

Negotiating Identities: Hybridity and Cultural Entanglements in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Abstract

Zadie Smith's White Teeth offers a compelling exploration of the complex processes of identity formation and cultural negotiation in postcolonial Britain. Employing Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity as a theoretical framework, this paper examines the intersections of race, culture and history within the narrative. Bhabha's notion of hybridity emphasizes the "third space," a liminal zone where cultural identities are negotiated and redefined. In White Teeth, hybridity is both a site of conflict and possibility, reflecting the multifaceted realities of diasporic communities in Britain. This research paper argues that White Teeth articulates the challenges and potentials of hybrid identities through its characters, their histories and the broader socio-political milieu.

Keywords— Hybridity, colonial history, identity, diaspora, multilingualism, cultural negotiation

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides a pivotal framework for understanding cultural negotiations in *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith. According to Bhabha, hybridity arises in the third space, a site of cultural interaction where dominant and subordinate cultures meet, leading to the creation of new, dynamic identities that defy essentialist notions. Bhabha articulates: "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities" (112). This perspective is crucial for interpreting the intergenerational conflicts in Smith's novel, where the Iqbal, Jones, and Chalfen families grapple with their identities amidst the intersections of race, history and migration. The novel's richly textured narrative, spanning multiple generations, reveals the complexity of negotiating hybrid identities in multicultural societies, making it a prime example of Bhabha's theoretical insights.

The concept of the third space is particularly evident in the lives of the Iqbal twins, Magid and Millat, who symbolize contrasting responses to hybridity. Although they share the same Bangladeshi heritage and are raised in the same household, the twins' paths diverge dramatically, underscoring the fractured nature of diasporic identity. Magid, who is sent back to Bangladesh for traditional upbringing, seduced by Western rationalism and secularism, assimilates into the dominant British culture. He becomes pro-British anti-religious and interested in science, embodying a rejection of his parents' traditional values. In stark contrast, in London Millat turns toward radical Islam through his involvement with KEVIN (Keepers of Eternal

and Victorious Islamic Nation), defiantly opposing Western hegemony. This binary opposition not only exemplifies the tension within hybrid identities but also affirms Bhabha's claim that cultural identity is never static but "continually in a process of hybridity" (113). Smith's portrayal of the twins illustrates the fluid, often conflicted, negotiations that occur in the third space.

The third space also manifests in the complex relationship between the Chalfen family and the multicultural communities they encounter. The Chalfens, a liberal, middle-class British family, embody a superficial openness to multiculturalism that masks underlying power dynamics. Their patronizing attitude toward Irie Jones, the daughter of Clara and Archie Jones, and the Iqbal twins reveals the subtle persistence of colonial hierarchies in modern multicultural settings. Bhabha's notion of hybridity challenges such hierarchies, emphasizing the transformative potential of cultural interactions. Irie, caught between her Jamaican and British heritage, explores this third space by rejecting the binaries imposed upon her, seeking instead a more inclusive and multifaceted identity. Her journey underscores Bhabha's argument that hybridity destabilizes dominant narratives, fostering the creation of new cultural expressions that resist assimilation. Hybridity is one of the major thematic axes of the discourse of postcolonial cultures. "As one of the most recurrent concepts in postcolonial literature, hybridity represents itself in the contact zones between the colonized and the

colonizer and their mutual interdependence,” (113) rightly observe Joel Kuortti et.al.

Furthermore, Smith’s exploration of hybridity in *White Teeth* highlights the interconnectedness of history, memory and migration, reinforcing Bhabha’s emphasis on the temporal dimension of the third space. The novel deals with the colonial pasts of its characters, from Samad Iqbal’s ambivalent nostalgia for his Indian heritage to the Chalfens’ implicit reliance on colonial privilege. These histories converge in the multicultural present, creating a rich tapestry of hybrid identities that defy simplistic categorization. The third space, as Bhabha envisions it, becomes a site of negotiation and contestation, where individuals and communities redefine themselves in relation to one another. “Cultures are crafted, sculpted, or narrated objects: like traditions, cultures are invented. [...] Bhabha’s idea of hybridity [...] suggests that cultures come after the hybridizing process, rather than existing before. In colonial relationships, this is just as true of the colonizer as of the colonized,” (23) rightly observes Hoddart.

White Teeth also masterfully explores the intergenerational conflicts that arise within immigrant families, shedding light on the complexities of cultural negotiation. Samad Iqbal, the patriarch of the Iqbal family, is consumed by a deep desire to preserve his Bangladeshi heritage amidst the challenges of raising his children in a Western society. For Samad, cultural preservation is not merely an ideal but a moral imperative, leading him to take drastic measures to ensure his sons, Magid and Millat, uphold traditional values. His frustration is poignantly captured when he laments, “What am I going to pass on? What will they remember? Nothing. A watered-down version of everything...” (145). This moment encapsulates the anxieties of immigrant parents who fear the erosion of their cultural roots, emphasizing the emotional toll of navigating hybrid identities. Smith’s portrayal of Samad highlights the generational rift that often arises in diasporic contexts, as parents cling to tradition while their children grapple with the pull of assimilation.

