

# Accept us or Reject us for Who we Are: Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth'

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Post World War II, numerous colonised countries retrieved their liberty from the British colonisation subsequent to the United Kingdom withdrawing to reinforce and regain its strength. The millions of people that were affected by the war turned to Britain, making it a multicultural country. Yet this confusion of the nation's identity made many immigrants struggle to keep their history, heritage and identity intact. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) addresses the issues of the past, present and future English superiority against the immigrant inferiority as the people were forced to leave their homes to establish a new home. This study will be textually limited to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). Theoretically, this study will be limited to the concept of identity by Homi Bhabha (1994) and national identity by Anthony D. Smith (2001). This study will examine the concept of identity and national identity in a multicultural country; it will also investigate the process of settling and assimilating minority immigrants. Finally, this study will highlight the cultural confusion and immigration struggles to reclaim their own heritage, culture and history.

**Key words:** *Postcolonial, identity, assimilation, national identity, multicultural, immigration.*

## Introduction

Post World War II, numerous colonised countries retrieved their liberty from the British colonisation subsequent to the United Kingdom withdrawing to reinforce and regain its strength. The millions of people that were affected by the war turned to Britain making it a multicultural country. Yet with this confusion of nation identity caused many immigrants struggle to keep their history, heritage and identity intact. In a multicultural country both natives and the outsiders 'migrants' face a different culture, language, history, race, religion and identity as they struggle for superiority and survival.



Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* published in 2000 was the winner of many international literary awards. It tells the story of a group of friends, Samad Iqbal from Bangladeshi and his friend Archie Jones from England, living in London after they left their homes. Smith had focused on the multicultural minor groups by displaying different characters from different ethnic groups, religious groups and regions as they interact and struggle to establish their own sense of belonging in a strange country.

In a 2001 interview on the Charlie Rose show, she mentioned the difficulty of summarising *White Teeth* as there around thirty four characters with different ethnic backgrounds as they interact and marry each other.

“To me the main characters are Archie and Samad as their friendship started a long time before anything happened and in the middle of nowhere, yet they meet again in London. I focused on the man to man relationship as it is to me more touching, their relationship makes people understand their reality and you can't loss it with them”

The British history of colonisation was for their own benefit and profit as they had concurred half of the world during the nineteenth century more which was than any other country in the world. It was followed by the Industrial technological revolution , which started to search for cheap labour and to help in the production process. These events were why only Britain had opened its borders for immigrates to settle in their country. After the two World Wars the United Kingdom had lost most of its power, it reclaimed their independence and many of them chose to migrate to Britain, which caused intercultural confusion and clash of cultures.

This study will be textually limited to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). Theoretically, this study will limited to the concept of identity and the meaning of national identity.

This study will examine the concept of identity in a multicultural country; it will also investigate the process of settling and assimilating minority immigrants. Finally, this study will highlight the cultural confusion and immigrates struggles to reclaim or to loss their own heritage, culture and history.

### ***White Teeth Summary***

The story starts in 1975 New Year's Eve, with Archie Jones trying to commit suicide after his wife left him. He changed his mind as he tried to find hope and happiness in his new life and a few days later he was invited to a party where he meets the lovely and beautiful Clara Bowden from a Jamaican family. Clara at that time she was in love with another man Ryan Topps but their relationship slowly ended.



Shortly after their meeting Archie and Clara got married and had a little baby girl named Irie who became a beautiful and smart woman but she did lack self-confidence.

The author introduces Archie's best mate Samad Iqbal, as they meet in the same tank group during World War II. Samad had moved to England shortly after the war where he was to marry a woman named Alsana. Their families had arranged the marriage and their meeting. Alsana is a very sweet and hardworking as a waitress in a small curry house.

Samad is only interested in his family history and his great-grandfathers history who is said to be part of the Indian Rebellion which took place during 1857. Samad and Alsana had two children named Magid and Millat who are the same age as Archie's daughter, Irie. Samad rejects the freedom and liberal life style in England, as he is a traditional Muslim man, yet at the same time he participates in behaviours like having affairs with other women, gambling and drinking which is against his Muslim faith.

He wants his children to follow Islamic rules so he sends Magid to Bangladesh to be close to Islam but Magid wants to follow the science faith and he rejects his Muslim heritage.

His brother Millat follow a different path and becomes part of the Militant Muslim Organisation, also known as the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation also known for short as 'KEVIN'.

