# COLOURFUL TEETH: A NEW POSTCOLONIAL REALITY IN ZADIE SMITH'S NOVEL

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*Abstract: Zadie Smith's novel White Teeth is the perfect illustration of a new type of uniqueness characteristic of the New World. East and West come closer together in this exotic narration, redefined by the particular environments people inhabit. The concepts of East and West are thus (re)examined and the paper's aim is to analyze how difference can turn into sameness when strict definitions of the self can no longer be imposed and individuals state their own affiliation(s).*

*Key words: postcolonial reality; self/ other; tradition vs. popular culture*

Zadie Smith is one of the contemporary writers who could easily be labeled as coming from two cultures and thus gaining insight into both the New World and the lost traditions of a small community. Belonging to the postcolonial world, she easily eschews such drawer-like definitions of the self and rather targets a broader audience, with a more general view on contemporary life and its immediate issues. Her first novel, *White Teeth*, can be read both as a (hi)story of immigrant life in London, and as a family saga tracing the destiny of characters as varied as Bengali Muslims, English low- and middle-class workers, exotic stalkers, eclectic Jehovah's Witnesses, spoilt children, cultured mistresses and even Swedish gynecologists. They are all united by the visible yet unseen city: a framework for the stories and lives to unfold, rise or shatter under the magnifying glass of urban challenges.

The daughter of a Jamaican mother and an English father, Smith is the very mirror of her own characters: she was born in England but her skin speaks of a different reality. Thus she embodies the 'East meets West' idea, reflecting the new identity of this globalized century. Accordingly, the characters in her novel cannot be but an eclectic gathering which reflects one or the other side of the story. As we shall see, this dichotomy that Edward Said speaks about (see Said, 1979: 43) is also present in the novel, but the new reality dictates also a mélange between these two apparently rigid concepts.

The novel opens in a rather spectacular manner, with a certain Alfred Archibald Jones attempting to take his life on a "nasty urban street" (Smith, 2000: 3-4), which is characteristic of his experience so far. But like everything else in his life, his suicidal attempt is also a failure. Fortunately, he ends up meeting his future wife, Clara Bowden, who descends the stairs as if in an old, glamorous, MGM movie:

> She walked down the stairs in slow motion, surrounded by afterglow and fuzzy lighting. And not only was she the most beautiful thing he had ever seen […] She smelt musty, womanly, like a bundle of your favourite clothes. She wore her sexuality with an older woman's ease, and not […] like an awkward purse, never knowing how to hold it, where to hang it or when to just put it down (Smith, 2000: 24).

The description would work perfectly for any attractive woman, and Smith does not render the other striking feature: Clara was black. Instead of approaching the character from a



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political point of view, the author chooses to charmingly depict a different type of "imperfection": the complete lack of teeth in the top of her mouth. It is this detail that makes her different, not her skin. By avoiding to interpret the skin as a fetish (see Homi Bhabha, 2002: 78), Zadie Smith takes her character out of the postcolonial gallery and turns her difference into sameness. Although Archie's employer does hint at the racial issue, making vague excuses such as "I'd spit on that Enoch Powell … but then again he does have a point, doesn't he? […] I mean, it's like Delhi in Euston every Monday morning" (Smith, 2000: 72), Archie does not react in any way. To him, there is no skin issue, no debate about his wife being of a different color, because 21st century life has become colourless. Neither of the two perceives their marriage as a compromise, as longing for the other colour (as Frantz Fanon would define it; cf. 1967: 47-51), nor do they ever talk about race.

Nevertheless, the Western society he belongs to sees in his friendship with the East a rather exotic behaviour:

> 'Oh, Archie, you *are* funny,' said Maureen sadly, for she had always fancied Archie a bit but never more than a *bit* because of this strange way he had about him, always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans like he didn't even notice and now he's gone and married one and hadn't even thought it worth mentioning what colour she was until the office dinner when she turned up black as anything and Maureen almost choked on her prawn cocktail (Smith, 2000: 69).

