

# Exploring Multiculturalism and Cultural Hybridity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

(This paper was presented at the International Conference on Culture through Language and Literature on the 6 and 7 of February, 2015. Organised by Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.)

**Mirunalini Prakasam**

22 Sripuram Golden Temple Road

Kamaraj Nagar,

Thorapadi,

Vellore

Tamil Nadu. - 632 002

[mirunalini10prakasham@gmail.com](mailto:mirunalini10prakasham@gmail.com)

Zadie Smith was awarded for the ways she deals with multiculturalism and hybridity in *White Teeth*. The characters Joneses, Iqbals and Chalfens are from three ethnically diverse families. In addition to this achievement, she also manages to make her characters appear both multifaceted and memorable to her readers. As part of the characters' experience as immigrants, they are confronted with conflicts between assimilating and preserving their cultures. The novel depicts the lives of a wide range of backgrounds, including Afro-Caribbean, Muslim, and Jewish. In keeping with Smith's epigraph, "what is past is prologue," the characters and their various cultural backgrounds show the complexity involved in immigration and replanting one's roots. *White Teeth* introduces us to a whole array of personalities and destinies, all vivid and with stories to tell. Quite the contrary; the novel sets both the objects of irony and satire, implying the need for a more nuanced reading and understanding of such characters and settings. The characters are brimming with "hybridity"; mixed backgrounds, a variety of religions, a subsequent generation of blended cultures. Though the characters inhabit such vastly different spheres, they are united and able to relate to one another through their common humanity. Zadie Smith's writing suggests that the reality of past and history must be recognized in order to move forward.

**Key Words:** Multiculturalism, cultural hybridization, Third Space, Immigrants, blend

The story of *White Teeth* takes place in London, a city which lives in both its past and present. London provides a meeting place of cultures, religions, and political viewpoints, and thus extends the opportunity of greater humanitarian understanding toward the characters. Simply due to the city's complexity the city itself may be considered as a catalyst for hybridity, which in turn enables the second generation of immigrant families to change so radically from their parents. *White Teeth*'s second generation, including Irie, Millat, Magid, and Joshua Chalfen, the tension between past and present home is less intense compared to their parents.

IRIE, THE PROTAGONIST OF THE NOVEL

Irie Jones, the Jamaican-British protagonist of the novel, successfully negotiates her unique identity in the ambivalent cultural space created by the often conflicting values of minority ethnic cultures and the dominant white British culture. Irie's ability to maintain, transgress, and create new cultural boundaries in this cultural space, which is synonymous with Bhabha's conception of the Third Space, reveals the importance of her hybrid genealogy. Irie the daughter of a white Englishman and a black Jamaican woman, is exposed to two different cultural norms that include attitudes towards marriage and sexuality, religious beliefs, norms of beauty, educational expectations, and a plethora of other ideologies. As she struggles to come in terms with her hybrid genealogy, her identity is developed in ambiguous "Third Space", where she must refashion traditional cultural ideals of "Englishness" to suit her own nature.

Samad Iqbal, a Bengali Muslim from Bangladesh is obsessed by the history of his great-grandfather, Mangal Pandey, who allegedly fired the first shot of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Samad, to become more like the English he leaves the immigrant-dense neighbourhood, East End, and moves to the more liberal Willesden Green. Samad voluntarily took part in the Second World War. When he, in the war, became positioned in a tank with Englishmen he was not aware of the impact these men were going to have on him. To Samad's disappointment, the Englishmen in his tank did not correspond with his expectations of the English; the colonizer, also affected by hybridity, had not represented the typical English. It was not only a disappointment that hit him, it was also the fact that he realised that he had been living in the world of unreality. Before the war, Samad's only encounter with the English was in what was then colonized India, where he was the colonized. In his life he had always lived under English rule: the English affected him and he affected them. Samad feels ashamed of his wife Alsana, as she does not act like the typical Bengali woman that he expects from her.