The third family are the Chalfens. The father is named Marcus who works as geneticist with mice and cancer in a project called 'Future Mouse'. His wife Joyce is a horticulturist who believes that she can help Millat walk away from his Muslim army movement. The Chalfens take good care of Irie and Samad's two boys but they ignore their own child Joshua who joins the Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation for shorter known as "FATE".

The three different families became connected as both Magid and Irie work for Marcus in the scientific project and in that time Irie reveals that she is in love with Millat. But later Millat leaves her shortly after to join the KEVIN, she then get involved in physical relationship with Magid until she became pregnant. As Magid and Millat are twins she doesn't know who is the father.

The story's climax is when a protest is arranged against the 'FUTUREMOUSE' project that brings KEVIN, FATE and Clara Bowden's mother to the same place at the same time. Samad realised that one of the scientists working on the 'FUTUREMOUSE' team is a former Nazi soldier who he and Archie fought during the war. Samad remembered that Archie should have killed him but didn't and at that moment Millat arrives holding a gun and Archie got between Millat and Samad taking a bullet in his leg saving Samad's life.

The ending of the story shows all the characters on television as the twin brothers serving in the community work for their crimes. Joshua and Irie went back to Jamaica. Archie and Samad spend their time in a local pub named O'Connell's Pub but finally they being their wives with them. <sup>1</sup>

In (2000) a review by Moss Stephen in The Guardian Journal titled "White Teeth by Zadie Smith" he mentioned that the book is very confusing to understand and to read since the storyline joins and separates and the characters join and fall apart:

"There is a false climax that attempts too many characters and storylines: here Smith is only spelling out themes about family and belonging and history- it is already implicit in the narrative as there is something too pat in the conclusion that we should not perpetuate such as the Myth and the wicked lies that the past is always tense and the future is always perfect. Yet she concluded that there are small weaknesses in what is a bounding, vibrant, richly imagined and thoroughly engaging whole."

A (2000) The New York Times journal published a review named "The New England" by Anthony Quinn, as he stated:

"Zadie Smith's debut novel is like London, it portrays a restless hybrid of the voices, tones and the textures of a 150 years of history. The story exposes the teeming family saga with a sly inquiry into race, identity and tender hearted satire on faith, cultural bemusement and antagonism."

In 2017 a journal article by Irene Perez Fernandez titled "Exploring Hybridity and Multiculturalism: Intra and Inter Family Relations in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*". This study had focused on the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity within the characters and the British society. The multicultural theme and history of Anglo-Jamaican, Anglo-Jewish and Anglo-Bangladeshi show the characters negotiating to establish their own sense of identity to belong and to be free in a city that is strange to them

"This newly acquired multicultural aspect of Britain is explored in the novel in the subsequent decades. Hence, inter and intra family relations among ethnically diverse characters are the centurial motif of the novel during the second period 1980s. The dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in religious and scientific group associations pertain social space in the last part of the novel." (P.144)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.supersummary.com/white-teeth/summary/>

“History and Root in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*” is another article by Seda Arikan (2013), which examined the people coming from different racial groups and different backgrounds. It reflects on the affect of the culture and the notion of British identity in the British society. As the story focuses on contemporary north London and its national heritage which inaugurate the struggle of multi-ethnic and multicultural families, and few other characters whom they represent other ethnic groups such as British and Jewish cultures.

“When the problems of the multi-ethnic and multicultural London are dealt with in a book such as *White Teeth*, it is inevitable to mention the immigrant or the multi-ethnic families and their second generation children as being ‘brown’ for their hybrid children as they face a dilemma of their existence and identity” (p. 1682)

### ***Nationhood and National Identity***

This paper main focus is the struggles and issues of the immigrant minorities in westerns countries that are considered as superior. This issue has become even more important after the British terrorist attacks in 2005 and in 2001 in New York as these events resulted a strong problematic relationship between the east and the west. The main struggle for immigrants is the loss of national identity and insisting to preserve their heritage from the dangers of exposing to the Western culture. This fear of losing their original identity can be seen in immigrants who refuse the European culture and are disinclined to assimilate. They see the Western culture as merely a threat to their own culture and faith.

The notion of nationalism is a factor in creating the laws of the political system from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and it was the cause of different wars and struggles and it was responsible for the death of millions just to keep the name of “fatherland” as their own (Ozkirimli, 2000, p.1). Nationalism is regarded as a powerful and emotional yet sometimes irrational ideology that plays an important role in the people lives and their attempt to belong and relate.

