

AT THE ROOT OF THE TEETH: A CONSIDERATION OF *WHITE TEETH*

AT THE ROOT OF THE TEETH: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE HEALING
POWER OF INTERPERSONAL AND FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN
ZADIE SMITH'S WHITE TEETH

By

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis considers how Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* contributes to contemporary debates on immigration, race, gender, and identity. The focus is on Smith's character Irie Jones and how her feelings of instability and displacement are negotiated in post-war Britain. Essentially this thesis considers the characters' inabilities to feel a sense of belonging in their lives as a result of the political and cultural climate in England during the late 20th century. The characters' struggles are explained and dissected in three chapters. The first chapter is devoted to the role that diaspora and travel theory play in a desire to belong; chapter two investigates the second-generation immigrant children's familial relationships and the conflict between the generations; and chapter three focuses on how gender and femininity function in regards to Irie's difficulties. This thesis investigates the ways that Irie diverges from her matrilineal heritage and negotiates for herself a place that she can call home in contemporary Britain.

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Introduction

This thesis offers a critical reading of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* by asking what specific contributions this text makes to discourses of memory, 'race,' nation and 'gender.' *White Teeth* is a novel primarily about second generation immigrants to Britain; dense with the hybridity of post-war London, the text uses multiple tones, textures and voices to question the many tensions and conflicts that plague its characters. Smith's first novel tackles multiethnic, multiracial, and transnational issues; she likely feels close to these themes as the daughter of a white English father and a black Jamaican mother. The focus of my thesis is on how Smith's characters negotiate the psychological need to belong. This negotiation is complicated in Smith's text by the characters' feelings of alienation that result from their position as immigrants or products of interracial marriages. Smith's character Irie Jones will be given particular attention in this thesis.

The varied paths traveled by Smith's characters are full of complexities and uncertainties, and thus invite interpretations on a multitude of levels. *White Teeth* tells the story of the intermingled lives of three families living in the late twentieth century in North-West London, England. The Jones, Iqbal and Chalfen families become entwined over the course of the text, which chronicles the characters' struggles with their various statuses in British society. Irie's difficult coming-of-age in the text is representative of the plight of many first- and second-generation immigrants in the politically charged environment in England during this time period. Namely, Irie does not feel as though she belongs anywhere; she feels alienated by white, British society, and she feels incomplete in her home life, which is riddled with conflict and secrecy.

My work on *White Teeth* adds to the body of work on this text by examining it in the form of a close reading of the characters' psychological states. The relationships developed between the characters are an essential part of this thesis' grounding, and thus the text is read and examined through the lens of the healing properties of healthy relationships. These relationships are complex and loaded with historical baggage, and are essentially at the root of the characters' main struggles. Ultimately, this thesis examines the interpersonal workings of Smith's nuanced characters and hopes to provide, through a readable and readily accessible analysis, an emphasis on the benefits of healthy, functioning relationships on the lives of even the most troubled personalities.

My thesis critically examines the text in three chapters. The aim of each chapter is to negotiate Irie's physical and psychological discomfort in a country that is decidedly hostile to its immigrant population. Indeed, the social and political environment in England during the time period in which this novel is set is rife with racism, sexism and discrimination. England's complicated relationships with its colonies experienced a geographical shift when England passed the 1948 Nationality Act that allowed citizens of the British Empire to travel freely across its colonies. As a result of this Act, England received an

influx of immigrants, and the social environment of the country was permanently altered. The relationship between England and its Indian and Jamaican colonies is symbolically represented in the text through the intermingled lives of the three main families in *White Teeth*, the Chalfens, Iqbals and Joneses. Moreover, the tense environment in England is the basis of much of the characters' feelings of displacement and inbetweenness (that of Irie Jones in particular). While Smith details the trials of each character and his or her specific struggles in England, she focuses on a common thread that eventually helps her characters achieve a sense of belonging. This connecting thread is the importance of relationships. As such, this thesis examines the importance that various types of relationships have on the characters' desires to belong and to feel loved.

Smith provides her readers with a loaded metaphor from which to unpack her characters' needs for an understanding of their place in society and their personal relationships. The metaphor describes the Bowden women in terms of a set of traditional Russian dolls. Smith writes: "... if this story is to be told, we will have to put them all back inside each other like Russian dolls, Irie back in Clara, Clara back in Hortense, Hortense back in Ambrosia" (356).

This metaphor is essential to this thesis' reading of *White Teeth* because it reveals how relationships, family, and the past inform the characters' present.

