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24 Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000)

Abstract: *White Teeth* is a realistic and comic family saga about the intertwined lives of three families of different ethnic affiliations. The novel spans the twentieth century, connecting the colonial past in Jamaica and India with the postcolonial present in London. In this metahistorical novel, narrative comments, the characters' unreliable versions of the past, and the twisted plots develop an ironic comedy of history characterized by repetition as a farce. Both first-generation and second-generation immigrants struggle for recognition. However, they develop different strategies in constructing their positions and identities through assimilation, transcultural hybridization, or the delimitation of their cultures in opposition to the permissive and capitalist Western society. The cosmopolitan and multicultural metropolis becomes the site of intercultural conflicts and transcultural blending.

Keywords: Black British novel, metahistorical fiction, comic realism, family saga, postcolonialism

1 Context: Author, Oeuvre, Moment

Zadie Smith is the daughter of an English photographer and a Jamaican immigrant mother, who became a social worker and psychotherapist at the NHS (cf. Tew 2010, 27). Smith, who grew up in multicultural Willesden in north-west London and earned a degree in English from Cambridge University, is one of the most successful 'Black British' authors in the twenty-first century and has been heralded as a shining representative of multicultural Britain (Merrit 2000). Her debut novel, *White Teeth* (2000), won the Guardian First Book Award, the Whitbread First Book Award, the James Tait Black Prize for Fiction, and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. *White Teeth* became an instant success both with the public and academia due to its highly humorous treatment of multiculturalism in the intertwined lives of three families of different ethnic affiliations in contemporary London. The book draws on some of her and her parents' experiences. One of the protagonists, Irie, is the daughter of an ordinary, lower-class Englishman and a young Jamaican mother. Irie grows up in a multicultural community and aspires to become middle-class (cf. Wachtel; Squires 2002, 8–10). However, Smith stresses that her comic novel is neither a means of self-expression nor a political statement on immigrants but a fictional representation of social change (cf. Hatzenstone 2000).

Smith's novel reveals echoes of Rushdie and Kureishi but differs from her predecessors in a more humorous vision of history that is both relevant to the present

and subject to unforeseen transformations (cf. Ball 2004, 242–243). The well-educated, young, and black author and her novel's light tone corresponded well to the progressive and inclusive agenda of New Labour's Cool Britannia (cf. Sell 2008). The Home Secretary launched the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain in 1997, which proposed a reconsideration of British history and identity including ethnic minorities and demanded an anti-racist politics of human rights, recognition, equality, and solidarity. The commission envisioned Britain as a community of communities with a balance of difference and cohesion in multiple affiliations of ethnic identities and Britishness (Parekh 2000, xiii–xxii). In 1998, Britain commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of Jamaican immigrants on the SS Windrush. Although the report of the commission and the celebrations did not meet with unanimous approval, public opinion tended towards accepting Britain as a multicultural nation (↗ 5 The Burden of Representation).

The author's subsequent texts slightly shift in tone and style but display the same interest in the impact of multicultural issues on values, beliefs, identities, and relationships across the boundaries of nations, generations, race, class, and gender. Smith's second novel, *The Autograph Man* (2002), won the 2003 *Jewish Quarterly* Literary Prize for Fiction. It presents a Chinese-Jewish dealer of autographs, who is fascinated with the glossy surfaces of media and celebrities, but also searches for religion, truth, and relationships in the face of personal loss. Her third novel, *On Beauty* (2005), is partly based on her own experience as a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study of Harvard University (2002–2003). This novel, which won the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Somerset Maugham Award, is mostly set on a campus in New England and explores the conundrums of desire and morals, liberal values and discrimination in the relationship of two families. Smith's fourth novel, *NW* (2012), returns to the setting of her first novel and presents how four characters experience the chaotic metropolitan life of Northwest London. *NW* goes beyond her previous texts in its postmodern montage of styles and media. Smith also wrote and edited short fiction (e.g. *Piece of Flesh* 2001, *The Book of Other People* 2007), and she published two volumes of essays, *Fail Better: The Morality of the Novel* (2006) and *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (2009).