Archie's "friendly relations" with the East are seen as a "strange way", an extravaganza that not everybody can afford nowadays. In a world dominated by very precise identity boxes, not mentioning the skin colour of your wife may cause accidental choking with some people. Society does indeed insist upon playing tricks on these New World individuals, forcing upon them definitions which should bring back their less glorious past, and retracing their heavy steps to the new city: "This and little more had constituted the ceremony. Archie was passed a pen and put down his name (Alfred Archibald Jones), nationality (English) and age (47). Hovering for a moment over the box entitled 'Occupation', he decided upon 'Advertising: (Printed Leaflets)', then signed himself away. Clara wrote down her name (Clara Iphegenia Bowden), nationality (Jamaican) and age (19). Finding no box interested in her occupation, she went straight for the decisive dotted line, swept her pen across it, and straightened up again, a Jones" (Smith, 2000: 50). However, for Zadie Smith the focus shifts again: instead of parading about the required identity boxes, she decides to ridicule the form which completely glosses over a woman's occupation. Clara does not think about such ardent issues either, but rather shows the determination of a woman in love, eager to become one with her husband. Nationality or no nationality involved.

The Joneses are thus placed in the middle of the debate, being "both/and", Western and Eastern, white and black, common and exquisite, modern and traditional, all at the same time. Their relationship does not imply any discussions about race because they have ceased to see the colour of the other – their reality is far beyond the concept of race and resides more in the human value of the other.

The other side of the story, i.e. the Eastern side, is represented by the Iqbals, Archie's Bengali friends. Having fought together a war reminiscent of Dino Buzzati rather than Erich Maria Remarque, Archie and Samad Iqbal share a friendship which has nothing to do with race. Although when they first met, in 1945, Archie's vision of this friendship was more of a colonial one, in accordance with the time frame ("the kind of friendship an Englishman makes on holiday"; Smith, 2000: 96), times have changed and they now flee their homes in order to meet at O'Connell's, their constant shelter from every-day life. With plenty of bad food to go around, they enjoy the privilege of intimacy in an Irish place owned by a Muslim called Abdul-Mickey. One cannot escape the satire of the postcolonial world without acknowledging it first!



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Archie thinks of Samad's family as "not *those* kind of Indians" (Smith, 2000: 54), which means that they are not traditionalist, or judgmental of one by the way in which one can cook the curry. While Alsana matches trainers to her sari, Samad is trying to revive old traditional values he perceives as crucial. Western temptations tend to lure him as well into the realm of real life, where you can flirt with your mistress at ease or masturbate in peace. This is also the reason why he wants his sons to be raised in the Eastern tradition and with Eastern values to hold dear. Samad makes thus a deliberate choice between East and West, refusing (at least theoretically) to be swallowed by an ever-expanding consumer society.

There is also the pure Western side of the story represented by the Chalfens, a typically upper class English family enjoying all the privileges of a rich education and embodying the vision of a West at its highest power:

> Every Chalfen proclaimed themselves mentally healthy and emotionally stable. The children had their oedipal complexes early and in the right order, they were fiercely heterosexual, they adored their mother and admired their father, and, unusually, this feeling only increased as they reached adolescence. Rows were rare, playful and only ever over political or intellectual topics (the importance of anarchy, the need for higher taxes, the problem of South Africa, the soul/body dichotomy), upon which they all agreed anyway (Smith, 2000: 313-4).

Unlike the Joneses and the Iqbals, they are a pillar for the British society, working on scientific projects and nurturing plants and people. Theirs is the Western way of doing things, helping with anything they can and taking part in as many projects as possible. Their family history goes back as early as 1675, everything being written down in every little detail. By comparison, Archie Jones "could give no longer record of his family than his father's own haphazard appearance on the planet in the back-room of a Bromley public house circa 1895 or 1896 or quite possibly 1897, depending on which nonagenarian ex-barmaid you spoke to." (Smith, 2000: 337). For the Western world a recorded history is more than necessary, while the East is more fascinated with the gift of oral storytelling which might alter some facts. The three families stand only for one type of relationship to the West, since their children are the very products of the West, each of them having his or her own approach to the society they live in.