Interestingly, the dolls are traditionally understood to represent a family; the Russian word for these dolls is *matryoshka*, the word "matry" comes from the Latin root "mater" which means "mother." In the context of *White Teeth* the Bowden family women make up the dolls, with Irie, located in the center of the family, having to fit into each doll in order for the whole family to fit together. Thus, Irie is read as a composite of her matrilineal heritage, and her ability to feel a sense of belonging in England is intricately bound up with her acceptance in her family. Smith sends Irie on a journey through her family's past in an effort to equip Irie with an understanding of where she comes from so that she can psychologically locate herself in her present. In fact, each chapter in this thesis is informed by this metaphor and uses it as a controlling device through which to read the characters' varied experiences.

Chapter 1: Negotiating Identity, Diaspora, Memory and Belonging in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

The ways in which Irie's past informs her present are discussed in chapter one through a consideration of the workings of memory in identity formation. This chapter is interested in the importance of memory in Irie's negotiation of her past. Indeed the Russian doll metaphor requires that each doll fit comfortably into the other dolls, and thus Irie must attain knowledge of her matrilineal past in an effort to exist comfortably in her own present. Chapter one is also concerned with the diasporic experiences of the characters in *White Teeth* and the ways that these travel histories affect the status of Irie's life. Irie's life is undoubtedly affected by her mother and grandmother who are both immigrants to England from Jamaica

and traveled to England in an effort to secure a more prosperous life for themselves and their offspring. John Clement Ball's reading of *White Teeth* in his text *Imagining London* supports the notion that knowledge of the travel history of Irie's family is essential in Irie's consideration of her place in British society. Indeed, Ball asserts that the characters in *White Teeth* exist both in the present (as the characters are intimately connected to each other's lives) and in the past (where the characters share memories of past experiences or learned histories) (Ball 239). The characters' placement in the past is precarious and thus this chapter turns to Maurice Halbwachs, who studies the collective memories of society and how they are essential in an understanding of the present. Halbwachs's work on collective memory in *On Collective Memory* is drawn on in an effort to work through Irie's struggles; his text contributes to an understanding of the workings of memory, since he writes that "the greatest number of memories come back to us when our parents, our friends, or other persons recall them to us" (38). With Halbwachs's work in mind, chapter one considers how Irie is connected to her family and how knowledge of her family's past will aid her in her search for a sense of belonging in white-British culture.

Chapter 2: Intergenerational Conflict and Belonging: First- versus Second-Generation Immigrants

In chapter two Irie's feelings of displacement are impacted by the conflict she encounters in her immediate family. Irie's dysfunctional relationships with her mother and father are somewhat representative of the relationships between the women in each generation of the Bowden family. Thus the metaphor of the Russian dolls speaks to the intergenerational conflict in Irie's life that keeps her from attaining a workable identity. In order for Irie to fit comfortably into her matrilineal past she must work through the conflict that has plagued her family so that she might feel at ease in her present and ensure that future generations be spared of this same problem. The conflict between the generations in Irie's relationship with her parents has to do with her status as a second-generation immigrant versus her mother's status as a first-generation immigrant. Chapter two draws on the work of Molly Thompson who critically analyses *White Teeth*'s multicultural nuances in her article "'Happy Multicultural Land'?: The Implications of an 'excess of belonging' in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." Thompson notes that the plight of second-generation immigrants is significantly different from that of first-generation immigrants, as they "have arguably had to navigate a more problematic relationship with their racial identities, often having to straddle two different, conflicting cultures" (122). Adding to Irie's 'problematic relationship' as a second-generation immigrant is the social environment in England during the latter part of the twentieth century for black youth. Thus chapter two also delves into the political climate in London for black youth at this time and considers how societal pressures affect Irie's relationship

with her parents. In *Black Youth in Crisis* authors Ernest Cashmore and Barry Troyna discuss how the racism experienced by first-generation immigrants to Britain is largely responsible for the unease felt by black British youth in the 1980s and 1990s. Evidently, at the heart of much of the 'crisis' of black youth at this time was a feeling of disengagement (15). The state of Irie's cultural environment is a crucial element in a reading of her conflicted relationship with her parents, given that she attempts to negotiate her place in both her society and her family throughout the text.