2 Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns

White Teeth is a family saga of immigrants that intertwines the lives of the Jamaican-born Bowden family, the Bangladeshi Iqbals, and the third-generation Polish Chalfens. The novel spans the twentieth century, connecting the colonial past in the British Empire with the postcolonial present in London. The Christian fundamentalist Hortense Bowden was born in Jamaica in 1907, the child of an English Captain and an Afro-Jamaican maid. Hortense joins her husband in England in 1972, where

their daughter Clara marries the lower-class Englishman Archie Jones and gives birth to their daughter Irie in 1975. The Bengali Muslim Samad Iqbal makes friends with the Englishman Archie Jones in the imperial forces of World War II, and rekindles their friendship when he moves to London in 1973. Samad marries the upper-class Bengali Alsana, who gives birth to the twins Magid and Millat in 1975. In the 1990s, the second-generation immigrants get involved with the middle-class, intellectual Chalfens, whose Jewish and Catholic traditions have been replaced by psychoanalysis and science. The family saga offers history from below through the experiences of the characters in the shape of the diachronic genealogy of families and a synchronic portrait of generations (cf. Erll 2007, 117–118). The novel is rife with conflicts of generation, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and ideology played out in colonial and post-colonial encounters, in domestic quarrels among husbands and wives, parents and children, in midlife crises and initiation stories. This section will firstly focus on conceptions of history between determination and contingency, and secondly on hybridity and identity in multicultural London.

2.1 History: Between Determination and Contingency

The titles of the novel's four parts indicate how relevant the past is in the lives of most major characters: "Archie 1974, 1945", "Samad 1984, 1857", "Irie 1990, 1907", "Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1999". The novel begins in the post-World War II era and follows a linear trajectory (1974–1999) with intermittent turns to the past (1945, 1857, 1907), establishing a network of present relationships and their historical roots (cf. Squires 2002, 56–57; Erll 2007, 124). The fact that the more recent year precedes that of the past in three of the four titles suspends the linear concept of cause and effect (cf. Sell 2006, 29). The relevance of genetic inheritance and cultural heritage is also captured in the leitmotif of white teeth and root canals. These dental metaphors suggest the relevance of biology and history, i.e. genetic inheritance, embodied experience, and the cultivation of cultural heritage. Cultural traditions form the roots of present identities, which can become uprooted upon migration or consolidated through finding one's roots (cf. Erll 2007, 121). Genes define what we are born with, but ageing and trauma can dissolve roots (cf. Braun 2013, 225). Rotten or lost teeth can be repaired or replaced, suggesting the option of (re-) constructing the past or leaving it behind (cf. Thompson 2005, 125; Itakura 2006, 131).

As a metahistorical novel, *White Teeth* offers ironic narrative comments on the past in the shape of the characters' situated experience and stories. Sell (2007, 158) maintains that "the novel enacts a dialectic between contingency and determinism." Characters experience and understand history as an unpredictable series of contingencies (Archie Jones), as a fateful cycle of repetitions (Samad Iqbal), as a linear development towards an impending apocalypse (Hortense Bowden) or of scientific progress (Marcus Chalfen; cf. Sell 2006, 29–30). Ball argues that the complex con-

nections between the stories “simultaneously reinforce and ironically complicate the relations between history and destiny, choice and consequence, accident and design” (2004, 241). However, in total, narrative comments, the characters’ unreliable versions of the past, and the twisted plots question determinist versions of history and develop an ironic comedy of history characterized by repetition as a farce.

Contingent events mark the war-experiences of the seventeen-year-old, naïve, nondescript, and pragmatic Archie Jones and the nineteen-year-old, passionate and intelligent Samad Iqbal. The Second World War ended Samad’s incipient studies of biology. One of Samad’s hands was crippled when a fellow soldier’s gun went off, an accident that terminated Samad’s army career and frustrated his desire to become a war hero. The two anti-heroes get separated from their battalion and stranded in Bulgaria, where they miss both the fighting and the ending of the war. Samad becomes a mentor of the Englishman, inverting the wonted colonial hierarchy. Getting his hands on a fascist doctor of eugenics through luck at playing cards with the doctor’s captors, Samad wants to grasp his last chance to contribute to the war effort through killing the prisoner of war. After a quarrel about whose war it is, Samad urges Archie to kill the POW, which would be illegal. Archie solves his moral dilemma between fighting evil and sparing the life of an unarmed prisoner through tossing a coin instead of making a moral choice. As usual, he shirks responsibility and yields life up to contingency. Chance saves the prisoner’s life, but ironically endangers Archie’s. While he directs his attention to the coin, the prisoner shoots him in the leg, a fact Archie hides from his pal. In sum, the friends’ war experience and wounds result from chance and farcical blunders rather than the heroic feat of killing the Nazi Samad would like to talk about time and again if anybody listened.