Samad's sons Magid and Millat represent the East and the West of Samad, with some recurrent slippages. Although they are identical twins, their reaction in similar situation is totally different. Millat does not seem bothered by their father's attempts to influence in their lives and decide what they ought to do and not, while his brother gets upset and responds with a silent protest. Magid who is the eldest by two minutes attempts to blend in. Millat Instead of trying to blend like Magid, which he knows is going to fail, he does the opposite. He joins a gang called Raggastani, where internal language is a mixture of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English. The group consists of a great mix of cultures, a hybrid within itself. Millat makes his escape to different organisations and groups, as a teenager he comes in contact with an organisation called KEVIN. KEVIN is an extreme Muslim group, which gives Millat a sense of belonging. The ironic thing about the group is that the founder of the organisation was not Muslim from the beginning. He was a man with radical opinions who studied Islam at university, a man who did not fit into society. Even the name KEVIN reveals the hybridity that exists within the group, the letters stands for Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation. The more time he spends in KEVIN, the more of a fundamentalist Millat becomes. He does not always agree with the opinion of the organization, but it is a place where he can express his anger and frustration.

The way Archie Jones acts towards Samad indicates that he has respect for him, the kind of respect the colonized has for the colonizer. Archie cannot be perceived as a typical Englishman, nor can he be perceived as anything else, he is a hybrid. Magid thinks that leaving things to its fate is the Eastern way of dealing with problems. This is just what Archie does, leaves everything to fate, every time when he ought to make a decision he flips a coin. Perhaps the most ironic fact in the novel is that it is Archie who releases the Future Mouse, when he had a gun shot in his thigh. Future Mouse is a project by Marcus Chalfen in which he introduces chemical carcinogens into body of a mouse and is thus able to observe the progression of tumors in living tissue. Archie is the most generic of all the characters, and the most neutral, brings about the final solution. He releases what all the multicultural characters have so vigorously fought for, control. This fatalistic maneuver of Archie's work had put him in his place. It is the first time Samad realises that the oppressed friend of his, Archie, never really has been the oppressed. Beneath the surface of the mimic man there is a man that in silence works against the oppression.

In its very structure we find a wide range of issues that are vital to an understanding of the immigrant's life in Britain. The characters may try to fight being affected by the other culture by making obvious declaration against it, by acting like a typical Eastern man; nevertheless, their acts reveal the hybrid within.

For Irie, this realization comes most strongly when she is fifteen years old and reaches puberty. With dismay, she notes "there was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. "A stranger in a stranger land" (Smith 222). Her physical features, typical of Jamaican women are a source of consternation and embarrassment to Irie because they set her apart from her peers. Even more importantly, the white British culture around her defines its norms of female beauty based on a thin figure, straight hair and a white skin and Irie finds herself severely lacking by these standards.

At this stage, Irie's realization of her differences casts her as an alien in her own society -she finds that her racial and ethnic identity has no reflection in the mirror of British society defined by the majority white cultural norms. Moreover, society, in the form of school peers and the local community alienates individuals with such differences. Irie, now with a painfully ammonia burned scalp from her attempts to straighten her hair and a bruised ego after her rejection by Mr. Chalfen, continues to re-evaluate the cultural values she is exposed to.

Irie's own negotiation of identity takes place through a gradual re-evaluation of the importance of the dominant white culture in her life. As Irie negotiates cultural boundaries, her "identity development takes place through three stages: an awareness of difference from the dominant culture, a struggle for acceptance among peers, and finally self acceptance and self assertion" (Martin and Nakayama 198). In the first major stage of identity formation, the multicultural or hybridised individual realizes that he or she is different from other children in the peer group and suffers from dissonance as he or she struggles to reconcile the differences between the ethnic cultures and the dominant culture (Martin and Nakayama 198).

In the early stages of her identity development, Irie had tried to claim a predetermined white cultural space. She realizes later, that a single cultural space does not adequately express her hybrid nature. Her identity is negotiated in the flux of the Third Space – like other aspects of cultural hybridity, it resists a fixed referent point. Irie overcomes her own desire for identification with one culture and rejects the claims that other cultures make on her to assert her own values forged through her experience with the dominant and minority cultures. Irie's success in her identity development is left with no doubt. Her confidence and patience draws troubled individuals of different ages and cultures to her – ranging from the young white Joshua Chalfen to the middle aged Samad.

Even more strikingly, she alone of her two closest friends – Millat and Majid – develops this hybridity. While Millat ends up embracing a fundamentalist form of Islam, Majid adopts white mannerisms, affectations and abandons his own cultural roots. Only Irie has the hybrid roots that ground her in the past but allow her to look to the future. As Joyce Chalfen says about gardening, “cross pollination produces more varied off spring which are able to cope with a changed environment” (Smith 258). Irie, the result of the cross pollination between the English Archie, Samad and the Jamaican Clara Bowden, able to cope better in the multicultural hybrid London society. Majid and Millat, the products of a mono-ethnic relationship, fail to find the appropriate balance in the contested and shifting cultural heritage they inherit from their parents and the society around them. Smith seems to imply that in the changing London society, the hybrid individual, a product of physiological and ideological blending of cultures, races, and ethnicities, is more likely to succeed in fashioning a unique identity that allows him or her to navigate the demands of a hybrid society. It is the hybrid individual who, resisting the homogenizing effects of a single culture is capable of transforming himself or herself to accommodate the present and accept the challenges of the future.