Chapter 3: Memory and Femininity: The Bowden Women's Connections

Perhaps Smith's metaphor of the Russian dolls is most aptly applied in chapter three, which specifically considers the impact of gender on the formation of Irie's identity. Naturally, this chapter is also interested in how Irie's matrilineal line impacts her status and in turn how her sense of self is shaped by her family's history specifically in regards to their 'gender.' It is important to note here that this particular chapter engages with terms such as 'race' and 'gender.' These terms are placed here in inverted commas in an effort to signal that this thesis acknowledges that both 'race' and 'gender' are socially constructed categories. Indeed these terms are used in lieu of an acceptable alternative and in recognition of the fact that there exists a lack of vocabulary to responsibly refer to these concepts. In the introduction to *Under Construction: 'Race' and Identity in South Africa Today* editors Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn discuss the complexities inherent in the terms 'race' and 'gender.' Even though Distiller and Steyn specifically address South African understandings of 'race,' their insights can fruitfully be extended to a reading of 'race' as represented in Smith's *White Teeth*. Importantly, Distiller and Steyn note the ways that 'race' is essentially performative, and indeed this chapter engages with the concept of 'race' under these same notions. Distiller and Steyn note that, "[r]ace' is given meaning by the political economy in which it is located. It needs props, a social and economic script, and co-actors, before it can assume its commonsensical proportions. In addition, it is most obviously registered visually, which implicates an audience in the meaning of the social stage on which 'race' is performed" (4). For the remainder of this thesis the terms 'race' and 'gender' will be used without inverted commas, but with the acknowledgment that they are understood as contested terms.

Chapter three's consideration of the links between the women in *White Teeth* is read alongside Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith's work in their article "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction." Hirsch and Smith's research is analyzed alongside this chapter's investigation of the links between memory and femininity that are made between the Bowden women. Hirsch and Smith assert that "[w]hat a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender" (6). The 'intricacies' of the relationships between the Bowden family women are

examined in this chapter and are read through the lens of Smith's Russian doll metaphor, which is a reminder of how these women must fit back into each other's lives (and, symbolically, their bodies) in order for them to comfortably co-exist in their relationships with each other and in their respective societies.

Each of the chapters in this thesis are linked through the way in which they are read with Smith's Russian doll metaphor. As such, the working of memory, intergenerational conflict, gender, race, and identity are contested and dissected for their contribution to the complex relationships under consideration in this thesis. Irie Jones's struggle throughout the text is symbolic of the struggles of many second-generation immigrant youth in England, as well as of the plight of England's colonies to achieve stability independent of colonial power. This thesis (and, arguably, Smith's text) seeks to explain and navigate the lives of *White Teeth*'s complex characters and, importantly, look towards the future with the hope that the work done today will alleviate these same burdens for tomorrow.

Chapter One

Negotiating Identity, Diaspora, Memory and Belonging in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* tackles the complexities of the lives of immigrants to Britain¹ who struggle with their immigrant status, family lives, and gender roles in English society. As is common with many "(post) post-colonial" (Ball 238) texts, the negotiation of identity is thematically central to the depth of the characters. Smith's text provides its reader with a metaphor through which to read her characters' varied identifications. Smith explains her characters' layered experiences (specifically, in this quote, Irie, her mother Clara, Clara's mother Hortense, and Hortense's mother Ambrosia) when she writes: "... for if this story is to be told, we will have to put them all back inside each other like Russian dolls, Irie back in Clara, Clara back in Hortense, Hortense back in Ambrosia" (356). Central to this metaphor is the concept of memory; this chapter focuses on how memory functions in relation to each character's experiences with decolonization, and specifically how memories have shaped the characters' feelings of inbetweenness and marginality. Not unlike *White Teeth*, this chapter unpacks the varied subjectivities of Smith's characters through an analysis of their diasporic experiences, memories, and primarily their familial relationships. In order to understand the ways in which identities take shape in the text, one must acknowledge and negotiate the remembered experiences of the central characters, beginning, naturally, with their emigration to England and its contribution to their wandering personalities.

The diasporic experiences of *White Teeth*'s characters are central to the manner in which they locate a unified identity for themselves. Both first and second-generation immigrants in the text are influenced by either their own experiences of travel, or diaspora, or their parents'. The text's location (London) therefore becomes a central meeting place of the characters' varied travels and memories. The novel chronicles the lives of three interwoven families whose shared diasporic experiences affect each character's location both psychologically and literally. The first-generation characters (including Hortense, Clara, Samad and Alsana) share literal diasporic experiences since they are all immigrants to England, while the second-generation characters (namely Irie, Millat and Magid) share a memory of immigration and a diaspora since they are the children of immigrants. John Clement Ball's analysis of *White Teeth*, in his text *Imagining London*, places *White Teeth*'s traveling characters both in the present (as the characters are intimately connected to each other's lives) and in the past (where