Samad’s fabulation of defeating the fascists is as tenuous as tracing his lineage to an anti-colonial rebel, Mangal Pande, who triggered the Indian Mutiny in 1857. It is somewhat unlikely that the Indian Hindu Mangal Pande could have been the Bengali Muslim’s ancestor (cf. Nair 2009, 6). British historians as well as the rest of Samad’s family and friends regard the sepoy (Indian soldier) Pande, who was scandalized by bullets greased with pork or beef fat, as a traitor, fool, and coward because he failed to kill both his English officer and then himself. One Indian civil servant and Samad, however, hold him as an emblem of anticolonial resistance. The narrator cautions the reader not to take the version of Pande as a drugged coward and traitor in British historiography as more plausible than Samad’s heroic version since it is neither one man nor one act but “complex forces, movements and deep currents that motivate wars and spark revolutions” (254).¹ This debate over the past satirizes both the imperial history and its counter-history, but Smith’s “‘mock’ revisionist historical novel” (Rupp 2010, 122–123) also calls for understanding Samad’s impassioned retrospect as moti-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated page references in brackets without further designation refer to Smith 2000.

vated by frustration, calling for sympathy. Samad's stories of Pande and World War II should compensate him for his humiliating socio-economic marginality in post-war England and reveal his divided loyalties and hybrid status at the same time.

Samad considers history as a cyclical connection of generations under the law of Allah: "you cannot *read* fate. You must *experience* it" (119). Samad's misfit son Millat, who rejects his father as a role model and joins militant Muslims, ironically seems to repeat the history of Pande his father failed to live up to. Under the influence of drugs, Millat attends the presentation of a genetically engineered mouse at the end of the novel to shoot Dr. Perret, whose eugenic research he believes to rival Allah's design. However, Millat's path is not determined by history, as Suárez (2012, 176) assumes. The narrator ironically confirms Samad's vision of determinist history, but inverts Samad's interpretation of his 'heroic ancestor' in calling Millat names: "He's a Pandy deep down. And there's mutiny in his blood" (526). Numerous inconsistencies undermine the determinist perspective: if Samad's relationship to Pande is beyond proof, so is Millat's; if genes were to dictate Millat's rebellious action at all, his twin brother Magid would not endorse its target, genetic engineering. History is marked by repetition with a difference, and Millat's plan is foiled because Archie saves Dr. Perret's life for a second time. In a further uncanny repetition of the past, Archie again is shot in the leg. This time, however, Archie does not act upon the toss of a coin but upon impulse. Ironically, at the very moment the anti-hero unexpectedly turns into a hero, his friend Samad realizes that his friend has been a 'coward' because he could not muster the courage to shoot the fascist doctor at the end of the war. Archie's moral feat is immediately qualified because he accidentally crashes the glass cage in the act, setting free the FutureMouse, and thereby foiling the scientific attempt at controlling life in a linear model of progress. In addition, the potential assassin goes free in the legal confusion over who of the twins shot at Dr. Perret. There is neither poetic justice nor traditional closure: the depraved Nazi is saved, the potential assassin cannot be convicted because the twins cannot be told apart, and the future of the mouse is uncertain. The scientists and the fundamentalists are held in check for a moment, but their basic conflict has not been resolved. Consequently, the plot reveals history to be neither a strictly linear nor cyclical development but repetition as a farce. However, the repetition of history as a tragedy has not been dismissed on principle but has just been barely prevented, which means that the novel's concept of history, war, and terror is ironic rather than naïve.

Samad's Muslim belief in cyclical fate compares to the fundamentalist Christian belief in linear destiny, a faith paradoxically both fed and undermined by contingency. Irie's black Jamaican grandmother Ambrosia converted to the Jehova's Witnesses' Christian fundamentalism, a framework that makes her interpret the Earthquake of 1907 as Judgement Day, killing a colonial master in the act of molesting her and triggering the birth of her child. She transforms her subjection to Christianity into a form of empowerment against 'corrupt' English culture and male repression, a lesson she imparts to her colored daughter Hortense, who emigrates to England,

where she gives birth to Clara. Repeated errors about the dates of the impending apocalypse with a bloodbath of the sinners cannot shake Hortense's faith but certainly undermine its credibility.

Christian and Muslim fundamentalists object to Chalfen's genetic engineering as an arrogant appropriation of God's prerogative, a critique that appropriately addresses Chalfen's hyperbolic self-image as master over life and death. These 'closed', religious or enlightened models of history as determined by God or science stand against the more modest, 'open' model of history in the novel, such as a contingent series of singularities and untoward situations that characters muddle through, farcical repetition with a difference, and a postmodern plurality of small (hi)stories after the end of grand narratives.

