for roots' (Friedman 152).

The object of this paper are to discuss Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* in light of these two opinions about multiculturalism and root and to explore how the characters of this text are tied with a common bond despite their different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

In Britain's multi-ethnic and multicultural context, the first and second generations of immigrants face individual and social conflicts. Some people like Samad attempt to retain their roots among the first generation of immigrants, But by his immigrant, diasporic identity, Samad is colonised, devalued and emasculated. He Is constantly disrespected by his wife, his twin sons, and Irie. Samad tries to exercise his power over others like Archie, Dr. Sick or Poppy Burt-Jones. He is emasculated not by his wife and his sons but by the racialised discourse in an ethnocentric culture which often treats him as a subaltern. His grandfather is denied his due respect as the English Dictionary(OED) defines Samad's great-grandfather, the rebel Pandey, as

'the surname of the first mutineer amongst the high-caste sepoys in the Bengal army/any sepoy who revolted in the Indian Mutiny of 1857/ any mutineer or traitor/ any fool or coward in a military situation.' (P.251)

Attempting to defend his grandfather, Mangal Pandey, Samad finds only one history book written by an Indian; otherwise, Mangal Pandey is described as a coward in every book. Samad's unrealistic desire to rewrite Pandey's legacy as an indubitably heroic one is ironically mirrored in a stoned Millat's subsequent aim of revisiting his father's undistinguished legacy, to scratch once the rusted, uneven 'Iqbal' his injured father's traces of blood, to magnify it, to

"finish it. Revenge it. To turn that history around. To blow it up in more ways than one" (418-419)

In his diasporic survival struggle, Samad tries to sustain his culture by planting seeds among his twin sons, Magid and Millat. However, the cultural flexibility of his sons, who gradually transgress into British culture, makes him furious, and he sends his elder son Magid to Bangladesh so that he can learn the way of life that is desirable to Bangladeshi Muslims. For both Archie and Samad, their shared experiences of World War II become the only heroic phase of their lives in which they can take refuge. Samad repeats the same story of Mangal Pandey to Archie and others at O'Connell's, the Irish pool

house run by a Muslim cook. This repetition has become their daily routine. As the author has said:

Because immigrants have always been particularly prone to repetition- it's something To do with the 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; may be original trauma would be better. A trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all and this is the tragedy of the Iqbals... (P 162)

Samad's feelings of rootlessness and alienation unite him with Mad Mary. He finds a connection between him and Mad Mary as both are from some place which is 'far away'.

Archibald is British but surrounded by Indians and Jamaicans. Is he free from the biases that Europeans of that time generally had against people of other cultures? He has Samad Iqbal as his best friend and Clara, the Jamaican, as his wife, but Archibald is very much aware of those features that stereotype the Indians and the blacks. Nonetheless, because they are different, Archie appreciates Samad Iqbal and Alsana, the Bangladeshi couple, and Clara, Archie's Jamaican wife. Stuart Hall has talked about two different models of cultural identity. The first model explains cultural identity as one culture shared by people having the same connection to a single root. Despite recognising the existence of a shared experience, the other model of cultural identity argues that, due to the intervention of history, some aspects differ radically from one another and constitute 'ruptures and discontinuities' within a shared experience. This second model resembles Wan-long Hong's "Satellite cultures".

The first-generation men in the novel (Samad Iqbal, Archie Jones and Marcus Chalfen) have internalised the values and social codes set out for them by their ancestors, and Samad, as well as Marcus, try to teach those to their sons (Magid and Millat Iqbal and Joshua Chalfens). The irony of Samad Iqbal's situation is that he tries to reconcile his Bengali Muslim and English identity. He continuously renegotiates his place in British society but wants his twin sons, Magid and Millat, to cling to strict Muslim identities. The irony of Samad's situation is that he feels a constant need to belong, a need to believe in one's experience, and a need to uphold a traditional Islamic identity. When he remains unsuccessful, he thrusts this burden upon his sons. Slowly, he realises that migration to London was his big mistake as England is a country-

“where you are never welcomed only tolerated. Just tolerated... it drugs you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognisable, you belong nowhere. (407)

Samad's breakdown demonstrates and resignifies the importance of one's roots, clearly showing that if one is ignorant of the influence of the past, that person will cease to understand the complexities and fluidities of identity and how an awareness of history is necessary for understanding who one is. The second generation, on the one hand, can transgress the boundaries of specific ethnic groups (that is, Jamaican, English and Bengali Muslims) to shape their childhood identities concerning one another rather than in opposition. Smith maps the children's progress throughout the novel, showing how they grow apart and are pulled towards extreme groups or beliefs, moving away from their hybridised childhood identities and towards fixed identities constructed primarily on one overarching concept. Magid joins Marcus Chalfen in his Future Mouse Project, one that is designed to perfect the 'mistakes of the creator' (312); Millat joins KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation), an Islamic Fundamentalist group 'with an acronym problem' (295). Joshua joins FATE (Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation), a group devoted to helping innocent animals escape the 'malicious hands of humankind' (403). All these reflect their desire to assert their identity. When Irie, the

daughter of Archie and Clara, tries to look around her for reflection on her identity, she finds none. Instead, she discovers people with "no curves, no curls". Being unkinky, 'no curve and no curl' becomes the goal which Irie falsely follows. Millat's realisation that society labels him as an essentialised 'other' contributes to his feelings of instability towards the end of the novel. He understands his connection with Irie, which is that they are childhood friends and because they have the same problems of the past, which, although different in shape and form, have shaken their lives to the very core similarly. This turbulence of mind arises from his feelings of saving his own culture. Millat tries to kill Dr Perret, who is threatening Millat's religious beliefs through his Future Mouse Project.

To conclude, Spivak's disapproval of roots probably comes from the thought that rootedness makes one unable to detach oneself from a place of origin and does not consider the fact that roots contribute immediately to the formation and production of one's identity. The immigrants in this novel try to cling to their past and history for survival, and identity becomes confusing for someone like Archie, whose history probably never existed. An overall similarity can be traced to the difficulties the characters experience while negotiating for their identities, which binds them to a familiar chord. It is difficult and impossible to form a stable multicultural society if its satellite cultures are not being acknowledged and respected by the propagators of the core culture. Core culture needs to become more and more inclusive for the formation of a happy multicultural society.

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