Anthony D. Smith in his book *Nationalism* (2001) gave a modern insight on the nation. He examined the notion of nationalism that is something relatively contemporary which means the “meaning of something” (p.6). Yet the meaning of nationalism is in a constant change depending on the development of the nation, the consciousness of the individuals about their nation, the language and the heritage of the individuals which gives meaning and symbolism for the nation, the socio-political movement which speaks on behalf the nationalists and the ideologies generally and specifically which define the nation.

“A nation is a historically constituted stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.” (1994, p.20)



Yet a more subjective definition of the notion of nationalism its according to Heywood in his 2003 study which is mentioned that its merely a “psycho-political statue.” Furthermore, it signified the self-awareness, loyalty and connection towards the land.

The concept of nationhood and national identity is something that was the center of the postcolonial studies where the groups such as the African and the Indian communities were the victims of the territorial oppression by the British forcing the people to re-locate. Many individuals living in another country can be traced back to a different country because of immigration hence the concept of nation and nationality.

To understand the national identity, according to David Miller in his (1995) nationality study he argued there must be a clear understanding of the nation itself. He mentioned that:

“The nations do not exist independently of the people’s beliefs, but as criteria which are much more complex than other things. In classing a group of people in a notion you are not only commenting on their physical characteristics or behaviours but also on how they view themselves.” (p. 164)

The postcolonial studies address the people’s confusion and their search for one united identity. A study by Homi Bhabha 1994 addresses the postcolonial individual struggles to create their own identity.

**Hybrid Identity** will be utilized as a part of the investigation of the novel and the main theoretical analysis. These key ideas are selected as a result of their importance to the investigation of the novel. The meanings of the key ideas are taken from a few researchers including Homi K. Bhabha the father of post-colonial studies and identity alongside Hybridity.

“Hybridity refers to the process of emergence of a culture in which its elements are being continually transformed or translated through irrepressible encounters. Hybridity offers the potential to undermine existing forms of cultural authority and representation.” (Dictionary of Sociology, 2005)

Hybridity according to Edward is the result of colonisation, immigration and globalisation but it’s in the statue of a consistent change. But Homi Bhabha had furthered the understanding of the concept of hybridity as he uses the term to:

“Mark the interdependent construction of the postcolonial identities, which is a combine and intersect binary the oppositions in a very complex and ambiguous ways.” (Meyer, 2008, p. 171)

The Mimic identity is defined as the “the assimilation between the Western culture and the colonised culture and almost closes the gap of the binary opposition of Selfhood and Other.” (Siti Masitah Md Zin, Low Chan Mee, 2014:p184) Furthermore, in his article Homi Bhabha (1994:122) “Mimicry and Men” he defined the concept of the Mimetic process “Colonial mimicry is the desire to be a reformed, recognisable other, as a subject of the difference that is almost the same, but not quite.” (Homi Bhabha,1994: p129). This concept is all about how the colonised or the individual is almost there but not quite, the desire to be superior and the permission to be such required the selective choice of identity and culture and cutting the roots for the traditional being.

Homi Bhabha’s Ambivalence identity is having two different identities and believes and traditions in the same individual, reasoning from the colonial power, the colonised starts to develop the notion that they must be like the colonisers to be superior as well. The ambivalence statues “neither this nor that” is the between and confusion, from an immigrant perspective they also suffer losing their original identity and the host country identity. Furthermore, in this study, this concept will be applied on Leila’s Characters since she is suffering from uncertain identity resulting from the different identities with different backgrounds between the conventional notion and the minority groups.

The final concept used which is Cultural Assimilation that is considered a very important concept in every multicultural society depending in the minority group’s perception of its either negative or positive process. It’s a positive process when the groups create a peaceful blend with the host country and this peaceful understanding will result the group preserving their own identity and their culture as well. However, negative assimilation will result when the groups complete immersing with the host country and group and their attempted to copy and adapt the host lifestyle.

“Assimilation implies the total absorption into another linguistic and cultural group. An assimilated individual gives up his/her cultural identity and may even go so far as to change his/her name.” (Harles,1997: p711)

Bhabha is mainly interested in understanding the negative side of assimilation and multiculturalism resulting in the Mimetic identity, however, this study will examine both negative and positive sides. This concept will be applied on the protagonist Amal and her lifestyle and choices.

## Textual Analysis

### *Identity in Zadie Smith's White Teeth*

It's interesting to notice that the social structure of *White Teeth* is based on the hybrid situation for both settings and characters even in the way they represent themselves. The small town in Northern London Willesden is like any other postcolonial and multicultural unity in a hybrid sense it just like the Irish pub owned by Arabic individual who is named Mickey; or the fact that the Afro salon run by a white man who uses Indian hair extension for African women. The lines of the ethnic culture seems to vanish within its divisions thus the story is not really about the English culture but the blurred lines set between the immigrant's heritage and themselves.