2.2 Multiculturalism, Hybridity, and Identity

For second-generation immigrants, history is no longer as central a reference point as it is for Samad and Archie but takes second place behind the hybridity of racial mixing and combining ethnic cultures. Smith delineates a "memorial culture in transition" (Rupp 2010, 119) since the colonial memory and the postcolonial counter-memory of the first-generation (Samad Iqbal, Hortense Bowden) differs from second-generation eclecticism. Nevertheless, identity is always positioned in specific historical and cultural contexts and in the process of being generated in representations (cf. Hall 2003, 234).

The idea of a nation or ethnicity is often associated with some unity of culture, and multiculturalism with the conflict or co-existence of separate ethnicities. The concept of hybridity presupposes genetic (racial) or ethnic difference, but the definition of difference as radical or relative, binary or multiple, spatial or temporal, is a point of debate in theory and in the novel. The idea of separate cultures has been challenged, for example, by Welsch with an eye on interrelation and Bhabha with a focus on disruption. Welsch's transcultural model focuses on past and present interrelationships between and within cultures and individuals, which have rendered contemporary mankind all hybrid and transcultural ~~now~~. The multiple options of transcultural combinations do not efface differences but multiply them (cf. Welsch 2009, 8–12), without, however, eliminating conflict (cf. Seeber 2010, 102–103). The nation as a rhetorical and narrative strategy, Bhabha argues, is "more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring" (1994, 140). Minorities add to existing cultural differences, challenge dominant forms of knowledge and identification, and require transcultural negotiations (cf. Bhabha 1994, 162). Smith juxtaposes all of these conflicting ideas of cultural identities, differences, and hybridity within and between characters.

Time and again, Smith exposes the problems of defining identities in fixed, self-contained boxes of us and them. Archie Jones may count as the representative

of a pragmatic, non-intellectual, lower-class Englishman, but he is a nobody with next to no particular interests or features, as insignificant as a pebble on a beach (11). In spite of his Welsh family name and his father's denigration of their family as "chaff", Archie is proud of his family's "[g]ood honest English stock" (99), an empty cliché. When he is put to the test by Samad to define Englishness, Archie mumbles helplessly: "democracy and Sunday dinners, and... and... promenades and piers, and bangers and mash – and the things that are *ours*. Not *yours*" (120). Archie's binary definition of the notion of his own culture and identity is rather fuzzy, but complemented by his liberal attitude towards others, as all of his friends are non-English (cf. Seeber 2010, 114). Archie represents the open-minded Englishman, whose Jamaican wife Clara and daughter Irie meet with resentment from his racist boss and fellow-workers with a more exclusive notion of 'us' and 'them' (69–73).

Archie's friend, the Bengali Samad, is another spokesman of separate cultures, but he struggles both with his own and his family's positions between Muslim religion and Western culture. As an imperial soldier with divided loyalties, Samad, who is in despair about being a cripple and his faith being crippled, asks himself whether Indians would have an Englishman like him, the English an Indian like him (112). In defiance of uncertainty and temptation, Samad repeatedly asserts his position as a believer, but his life is marked by backsliding. He is sexually attracted to the English teacher of his sons, Poppy Burt-Jones, who adheres to a superficial ideal of multiculturalism and projects her Orientalist stereotypes of exotic Indian culture on Samad (132–133, 159–160). Suffering from qualms about compromising his faith, his purity, and his role as a father, Samad ends his affair with Poppy and tries to become a good Muslim.

Samad's wife, Alsana, is also concerned about the purity of her family, but more in racial than in cultural terms. She is afraid that if her son was to marry an Englishwoman and they had children, their Bengali genes would be diluted and no longer visible, which "is both the most irrational and natural feeling in the world" (327). Ironically, the fears of the immigrant and the racist are somewhat similar: "But 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*" (327). However, when Samad provokes Alsana with his stubborn insistence on the need to protect their Bengali culture against Western 'corruption', Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* by implication (7 20 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*), and her beloved Hindi movies, Alsana consults the *Readers' Digest Encyclopedia* on what the term 'Bengali' means. Finding out that most Bengalis descend from Indo-Aryan migrants, she concludes that she is "Western after all! [...] [I]t'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!" (236).