Homi Bhabha's Third Space Theory explains the uniqueness of each person, actor a context as a hybrid. Third Space Theory suggests that every person is a hybrid of their unique set of affinities (identity factors). O'Connell's Pool House is a clear example of The Third Space; this place turns out to be the epitome of hybridity and mixture. This pub is run by Arabs and the name suggests an Irish pub. It is a place more than the mixture of Irish pub tradition and Arab history. Irie develops the sense of The Third Space. It is the root of hybridity that allows her to look to the future with an affirmative approach.

Due to globalization the world has become smaller; a culture that is created from a common history within a country no longer exists. In *White Teeth* the ultimate assertion and celebration of Irie's hybrid genealogy and identity comes through the birth of her child. Her child conceived when she sleeps with Majid and Millat, separately, on the same day, has no paternal roots at all. Since Majid and Millat are identical twins, genetic testing to determine the child's paternity will prove futile. This child, which has Jamaican, British, and Bangladeshi roots, optimizes Irie's legacy of hybridity because her utter lack of paternal roots frees her from the polarity that cultures can subject on their adherents. The young girl, “free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings,” has no fixed reference point to develop her own identity and represents the next stage in the immigrant experiment (Smith 448). Her identity too will be developed along contested boundaries in the Third Space. Finally, this child

becomes symbolic of the successes of cultural hybridity and representative of its future in British culture. She becomes the living “inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” by virtue of her genealogy. Like her mother Irie, she will negotiate her identity amidst multicultural societies that alienate her differences but like Irie, she will also escape the dichotomies and homogeneity imposed by cultural norms of both the dominant and minority culture.

This child remains nameless in the novel – she is representative of the thousands of other children who are growing up in Diasporas around the world. It is these children, fashioning hybrid values and ideas for themselves to suit their hybrid identities, who will become the citizens of the “international culture” that Homi Bhabha envisions. Their new cultural ideals will transcend the superficial aspects of tastes, fashions, foods, and extend to cover cultural notions that cover aspects as wide ranging as sexuality to religion.

First generation children born in London are constantly haunted by the shadows of their ethnic roots and their identity is shaped amidst the demands of their ethnic cultural values and the need to adapt to the dominant culture around them. The choices that the individual makes play an important role in determining the result of this experiment. Irie, by confronting her roots is able to transcend them while her peers remain trapped in varying stages of assimilation/identification. Ultimately, the success of Irie’s identity development reveals that in the immigrant experiment, it is the hybrid individual, representing diverse cultures and encompassing contested cultural spaces, who can successfully navigate the changing dynamics of British society.

### Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi. *The location of culture*. London: Routledge, 1994
- Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Michaelson, Scott. "Hybrid bound." Department of English Michigan State University, 1998.
- Kraniauskas, John. "Latin-Americanism and Postcolonial Perspectives on Cultural Studies." *Essays Hybridity in a Transnational Frame* 1.1 (2000) 111-137
- Gane, Gillian. "Migrancy, The Cosmopolitan Intellectual, and the Global City in the Satanic Verses." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 48.1 (2002) 18-49
- "MULTICULTURALISM" *Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Ed. Tom McArthur. Oxford University Press, 1998. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. Kennesaw State University. 22 February 2010.
- Martin, Judith N., and Nakayama, Thomas K. *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*. 4th ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 2007.
- [www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/thoratpaper.pdf](http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/thoratpaper.pdf)
- [www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:237827/FULLTEXT01.pdf](http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:237827/FULLTEXT01.pdf)
- [http://digitool.library.colostate.edu///exlibris/dtl/d3\\_1/apache\\_media/L2V4bGlicmlzL2R0bC9kM18xL2FwYWNoZV9tZWRpYS8xNzU3NDE=.pdf](http://digitool.library.colostate.edu///exlibris/dtl/d3_1/apache_media/L2V4bGlicmlzL2R0bC9kM18xL2FwYWNoZV9tZWRpYS8xNzU3NDE=.pdf)

\*\*\*\*\*