“It was only that here, in Willesden there was not just enough of any one thing to gang up against any other thing and send it running.” (P. 3)

This line shows the author intention to establish the coexistence of different ethnic groups without one certain ethnic group claiming itself as the dominate one.

The hybrid relationships represent an important theme in the story such as the relationship of Archie and his wife Clara Bowden who represent the interracial marriage in the story. He is from English decent and she is Jamaican decent. He older than her and he was married before and she is only 19 years old.

Both Archie and Clara are suffering from identity crisis as they share their hybrid relationship. Clara had distanced herself from her family and her culture since she wants to be an English lady. After his wife left, Archie took Samad's advice and decided to get marry without paying any attention to the culture or the race of his future wife Clara. Their kids turned out to be confused since they don't know their history.

“If it's a girl, I think I like Irie. It patois means everything OK, cool. Peaceful, you know?” (p.76)

Clara had to explain everything to her husband Archie, even the name of their baby girl since he didn't know anything about his wife's culture. Although Clara hated and rejected her culture, as her daughter grew older she became more ambivalent about her choice and her character starts to change. She starts to fear her daughter Irie will forget her own culture and that she will become completely English like her father.

“From Irie’s bedroom shrine of green eyed Hollywood idols to the gaggle of white friends who regularly trooped in and out of her bedroom, Clara saw an ocean of pink skins surrounding her daughter and she feared the tide that would take her away” (335)

The fact that the Jones’ represent an interracial marriage, their existence disturbs the postcolonial society as they reject their own identity and adopting another culture. At the same time they want their children to follow their original culture, which they rejected in the past. Their carefree personality and open mindlessness is considered acceptable in a western society yet the Jamaican society still influenced by traditionalism and cultural rules. These two different identity and cultures created blurred lines of which identity to follow for Irie.

Accordingly, it’s very difficult to define Irie as Jamaican or English, since she is both and none at the same time. She was born and raised in England which made her naturally English yet her grandmother and mothers who represent the Jamaican heritage also influenced her identity.

“She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfenishness. 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, ne’ Chalfenovsky) or that they might ne as needy as her and she was of them.” (p.335)

This identity crisis had influenced Irie’s personality and internal structure. It helped her consciousness to care or to learn about her own history. She was even okay with not knowing the identity of her father’s child since she doesn’t care about her own identity and she doesn’t care about her own child’s identity.

The Chalfens who represent the second immigrant family are from a Jewish culture. Their characters and behaviours can’t be described as purely English or Jewish and the method that they choose to follow is called the ‘Chalfenist’.

“Marcus shrank back a little. His Chalfenist confidence was always less evident when he stayed abroad, away from the bosom of his family.” (p.420)

This family represents the Chalfenism culture which is a minor immigrant culture, as the family in the novel represents a peculiar characters and behaviours. The parent’s obsession with superior identity and their self-imagery had created walls between them and their children. Joyce Chalfen always speaks on behalf of her child Oscar, Oscar doesn’t object or reject this parent’s ideologies; he simply mentioned that he doesn’t share the same believe system as them.



“He destroyed Oscar’s Lego fire station and threw the coffee machine across the room. Then he did what Joyce had been waiting for all these years. He asked her advice” (p.382)

Oscar decided to dissociate himself from his culture and his family, since he couldn’t relate to his parents and couldn’t understand their own ideologies even when he spoke with his father.

“There’s no point being reasonable with him because he thinks he owns reasonableness how do you deal with people like that?” (p. 411)

This family represents the thin line between hybrid identity and multiculturalism. The parents trying their best to preserve the family heritage and history and yet their son adopts another culture. He chooses to be Vegetarian and starts a romantic relationship to a Mulatto woman. The younger generation has the hybrid tendency since they don’t share the same cultural appreciation as the older generation

“He saw a room of change. And the genius of it, the master stroke, was that Magid never for a moment let Marcus feel that Chalfenism was being compromised in any way whatever. He expressed his undying addiction and admiration for it every day. All Magid wanted to do, he explained to Marcus was being Chalfenism to the people. And you had to give the people what they wanted in a form they could understand” (P.430)

According to this quote it’s clear that Marcus is always ready for change and he accepted change, yet Magid highly respected the traditions and their moral identity. They share different beliefs and culture and yet they have only admiration for each other. This stands as an example for harmonic multicultural relationship.