The second generation is less concerned with its Bengali heritage, but responds in different ways towards their multicultural environment. The twins' inverse devel-

opment questions genetic determinism and endorses cultural influence and individual choice. Magid embodies his father's interest in intellectual English education (science) and his initial desire to belong, Millat his father's temptations of sex and drugs and his struggle with Muslim faith. Samad feels alienated from Magid's denial of his Bengali name as he calls himself Mark Smith (151) and from Millat's indulgence in dissipation. The narrator comments that the life of immigrants is a tragicomic

rerun. We have been here before. This is like watching TV in Bombay or Kingston or Dhaka, watching the same old British sitcoms [...]. 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. (161)

Samad would like to send both of his sons back to Bangladesh in order to lead them away from Western corruption and back to their 'roots', but the routes they take counteract his plans: "Despite his own religious hypocrisy, he is determined to raise his children according to Islam, hoping that religion can act as an antidote to the disorientation brought about by the plurality of their attachments as second-generation immigrants" (Mirze 2008, 193). However, the impact of the past "on the present and the future is unavoidable but also unpredictable" (Ball 2004, 239). Samad can only raise the money for one son, but ironically, Magid returns as an almost perfect, but brown, Englishman, formed by traditional colonial education in Bangladesh. Immigrants, the narrator maintains, are heading for the future but "cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow" (466). His brother Millat "didn't need to go back home: he stood schizophrenic, one foot in Bengal and one in Willesden" (219). Millat "is the epitome of cultural hybrid identity" (Beukema 2008, 9). He dresses in the style of hip-hoppers, loves Public Enemy, Hollywood Mafia movies, Kung Fu, and Black Power. Millat leads a gang of Raggastani, who speak "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*, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck *geezer* who would fight in their corner if necessary" (231). Millat's subsequent radicalization is a prototypical response to pervasive xenophobia or Islamophobia, which reduces him to the negative stereotype of a Paki without a face or a voice of his own (233–234). Millat and his crew protest against a blasphemous book in Bradford, an allusion to Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (↗ 20 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*). Later, Millat joins Muslim fundamentalists and tries hard to give up the 'Western sins' of sex and drugs, but the movie *GoodFellas* still defines the norms of his masculinity, anger, and style in a hybrid way even as he replaces Liotta's 'gangster' by 'muslim': "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a Muslim" (446). Here, the hybrid fusion of cultural traditions does not lead to transcultural understanding but exacerbates the conflicts within the individual, the family, and British society.

Archie's and Clara's daughter Irie shares Magid's desire for belonging to the white, educated middle class but experiences a similar lack of recognition from English culture as Millat. "It is through the character of Irie that the anxieties of youth and immigrant communities are displayed, and her function in the novel is often to articulate opinions that the narrative voice can only do more intrusively" (Squires 2002, 27), such as being sick and tired of the permanent turn towards the past (cf. Rupp 2010, 124–125). In contrast to the handsome Iqbal twins, Irie is worried about her genetic heritage as a black woman. She suffers from her kinky hair and big body, which seem to be less attractive to boys than slim white girls: "There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land." (265–266). Irie feels that she is "all *wrong*" (268). Her frustration with her 'African' body "could be read as a metaphorical denial of part of her cultural origins" (Thompson 2005, 128). Impressed by the long lineage of the Chalfens, her own roots appear to be rather broken (cf. Thompson 2005, 133). Irie's mapping of her ancestry "parodies the conventional patrilineal family tree sacralized in family bibles and accurately represents the confused, unknown, illegitimate, multiple legacies and bloodlines of Irie's, crossing and recrossing the Atlantic" (Nair 2009, 8). Irie, for whom "the Chalfens were more English than the English" (328), "wanted to merge [...] to be of one flesh, separated from the chaotic, random flesh of her own family and transgenically fused with another" (342).

Ironically, the white English middle-class Chalfens have Polish, Jewish, and Catholic roots, confirming Alsana's insight that nobody is truly and purely English. Walters argues that "the cultural hybridisation of English society has made concepts of ethnicity and race indeterminate" (Walters 2005, 315). In the words of the Arab immigrant Mickey Abdul: "We're all English now, mate" (192), a statement equivalent to "we are all hybrid post-colonials" (Head 2003, 114). Since the family metonymically stands for the nation, "the quotidian unit of the family becomes the site where difference literally starts at home" (Trimm 2015, 154). The Chalfens' genetic and cultural hybridity is mirrored in Joyce's professional interest in cross-pollination as evolutionary progress and Marcus's genetic engineering as a path towards the "*perfectibility* of all life [...] for social and scientific progress" (312). However, both of their projects aim at controlling difference and change, and they both fail to some extent, stressing challenge and disruption through otherness and contingency. It is true that Magid and Irie make progress in studying science under Marcus's tutelage, but they were ready and willing to do so in the first place. Joyce takes on Millat as a project, who had been assigned to her care due to deviant behavior at school. She feels attracted to the handsome stranger, and assumes a motherly responsibility for him. Millat's misbehavior increases her interest in him, as the Other motivates her intervention as a cultivated and civilized Englishwoman. However, she does not realize that Millat looks through her and exploits her. His challenge only endorses her binary perspective, but the narrator notes how the assumed hierarchy of her position and knowledge is undermined (cf. Bhabha 1994, 162).