¹ This thesis is concerned with how Smith's characters negotiate the social and political climate in England. England is at times referred to as "Britain" in Smith's text and this thesis, but importantly, the terms "Britain" or "British" are meant to represent only the country of England, and not, for example, the entire United Kingdom.

the characters share memories of past experiences or learned histories) (239). Being rooted in both the past and the present causes, undoubtedly, a feeling of instability and inbetweenness. Moreover, *White Teeth* implies that the result of migration and diaspora is the feeling of being between worlds, and the challenge is to negotiate that feeling in such a way that one's psychological need to belong is eventually fulfilled through relationships. The emotional links formed through these relationships sustain Smith's characters and help to define their status as immigrants (whether first or second generation) in England. This chapter argues that Smith's characters are in a perpetual state of wandering, and that this state is negotiated through the relationships formed between the three central families in the text (the Joneses, the Iqbals, and the Chalfens), who attempt to find stability through shared histories, memories, and experiences.

Sunetra Gupta, an Indian-born British author whose novels' settings are located transnationally, comments on this state of perpetual wandering as the crux of the "British" immigrant experience:

I think one has to be comfortable with the notion that one has one's own cultural identity and that one doesn't necessarily have to be at "home," so to speak ... I think we have to accept that we are going to be perpetually wandering. We are bound to, I think. That's the kind of crisis that we're in now, that we're forced to be in a state of perpetual wandering. I mean we can't be at home. Even if we sit at home, we are forced to travel, just because of what is going on around us. (qtd. in Williams)

The idea of not feeling at 'home' is echoed in James Clifford's work on travel theory. Indeed 'home' implies a sense of belonging, and comfort, and Clifford believes that, "[t]o know who you are means knowing where you are" ("Notes on Travel and Theory"), and therefore the location of 'home' is necessarily bound to a geographical area, but more importantly to a frame of mind, or a psychological feeling of belonging. The characters in *White Teeth* attempt to find a 'home' where they feel a sense of belonging. This feeling of knowing where one's home is depends entirely upon knowing who one is at home with, which is why the relationships in *White Teeth* are so central to the narrative. The interwoven lives of the families in *White Teeth* mimic the complicated status of their "Britishness." This confused status of "Britishness" is essentially the focus of Smith's text. The characters are technically British, but they feel wholly out of place in British society because their familial roots are located elsewhere. This scenario is now common in Britain (as a result of the influx of immigrants in the country) and the British 'nation' has struggled to define itself outside of its imperial roots. What Smith is doing then, is mimicking the links between Britain's struggle to define itself, and its citizens' personal struggles to define their statuses. Ball notes this connection between complex relationships and the complex status of the nation when he states that Smith "broadens patterns of sociohistorical involvement through interpersonal analogies" (237). In fact, Smith's characters, specifically

her character Abdul-Mickey, at times goes to great lengths to question this link between the self and the nation.

Merging Identities: The Case of the Abdul-Mickeys

Naturally, the characters in *White Teeth* who desire to belong somewhere attempt to locate themselves by merging their recognizable identities with each other in an effort to create emotional links. In his text *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* James Clifford attests that diasporic experiences cause people to look for “ways of sustaining connections with more than one place while practicing nonabsolutist forms of citizenship” (9). This phenomenon is at work in Smith’s text through the character Abdul-Mickey, the owner of O’Connell’s Pool House, where Archie and Samad meet regularly to complain about their wives and children and to consider important life decisions. As a respectful gesture to British culture, Abdul-Mickey’s family decides to add an English name to the end of each child’s Arab name. In this way, Abdul-Mickey’s family finds a way to (somewhat comfortably) inhabit their two worlds. However, they refuse to adhere entirely to British cultural codes. Smith introduces Abdul-Mickey as follows:

It was a tradition, both in Mickey’s wider and nuclear family, to name all sons Abdul to teach them the vanity of assuming higher status than any other man, which was all very well and good but tended to cause confusion in the formative years. However, children are creative, and all the many Abduls added an English name as a kind of buffer to the first. (186)

Ironically, this gesture to British culture is not consciously reverent towards Britain, but instead is born out of a need for specificity. In this way Abdul-Mickey and his siblings have not so much added a British name to their Arab name, as they have placed a British name as an additional layer to their individualities. This need for specificity is born out of a desire to individualize their identities in such a way that they do not lose their Arab status, but instead gain British status. In this sense their individuality (how they differentiate themselves from one another, and how they make themselves unique) is layered: it is part Arab, and part British both in name and nationality. This re-naming and layering of ‘Britishness’ onto Abdul-Mickey leaves him resentful of British life and culture.