The cosmopolitan London reality has allowed them to turn their racial particularity into a given which people have stopped questioning. Upon having a child, there will be no question as to its becoming "lighter", nor any prayers to Almighty-God concerning this issue. Irie will indeed inherit Clara's Jamaican features, as "[t]he European proportions of Clara's figure had skipped a generation" (Smith, 2000: 265), and she will be displeased with them as well as with her hair. She will even go to a mediocre hairdresser in order to have her hair straightened as much as possible. Her drive, however, does not come from a psychological identification with the white majority; it is rather the impulse of a teenager in love, desperately attempting to woe her unobservant lover. As she sees herself with a hair that (literally, as well) does not belong to her, she removes it as if it were an old, undesired coat and chooses her old self again. Irie refuses to force upon herself an identity which cannot complete her, but would only strip her of the person who she really is.

Irie does not think much about her own complexion, but it is the others who try to "place" her in the right identity box: "'Pale, sir! Freckles an' every ting. You Mexican?' 'No.' 'Arab?' 'Half Jamaican. Half English.' 'Half-*caste*', Jackie explained patiently. 'Your mum white?' 'Dad.' Jackie wrinkled her nose. 'Usually de udder way roun'." (Smith, 2000: 273). The need for an exact definition of one's roots determines the others to guess the racial identity of Irie's parents, although Irie does not perceive herself as being 'half-caste'. She is rather the imminent result of the reality she lives in, where East and West have joined hands into a new kind of reunion. Irie refuses to be burdened by history and chooses instead to focus on her



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intellectual development. And still, at the end of the novel, she does pursue her roots by looking up her grandmother and choosing to live with her for the time being.

The Iqbal children are as Western as any of their British colleagues, lured by the city they live in. Because of these temptations Samad Iqbal will try to make a decision regarding his twins, as he is determined to send one of them "home" to learn the old traditional ways. This proves, however, to be rather difficult, since he cannot choose between the bad, ill-behaved boy (Millat) and the cold, intellectual one (Magid). The decision encompasses more than just the small Iqbal family unit:

> *The trouble with Millat*, mutinous Millat aged thirteen, who farted in mosque, chased blondes and smelt of tobacco, and not just Millat but *all* the children: Mujib (fourteen, criminal record for joyriding), Khandakar (sixteen, white girlfriend, wore mascara in the evenings), Dipesh (fifteen, marijuana), Kurshed (eighteen, marijuana and very baggy trousers), Khaleda (seventeen, sex before marriage with Chinese boy), Bimal (nineteen, doing a diploma in Drama); *what was wrong with all the children*, what had gone wrong with these first descendants of the great ocean-crossing experiment? Didn't they have everything they could want? Was there not a substantial garden area, regular meals, clean clothes from Marks 'n' Sparks, A-class top-notch education? (Smith, 2000: 218).

An entire young generation is seduced by the liberties the city can offer, preoccupied not with the type of meat they eat, but with the pot they smoke and the Levis they are going to wear. Millat is the epitome of his generation, collecting everything "worth having", from albums, posters, special-edition t-shirts, club fliers, Air Max trainers, *2000 AD Magazine*, *Catcher in the Rye*, a guitar, *Godfather I* and *II*, *Mean Streets* and *Dog Day Afternoon*. When threatened by a great storm and urged by Samad to take some "essential, life or death things", Millat and Alsana make the most unexpected picks, according to the still-trying-to-cling-to-tradition Samad: "Millat: *Born to Run* (album) – Springsteen; Poster of De Niro in 'You talkin' to me' scene from *Taxi Driver*; Betamax copy of *Purple Rain* (rock movie); Shrink-to-fit Levis 501 (red tab); Pair of black converse baseball shoes; *A Clockwork Orange* (book); Alsana: sewing machine; Three pots of tiger balm; Leg of lamb (frozen); Foot bath; Londa Goodman's *Starsigns* (book); Huge box of beedi cigarettes; Divargiit Singh in *Moonshine over Kerala* (musical video)" (Smith, 2000: 222). The problem with this long list is that nobody thought of picking up the Qur'ān!

In a world dominated by consumerism, seduced by pop culture and brought up with everything but classical or sitar music, the Iqbal children have no choice but to make their way through all these temptations. Samad's decision to send the good one away, back to India, will prove wrong. Remaining at home, Millat starts to date all the girls he can seduce, smoke marijuana in his spare time and frighten the neighbourhoods with some gang or the other. Tired of these routines, he joins the fundamentalists KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation), who will try to revive in him the echoes of tradition. Yet, what drives Millat has nothing in common with religion: it is his rebellious nature, not his Muslim self that joins the group. Even if he tries to behave in the expected manner, he ends up

> in a cold sweat from trying to recall all that was halal or haraam, fard or sunnat, makruh-tahrima (prohibited with much stress) or makruh-tanzihi (prohibited, but to a lesser degree). At a loss [he …] stood in the mirror and practiced a different, easier routine, one he knew in intimate detail: *You lookin' at me? You lookin' at me? Well, who the fuck else are you looking at, huh? I can't see anybody else in here. You lookin' at me?* He was in the swing of it, revealing his invisible sliding guns and knives to the wardrobe door (Smith, 2000: 460).