Her husband Marcus created the transgenic FutureMouse, “*eliminating the random*” (340). The scientist’s claim to be able to predetermine life and death appropriates divine power in a fundamentalist fashion. Marcus’s “compulsive desire to eliminate randomness seems to encourage the genetic essentialism” (Suarez 2012, 180) that reduces human beings to their genes. However, in their ambition to control deviation (Magid, cancer), the Chalfens neglect their own son Josh and inadvertently provoke his turn against his father’s genetic engineering from the militant position of animal rights.

The ending asserts transgenic and transcultural hybridity but denies control and domination through fundamentalism of any kind. Fundamentalists oppose each other at the presentation of the FutureMouse. The millennialist Hortense Bowden, the radical animal rights activist Josh and the Muslim fundamentalist Millat oppose the scientific determinism on display. Archie’s intervention saves the eugenic mentor of genetic engineering from Magid’s bullet, asserting humanism and agency in the face of the post-humanist attempt at genetic control (cf. Buchanan 2013, 19–20). However, the novel shows an ironic interplay of choice and chance since Archie accidentally smashes the showcase. The escape of the mouse seems to defy essentialism and fundamentalism (cf. Tew 2010, 134), but nobody wins the argument: Chalfen can no longer prove genetic predetermination, but he could create a new transgenic mouse, and the fundamentalists might interpret the escape as a case of divine intervention. The opposite forms of fundamentalism are suspended through contingency, but not necessarily defeated. In opposition to Samad’s and the Chalfens’ attempt at controlling hybridity, the novel champions the free play of transgenic and transcultural hybridity: Irie sleeps with both twins within a short time, so that it is impossible for her to say – or genetic examination to prove – whether Magid or Millat is the father of her baby (cf. Suárez 2012, 181). The baby with ‘white’, ‘brown’, and ‘black’ genes may grow up with Irie, her grandmother, and Josh, and connect with her ‘uncles’ Millat and Magid, which means an exposure to diverse, already hybridized cultural influences, the outcome of which will be unknown. The human being – as the FutureMouse – is more than its genes and beyond determinism (cf. Braun 2013, 233). Irie, with her complex background, embodies “the emerging model for contemporary Englishness” (Bentley 2007, 496). Irie’s vision of a time “when roots won’t matter anymore” (527) is complemented by the narrator’s vision of Irie with her daughter, Josh, and grandmother on a beach in Jamaica. Her return does not necessarily mean that transcultural London or cosmopolitan identity is a chimera, but that she can “claim multiple spaces of belonging” (Nair 2009, 10). This perspective corresponds to Welsch’s positive vision of a transcultural world, but Christian, Muslim, and post-human forms of fundamentalism, whether genetic engineering or animal rights radicalism, qualify the optimistic image.

3 Aesthetics: Narrative and Literary Strategies

Smith wrote her novel “in the familiar frame of the comic realist mode” (Bentley 2007, 497) in the traditions of the English novel of Dickens and in the wake of the post-colonial novels of Rushdie and Kureishi, “mingling ethnic origins, faiths and families” (Squires 2002, 16) in multicultural London. Within the realist paradigm, *White Teeth* is a veritable portmanteau of intertextuality: it draws on the sacred texts of the Bible and the Q’ran, colonial and postcolonial history, e.g. the Indian Mutiny, colonial Jamaica and the Congo, World War II, the “Rivers of blood”-speech, the burning of Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* (↗ 20 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*), on popular culture, such as Hollywood movies, Hip Hop, postmodern chaos theory with fractal repetitions, and the postcolonial theory of hybridity.