Paul Gilroy’s concept of diaspora consciousness provides a valuable lens for understanding the duality inherent in these conflicts. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy avers that diasporic identities are characterized by a tension between belonging and alienation, resisting assimilation into a singular national culture (123). Samad’s struggles exemplify this duality, as he resents the Westernization of his sons yet fails to fully reconcile with his own hybrid existence. His rigid adherence to an idealized version of Bangladeshi identity underscores the limitations of essentialist notions of culture. For instance, his decision to send Magid back to Bangladesh in an attempt to root him in tradition backfires, as Magid

returns more Westernized and rationalist than ever. This irony underscores the futility of attempting to enforce a static identity in the fluid, ever-evolving context of the diaspora. Smith’s subtle characterization of Samad reveals the complexities of navigating cultural heritage in an environment that continuously reshapes it.

The tension between Samad and his sons further illustrates the destabilizing effect of hybridity on fixed cultural boundaries. Magid and Millat, though raised in the same household, embody divergent responses to their cultural inheritance. Magid, removed from his father’s influence, embraces Western secularism and detaches himself from his Bangladeshi roots. Millat, by contrast, seeks solace in radical Islam, rejecting Western values and attempting to construct a rigid, oppositional identity. These polar opposites highlight the fragmented and multifaceted nature of hybrid identities. Neither son adheres to Samad’s vision of cultural purity, underscoring Bhabha’s assertion that cultural identity is not fixed but is continually redefined in the third space of hybridity (112). The Iqbal family’s intergenerational struggles reveal the inherent fluidity of identity, as each member negotiates their place within overlapping cultural contexts.

Smith also interrogates the emotional and psychological impact of these negotiations, particularly through Samad’s inability to reconcile his ideals with the reality of his family’s hybrid existence. His fixation on cultural preservation blinds him to the ways in which hybrid identities can be a source of strength and innovation rather than loss. The generational divide between Samad and his sons underscores the inevitability of cultural transformation, as each generation interprets heritage in ways that resonate with their lived experiences. This dynamic aligns with Gilroy’s assertion that diaspora consciousness involves “a tension between roots and routes,” where identity is shaped both by a connection to ancestral origins and by the experiences of movement and change (122). Through Samad’s struggles, Smith captures the bittersweet nature of cultural negotiation within immigrant families, revealing how intergenerational conflict serves as both a site of tension and a catalyst for growth in diasporic communities.

Language serves as a vital marker of hybridity in *White Teeth*, reflecting the fluid, multifaceted identities of its characters. The novel’s multilingualism and frequent code-switching exemplify the intersections of culture, identity and belonging in diasporic contexts. Irie Jones, the daughter of Archie and Clara, embodies this linguistic hybridity as she faces the tensions between her Jamaican and British heritage. Her inner conflict is poignantly expressed when she reflects, “She wanted to be one thing. One thing at a

time. English or Jamaican. Black or white. And she wanted it without constant interruption” (266). Irie’s longing for singularity contrasts with the inherent hybridity of her identity, underscoring the challenges of growing up in a multicultural society that often demands clear categorizations. Smith uses Irie’s linguistic and cultural duality to highlight the struggles of self-definition in a space where identities are continuously contested and reshaped.

Homi K. Bhabha’s assertion that “the language of hybridity disrupts the narratives of authority” (149) resonates deeply in *White Teeth*. The novel’s linguistic diversity challenges the dominance of standard English and, by extension, the cultural hegemony it represents. Smith incorporates elements of Jamaican Patois, South Asian dialects, and colloquial British English, creating a linguistic tapestry that mirrors the cultural plurality of contemporary Britain. This disruption of linguistic norms undermines monolithic notions of British identity, offering instead a more inclusive, hybrid vision of cultural belonging. Irie’s oscillation between linguistic modes and cultural codes reveals the third space where new identities are negotiated. By destabilizing traditional hierarchies of language and identity, Smith reinforces Bhabha’s claim that hybridity is a site of resistance and creativity, where marginalized voices challenge dominant narratives.

Language in Smith’s exploration of hybrid identities is another important issue in the novel. Smith’s linguistic choices foreground the hybrid, provisional nature of identity formation in diasporic contexts. This is evident not only in Irie’s journey but also in the broader narrative structure of *White Teeth*, which interweaves multiple voices, dialects and perspectives. The linguistic hybridity of the novel reflects the lived realities of its characters, who inhabit overlapping cultural spheres. For example, Iqbal family’s interactions often shift between formal English, peppered with references to Bangladeshi traditions, and the colloquial speech of London’s multicultural neighbourhoods. This linguistic fluidity mirrors the characters’ attempts to go through the complexities of belonging smoothly, emphasizing the provisional and dynamic nature of identity in a globalized world.