The last family is the Iqbals family and the focus of the novel and they are the opposite of the Jones. The parents share a traditional Bangladesh wedding and very conservative in nature. Both Samah and his wife have never met before their wedding and their union was based on the two families’ agreement. Their union was arranged even before Alsana was born following the old Islamic traditions yet their children were born in England.

Samad rejects the Western culture although his best friend Archie is an English man, he considers the westerners are looking with inferiority at the Bangladeshi and his own Muslim identity. When Archie calls him Sam instead of Samad he answers angrily:

“Don’t call me Sam ... I’m not one of your English matey boys. My name is Samad Miah Iqbal. Not Sam or Sammy. And nor God forbid Samuel. It is Samad” (P. 94)

Both Samad and his son Millat share the same British ideologies that infect and contaminate their heritage and culture even their faith and relationship with God.

Samah is also struggling with his Bangladesh identity as he was unfaithful to his wife more than once, he spends his time in the pub drinking and flirting with other women and he is lying and gambling with his money. He is limited to his ambivalent identity as he struggles to keep his faith and traditions safe from the western influence but he is unable to do so. At the same time he always pushes his two young boys Millat and Magid to follow the traditions and to keep their faith when he is not doing so.

Samad keeps on mentioning his great-grandfather and their old glorious times of the Indian revolution as it is part of his great history and something to make the new generation appreciate their past. At the same he serves in the English army and fought beside the British against his own people. There is an ambivalent mimic degree set between his own beliefs, speech and his actions and personality.

“Sadly said Samad sighing, distracted from his erection by the dismal through of his second son, Millat is a Good – FOR – NOTHING” (P.135)

This ambivalence is also obvious in this statement as he calls his son Millat “good for nothing” as he chose to not be interested in the Bangladesh identity and hee doesn’t follow or behave according to what Samah believes to be the proper structure for a man. At the same time Samah is not following his own rules as well. Because of this ambivalence it created an internal struggle within Samah himself.

“But Samah wasn’t listening, he was already reciting in his head repeating two English phrases that he tried hard to believe in, words he had learnt these past ten years in England, words he hoped could protect him from the abominable heat in his trousers: To the pure all things are Pure. To the pure all things are pure. To the pure all things are pure” (p.138)

Samah’s ambivalence reach its highest point when he meets the beautiful Poppy Burt Jones. He falls in love with her instantly ‘and he start to have a romantic relationship with her after he had sexual relationship with his wife calling her name and masturbating imagining her face. Yet he starts a fight with his two sons for bringing girls to the house and as Muslim men it is not proper, it’s forbidden

“The moment Samad set eyes on the pretty red-haired music teacher Poppy Burt Jones that July of 1984 he knew finally the truth of this. He knew his God was having his revenge, he knew the game was up, he saw that the contract had been broken ... the temptation had been deliberately and maliciously thrown in his path.in short all deals are off.” (P. 141)



Between all the characters Samah and Millat are the only two people who are fighting and preaching about their own culture and heritage. They both feel and believe that it is upon them to carry on the Islamic message and identity in England for the new generation to understand their heritage. They do this not for their love and compassion about Islam but for their fear of losing the one thing which defines them as not English but Bangladeshi.

Zadie Smith's choice to present the voices of the Muslim Bangladeshi English is critical to understand the dangers of losing the history and self to others and this is one of the key issues faced by the multicultural community. When a group of a different race, color, religion, ethnic, language and culture are unable to create their own sense of belonging and feeling attachment to the land they are a threat of isolation and heritage distraction.

“Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort despite all this, it is still hard to admit that there is no more English than the Indian, no more Indians than the English” (p.334)

## **Conclusion**

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) is the perfect representation of an English Multicultural society with different culture, race, religion, heritage and languages to create the image of a hybrid country in North London. The fear is mutual being the guests and the hosts as each of them carries on the fear, they both fight for their land and their history. The novel is realistic in examining the identity of the new and the old generations as each of them possess their own, all the characters keep on struggling and fearing to cope with a community which is different from their own. The older generation such as the fathers, the mothers and the grandparents in the story have their own history and culture since they were part of it, they try their best to maintain their identity and culture yet they all failed in their mission. The contemporary generation however is the young boys and girls creating their own hybrid mimic identity, as they are a mixture of both English and their own descendent heritage. The story doesn't just offer the personal and culture clashed but shows the positive interactions of the modern generation as they create their own peaceful identity. Finally, Smith wrote her history as a recorder of history, he gave further insights to other cultures and their struggles to make the focus not on the British white supremacy but also about the minorities.



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