Following comic realism, Smith presents us with an ironic, third-person, and largely omniscient narrator, very realistic settings and dialogues, somewhat comic protagonists, and comic coincidences and contingencies that tend to undermine the probability of the plot. In addition, the narrator is self-reflexive, “both informs and teases the reader, extending authority, interrogating authority, and hence foregrounding the narrative’s fictionality” (Squires 2002, 62; cf. Groes 2011, 223). The humorous authorial narrator reveals not only an aversion to ideology of any kind but also shows empathy towards the characters who fall prey to fundamentalist ideals. The narrator presents diverse multicultural positions from the perspectives of characters, often giving their idio- and sociolects in free indirect discourse (cf. Childs 2005, 209). The novel is thoroughly dialogic in terms of voices and ethnic varieties, a heteroglot mix of “new ‘breeds’ of hybrid, spoken languages” (Groes 2011, 227), which fulfils both a comic and a referential function of constructing “London’s social, psychological and cultural diversity” (Seeber 2010, 104; cf. Squires 2002, 64–65). “[T]he adoption of linguistic variants by London teenagers,” Logaldo (2010, 117) argues, “appears as the result of a more or less conscious wavering between historical (ethnic, generational, class) issues and cultural issues, between background situations and personal aspirations or group identifications.” The novel’s “multi-voicedness is inseparable from the notion of globalized English in a post-colonial framework,” and its realist representation of direct speech is very close to “the transcription of real life dialogues in scientific surveys” (Logaldo 2010, 118).

The characters appear in conspicuously mismatched pairs that draw attention to their shortcomings, such as the intellectual Samad and the naïve Archie, old Archie and young Clara, old Samad and young Alsana, good Magid and bad Millat, angry Millat and gentle Irie. Squires (2002, 60) attributes Smith’s stereotyping of characters and their subordination to the plot to the choice of the comic genre. However, the comic situations do not detract from understanding the serious conundrums of the protagonists Archie, Samad, Millat, and Irie (cf. Seeber 2010, 106). The comic, improbable causality conveys “an erratic, occasionally portentous and yet mundane reality underlying the various lives [...] with a sense of trauma and ineptitude” (Tew 2010,

51). The ending of the novel artfully draws all the threads of the narrative together (cf. Head 2003, 113–114) but “risks its carefully built up balance between empathy and commentary, elevating comedy at the expense of complexity” (Squires 2002, 58). In sum, the novel itself is a hybrid mix of comedy and realism, popular and academic culture, oral heteroglossia and intertextuality.

4 Reception and Theoretical Perspectives

White Teeth met with a phenomenal response. Many popular readers, literary critics, and academic scholars received the novel extremely well, praised its good entertainment and new multicultural and hybrid vision of England. It was adapted as a mini-series by Channel 4 Television in 2002 and has even been translated into more than twenty languages. *White Teeth* had also been the subject of discussion in more than one hundred interviews, reviews, and scholarly essays by 2010 (cf. Tew 2010, 110–135). The initial, overwhelmingly positive reactions to the novel have been qualified by critics who take issue with the novel’s comic perspective on the problems of multicultural society, only to be countered by balanced appreciations of the novel’s irony and complexity. The major issues covered are the novel’s marketing and popularity, its mix of realism and comedy, its take on history, multiculturalism, hybridity, and identity.

Some critics are skeptical of the novel’s success and relate that to marketing, commodification, and light entertainment (cf. Squires 2002, 69–82). Jakubiak (2008, 202) says that the novel is easily consumable and that its young, attractive, ethnic, and female author has been an asset in international marketing. She complains that this positive image constructed by the entertainment industry shapes readers’ views of the novel’s optimism to the detriment of its rather mixed picture of multiculturalism (Jakubiak 2008, 211; cf. Nicklas 2013, 125–129). In a more pronounced way, McLeod (2013, 158–161) finds fault with Smith, who, following Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *Imaginary Homelands*, presents us with a commodified hybridity in the multicultural metropolis, which ultimately subjects dirt, disorder, and uncertainty to narrative order and a reconciliation of opposites that is less provocative than orthodox. Tew (2010, 59) criticizes the naïvely optimistic vision of multicultural harmony with the benefit of hindsight concerning terrorist attacks. Thomas (2006) was more explicit in her scathing remarks: “Smith’s brand of undemanding multiculturalism could serve as an anthem for the complacent self-image of London as the harmonious melting pot. If 9/11 made hysterical realism as a genre irrelevant, 7/7 has exposed the fatuousness of Smith’s cute celebration of cultural hybridity”. Tew and Thomas seem to expect authors to have preternatural prescience since not even the secret services anticipated the extent of radicalization and terrorism. In addition, it would be wrong to reduce the novel to a mere “aesthetic commodity”, Squire (2002, 41–42) argues,

since “her ironic inscriptions of the reception of postcolonial culture can be understood as a paradoxical strategy of both acceptance and resistance, an argument for both her critical and commercial success”. In response to the skepticism concerning the hype Smith comments on how she grew up with the notion that what 20 million people like cannot be good and she herself was very harsh about her work (cf. Bollen 2012). She concedes that she puts forth a rather optimistic view of multiculturalism, but hedges her criticism by referring to her own experience of the normality of multicultural coexistence in North London (cf. Anon.), a fact that would be supported by the sociologist Gilroy as demotic cosmopolitanism (cf. Sizemore 2005, 65–66).