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Replacing the *Taxi Driver* routine of "talkin'" with "lookin'", he updates and adapts it to his immediate needs, simultaneously identifying with Travis Bickle's anger and with his goal: "Here is someone who stood up." It is not the Qur'ān he needs, but the sound of the streets, once more reconfirming his belonging here, today as always.

Growing up with the realities of London life, surrounded by a host of identities (be they given, borrowed or stolen), their life is dictated by the street. There can be no melancholy about the (in)glorious past, because *this* is their past: stalkers crying out and covering the city noise, middle-class neighbourhoods and a school celebrating every "religious or secular event, be it Christmas, Ramadan, Chinese New Year, Diwali, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, the birthday of Haile Selassie and the death of Martin Luther King" (Smith, 2000: 129). No matter how hard Samad tries to revive feelings of family pride when talking about Mangal Pande, their great-great-grandfather and the first person to shoot a bullet in the Indian Mutiny, his children cannot relate to this narrative. To them, it is a mere story coming from a background they do not yearn for, a past which does not belong to them, but to a generation they have nothing in common with.

Ironically enough, Magid is sent to India in order to escape all that and be able to trace back his past without the influence of any external factors. At first it appears that he will become one with the new place, slaughtering a goat, living in the mountains and even escaping a rebellion. Yet, these are mere facts; when brought home with the financial help of a Jewish scientist, Marcus Chalfen, Magid is even more European than before. His English is perfect, his clothes are immaculately white and he enjoys his piece of bacon more than anything. Thus, Samad is forced to realize that you cannot impose tradition on someone whose ties are not to the family's past, but to the realities he grew up with. Thus, instead of welcoming a faithful Muslim, impressed and changed by "home", the father has to deal with a secularist in search of glory. Meanwhile, the child who stayed in England becomes a fundamentalist: not due to his beliefs, but to the necessity of belonging to a group which should momentarily satisfy his needs.

The whole first-generation of children living in London is different from any postcolonial perspective of the world:

> It was a new breed, just recently joining the ranks of other street crews: Becks, B-boys, Indie kids, wide-boys, ravers, rude-boys, Acidheads, Sharons, Tracies, Kevs, Nation Brothers, Raggas and Pakis; manifesting itself as a kind of cultural mongrel of the last three categories. Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called like 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; Kung Fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; added to this was a smattering of Black Power (as embodied by the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy); but mainly their mission was to put the Invincible back in Indian, the Bad-aaaass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani. […] But no one fucked with any of them any more because they looked like trouble (Smith, 2000: 232).

This generation has long broken with parents and traditional influences. Instead of grieving for a forgotten past and ties which cannot be rebound, they rejoice the privileges of contemporary culture, translated as Hip-Hop, consumerism and brand awareness. Thus, the Qur'ān will be put aside for De Niro, the curry forgotten for bacon and gold chains chosen over an attitude of repentance. When asked by Joyce Chalfen "Where are you from?", Millat innocently replies: "Willesden". To Joyce, the answer seems rather jocular, so she insists: " 'Yes, yes, of course, but where originally?' '*Oh*', said Millat […] 'You are meaning where from am I *originally*.' Joyce looked confused. 'Yes, *originally*.' 'Whitechapel', said Millat, pulling out a fag. 'Via the Royal London Hospital and the 207 bus'" (Smith, 2000: 319).



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Millat can think of himself exclusively as belonging to London, the only reality he knows. He and his generation peers do not perceive themselves as coming from several places, nor do they have stories to tell apart from the ones related to their London life. This new generation no longer has the identity issues faced, for example, by Karim Amir, Hanif Kureishi's Indo-English teenager, who is constantly torn between "here" and "there". No dichotomy marks the life of Millat and his friends because they have firmly decided to be "here", a vivid part of the streets they grew up on. Theirs is the new generation which has stopped questioning everything, refusing to be torn apart by doubt and history, and choosing to live life as it is instead.