Through its linguistic richness, *White Teeth* affirms the multiplicity and fluidity of hybrid identities, celebrating the creative possibilities inherent in cultural and linguistic exchange. Irie’s struggle to reconcile her dual heritage, alongside the novel’s broader linguistic experimentation, reflects the challenges and opportunities of hybridity in multicultural societies. Smith’s portrayal of language as a marker of hybridity underscores the novel’s resistance to cultural homogenization, offering instead a vibrant, pluralistic vision of identity. In doing so, *White Teeth* not

only critiques the limitations of monolithic cultural narratives but also celebrates the transformative potential of linguistic and cultural hybridity.

The novel’s engagement with colonial histories deepens the exploration of hybridity in *White Teeth*, revealing how the remnants of Britain’s imperial past continue to shape contemporary identities. Throughout the narrative, Smith repeatedly references the colonial legacy, especially through the character of Samad Iqbal, whose obsession with his great-grandfather, Mangal Pande, highlights the importance of history in shaping identity. Pande’s role in the 1857 Indian Rebellion becomes a symbol of resistance for Samad, who mourns the erasure of such histories from the mainstream narrative. In one of his poignant moments, Samad exclaims, “No one knows who he is! They have forgotten him!” (120). This fixation illustrates a broader diasporic need to reclaim and reinterpret historical narratives that have been marginalized or forgotten by the dominant culture. Samad’s anguish over this erasure reflects a deeper desire to reconnect with a lost past, one that he believes is essential to understanding both his heritage and his identity in the present.

Bill Ashcroft have noted that postcolonial literature often “reimagines history to articulate marginalized perspectives” (43). This idea is particularly evident in *White Teeth*, where Smith reclaims Britain’s colonial history not from the perspective of the colonizers but through the lens of its immigrant communities. By doing so, she underscores how the colonial past continues to inform and shape the present-day experiences of individuals in the diaspora. The characters in *White Teeth*, particularly Samad, struggle with the weight of historical legacies, as they explore the complex interplay between memory, identity and cultural belonging. Smith’s subtle treatment of history challenges the dominant historical narratives and forces readers to reconsider the ways in which colonial legacies continue to affect the lives of the children and grandchildren of immigrants.

This negotiation between memory and identity is central to the construction of hybrid identities in the novel. The characters’ struggles with their inherited histories are framed within the context of a multicultural, postcolonial society, where cultural boundaries are constantly in flux. The characters in *White Teeth* are caught between multiple cultural authorities—Britain’s imperial past, their ancestral traditions, and the pressures of assimilation in a new country. This ambivalence complicates their sense of self and underscores the fluidity of identity in the postcolonial world. It is through these tensions that Smith illustrates the hybrid nature of identity, where the past is constantly

reinterpreted and redefined by individuals who exist in-between cultural worlds.

The Chalfen family represents another dimension of hybridity in *White Teeth*, embodying cultural hegemony and liberal paternalism. Marcus and Joyce Chalfen, a white middle-class couple, position themselves as progressive mentors to Irie and Millat. However, their interactions often reveal a patronizing attitude that underscores the power dynamics within hybrid spaces. Joyce's fascination with Millat, whom she describes as "exotic and wild," reflects the objectification of the Other (324). These dynamics highlight the inequalities embedded within multiculturalism, where dominant cultures often seek to assimilate or commodify difference.

Ultimately, *White Teeth* offers a rich narrative that interrogates the complexities of hybrid identities, particularly in relation to Britain's colonial history. By focusing on the struggles of immigrant families like the Iqbals, Smith emphasizes the importance of remembering and reinterpreting the past to make sense of the present. The novel's characters grapple with historical erasure, but through their attempts to reclaim their histories, they engage in a process of cultural negotiation and transformation. As they face the intersection of memory, history, and identity, Smith's characters embody the ongoing struggle of diasporic communities to assert their place in the world, resisting the forces that seek to marginalize their histories and identities.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* masterfully explores the intricacies of hybridity, illustrating the cultural negotiations and identity formations that arise in postcolonial contexts. Through its richly drawn characters and interwoven histories, the novel reveals the challenges and potentials of living in the third space. Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics, emphasizing the fluidity and multiplicity of identity. By reclaiming historical narratives, embracing linguistic diversity, and critiquing cultural hegemony, *White Teeth* offers a complex portrayal of hybridity that resists simplistic categorizations. In doing so, the novel affirms the transformative possibilities of negotiating identities in an interconnected world.

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