Other critics are more concerned with formal inconsistency. Wood (2005, 168) considers the novel entertaining but flawed: its “hysterical realism” exhausts conventions of realism in exuberant storytelling of multiple narratives with intricate connections and strange conjunctions of events, actually evading reality. He suggests that Smith’s characters retain human traits and that “her details are instantly convincing, both funny and moving” (2005, 176) on the one hand. On the other hand, the narrator’s intrusion and caricature undermine the credibility of the characters. The book as a whole is uneven: “As realism, it is incredible, as satire, it is cartoonish, as cartoon, it is too realistic” (Wood 2005, 172). In opposition to Wood’s critique of excessive form, Paproth (2008, 9–11) maintains that the novel is too controlled because it undermines the characters’ search for fundamental meanings in an uncertain postmodern world but it contains their stories in a modernist narrative structure that offers readers a rather traditional literary experience. Zadie Smith herself concedes Wood’s critique of her sprawling narrative, but she refutes his claim that her book lacks feeling and humanity. She claims that works of high artifice are not opposed to but express humanity, “which derives from their reverence for language, their precision, their intellect and, more than anything, from their humour” (Smith 2001). Smith continued to write her next two novels in the realist and modernist traditions, but she employed a more experimental, postmodern style in her fourth novel, *NW*.

Most critics with a postcolonial approach consider the novel as a rather balanced and fairly appropriate representation of immigrant generations in the multicultural metropolis. *White Teeth*, Head claims, “part celebration, part cautionary tale, is an apt summation of the triumphs and the limits of British multiculturalism at the end of the century” (2003, 111). Smith’s novel is cited as a realistic portrait of the “fluidity of social formations in the British capital, along with its inhabitants’ intergenerational adaptation” (Knauer 2008, 185). The novel presents London “as a contact zone for cultures around the world” (Dalleo 2008, 92) that transforms both the immigrants’ and the hosts’ cultures, a process that is particularly evident in the hybrid, Carribeanized ways the younger generation employs in mixing cultures and languages (Dalleo 2008, 94–95). The novel cautions the reader not to idealize Great Britain as a “Happy Multicultural Land” (465) because the immigrants’ multiple affiliations result in uncertainty, a lack or excess of belonging in an uneasy multicultural setting that calls for a constant re-negotiation of identities (cf. Thompson 2005, 123, 135; Trimm

2015, 155). “Hybridity is no longer an exception to a concept of identity based on some kind of unity, or even unity in diversity”, Moss argues, as “[c]ultural and racial hybridities are becoming increasingly ordinary. The significance of this ordinariness lies in the pivotal notion of a tolerance or acceptance of diversity in opposition to the potential fear or prejudice that comes out of a desire for purity” (Moss 2003, 12; cf. Sizemore 2005, 65–68). Tancke cautions against a rosy view of hybridity because it is qualified by “painful effects of ethnic mixing and the blurring of racial and cultural boundaries” (2013, 28). She adds that the “narrative’s emphasis on the palpably material impact of history, on violence and the body jars with contemporary fantasies of playful hybridity and autonomous self-fashioning” (Tancke 2013, 37).

The novel does not present a blinkered vision of multicultural harmony because neither racism nor fundamentalism are absent (cf. Moss 2003, 15; Nair 2009, 9). “London’s utopian conviviality is marred by the survival and reinforcement of these ‘races’ and discrete identities whose boundaries are policed by violence” (Suárez 2012, 182–183), but racism “is continually greeted with comic derision rather than fearful submission” (Squires 2002, 40). The novel considers Muslim fundamentalists as a serious threat but does not necessarily take their representatives serious (cf. Perfect 2014, 94–95) even if it understands their motivation (cf. Childs 2006, 10). Millat’s combination of pop culture and fundamentalism appears to be comic but corresponds to the current version of the postmodern pop-jihad (cf. Falkenhayner 2014, 74). The novel goes beyond the popular projection of fundamentalism on ‘unenlightened’ Muslims as the Other of Western culture. *White Teeth* also reveals fundamentalism in Christianity as empowerment (cf. Childs 2006, 9), and attributes the same motivation to genetic engineering as a fundamentalism of rationality. Since any position is criticized, Tew asks, what is the overall norm of the book? If there is an ethics, it seems to be that of tolerance, respect, and relativity usually absent in the satirized characters under observation, but other “cultural shibboleths such as liberalism, political correctness and multiculturalism” (Tew 2010, 50) do not escape censure.

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