Their father, Samad Iqbal, is actually the only immigrant in the novel who cannot let go of history. Yet, as he sees Magid returning to England more English than ever before, he starts questioning his own views: " 'And then you begin to give up the *very idea* of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long, dirty lie … and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an *accident*. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?'" (Smith, 2000: 407). Samad feels that you have to relate to your past in order to have a future, but real-life events contradict him. His children refuse any connection to the past, Alsana trusts the BBC above anything, while her cousin is a lesbian who creates shoes. Nor does Clara Bowden, or even her mother Hortense, grieve for Jamaica, as they are pleased with the offerings of the city they become one with. Samad's work colleagues, Abdul Mickey and his children all take this new reality for granted, refusing to be lured into the past. The burden of memory is something they all (un)consciously refuse to carry.

Zadie Smith's characters portray a new type of individuals who are Eastern and Western at the same time, whose roots no longer reflect their present cultural identity. They are part of both worlds, even if at times they cannot relate to an unknown past. The question "Do you think anybody is English? Really English?" (Smith, 2000: 236) is indeed difficult to be answered and the London reality is the very proof for that. The language of the streets underlines once more the idea that there are as many Englishes as individuals.

Spaniards, Italians, Jamaicans, Indians, Englishmen and even a prophetic Swede all join the chorus of the London streets: different voices united by the English language. It is not that their use of language is not correct – or, as Samad notices in relation to his English mistress, who misuses words, that "only the immigrants can speak the Queen's English these days" (Smith, 2000: 181); it is part of who they are as individuals. There is no issue related to their accent, no frustration or inhibition as to the fact that they might mispronounce one word or the other. The act of speech is natural, the vivid vernacular of the streets mixes old and new forms into a global discourse. The Indians or Bengalis do not speak differently from their English counterparts because theirs is the real language: a language in use, not a tool of power or a sign of surrender. Zadie Smiths' characters transgress Foucaultian debates and live life as it really happens, with its real-time events, feelings and words.

This multicultural reality can, at the same time, trigger not only positive events, but also negative feelings in those who are biologically split between two continents. Racial tensions stem, in this context, from the very cross-cultural relationships that are being praised by others. Alsana, Samad's wife, is reluctant towards the Englishman who has married a black woman and defines Irie as "half blacky-white" (Smith, 2000: 61). Irie's presence around her sons troubles her, as her children are "pure Eastern" and might be corrupted by the reality that Archie's daughter stands for. She also distrusts the Chalfens whom she also perceives as a Western threat to her children. Samad shares her ideas about the corrupt West: "They won't go to the mosque, they don't pray, they speak strangely, they dress strangely, they eat all kinds of rubbish, they have intercourse with God knows who. No respect for tradition. *People call it*



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*assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!*" (Smith, 2000: 190, emphasis added).

Adapting to the customs of a foreign country is seen not as a plus in the children, but as a fault that might have been avoided. The negotiations between the East and the West apparently stop here. "We are split people" (Smith, 2000: 178) seems to define both the old and the young immigrants who are supposed to take sides. And although the children were brought up on English soil, have spoken English ever since and celebrated only continental holidays, they are still not one with the English:

> He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country (Smith, 2000: 234).

From this point of view there can be no talk about a contact between the East and the West, but only a high fence which may be escaladed from time to time. There are indeed spaces which allow the development of a complex identity, but also spaces which limit the horizon of the other. But because "[t]his has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment" (Smith, 2000: 326), it is hard not to notice that this new reality will impose itself on the narrower view on life.

Zadie Smith's characters could, according to the cultural definition, be labelled as postcolonials. Some were born in India, Pakistan or Jamaica, while others are first-generation immigrants, born and raised on English soil. Their skin colour is indeed different, their family stories are different and their customs may sometimes be different. They do feel differently from the English, but they do not want to be *like* them. The former postcolonial subject has turned into an independent persona, no longer torn by issues such as identity, place or resistance: he is an integral, self-standing part of the new city. It is this very city which has created all of these charming characters of every-day life, who walk its streets and become one with the many.

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