Despite his tendencies towards appeasing British sentiments, Abdul-Mickey is still disgusted with the influence that he feels British culture has on his family and on his culture in general. He says: “... Look at my littlest, Abdul-Jimmy. Up in juvenile court next week for swiping fucking VW medallions ... No sense of tradition, no fucking morality, is the problem ... We’re all English now, mate. Like it or lump it, as the rhubarb said to the custard” (192). Abdul-Mickey himself has made a conscious effort to assimilate to British culture by changing his name to conform to the British customers in his bar; furthermore,

Abdul-Mickey will not change the name of his bar – which is an Irish surname – despite the fact that it is “neither Irish nor a pool house” (183), because he fears losing business if he uses an Arab name. Interestingly, the changing of surnames in order to evoke feelings of belonging to a particular area of the world is neither uncommon, nor is it a contemporary phenomenon. Clifford quotes Amitav Ghosh, a novelist and anthropologist who, in the course of his field work, at one point observes that “you could read the history of [restlessness] in the villagers’ surnames ... The wanderlust of [its] founders had been ploughed into the soil of the village: it seemed to me sometimes that every man in it was a traveler” (qtd. in *Routes* Ghosh 2). Clifford calls this “dwelling in travel,” which is a good way to think about how Smith’s characters locate themselves; they feel as though they cannot find stasis, that their ‘home’ is on the move (2).

In *Caribbean Passages*, Richard F. Patterson echoes these same ideas when he analyses Caryl Phillips’s novel *A State of Independence*. Patterson describes the plight of Phillips’s protagonist as follows: “Bertram Francis experiences the double exile of a man who is not at home in his adopted country but, because he has suppressed his past for two decades, no longer feels welcome in his place of origin” (124). Like Phillips’s character Bertram, Abdul-Mickey and several other *White Teeth* characters feel torn between two locations and are forced to wander in the spaces between. For Bertram, this transitional space is somewhere between England and the West Indies, and this confusion makes it difficult for him to recognize his own identity. Phillips writes: “If he does not feel ‘at home ... here,’ then ‘here’ has, in effect, become ‘there.’ The corrosive process of alienation has eaten away the very ground of his being” (128). Paul Gilroy speaks specifically about this place (which for him, is the Atlantic Ocean – the center of the trans-Atlantic slave trade) in his text *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy asserts that the Atlantic Ocean is an in-between space and that its fluidity (by virtue of the multitude of people and ships that have crossed it) is mimicked by the diasporic quality of black histories. John Clement Ball describes the ‘Black Atlantic’ in a similar way, noting that it is the “defining location of historically embedded black identities” (14). Although Gilroy studies specifically the African diaspora and black identity, his theories are useful to this study of varied and at time competing cultural identities.

Irie Jones: Memory, Inbetweenness, and the Search for Belonging

Irie Jones is perhaps one of the novel’s most confused and lost characters. As such, she is an important case study to analyze in terms of her (remembered) diasporic experience. In *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text, and the Black Diasporic Body*, Hershini Bhana Young discusses (re)memory and the idea that “memory [belongs] to both the individual and her communities” (86). Young leans on Toni Morrison’s idea of re-memories, shedding light on Irie’s struggles to belong, and to locate herself in the present. Young quotes a passage from Morrison’s *Beloved* that describes the ability to remember that which you did not

personally experience. Morrison writes: “I used to think ... [s]ome things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not ... Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up ... But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else” (qtd. in Young 85). Morrison’s theories about re-memory and encountering old memories relate primarily to the position of the author rather than the experiences of the characters, which is the focus in Smith’s novel.² While her characters are certainly informed by her theories, her main emphasis on the site of re-memory is concerned with the author. In an effort to study the characters’ experiences of re-memory in *White Teeth*, it is helpful to turn to the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who provides his own perspective on ‘bumping into’ old memories, or memories belonging to others in his text *On Collective Memory*. Halbwachs writes that memories are by nature social, or collective; thus explaining how one might feel as though one is experiencing someone else’s memory (which is similar to what Morrison describes above):

... it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories ... It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection. (38)

Smith’s characters, especially Irie, encounter the effect of the “collective memory” of society that Halbwachs describes. And indeed Smith’s metaphor of the Russian dolls (that Irie, her mother Clara, Clara’s mother Hortense, and Hortense’s mother Ambrosia must fit into each other like Russian dolls in order for their stories to be told) clarifies Irie’s need to confront her past. In order for Irie to fully understand and accept her self and her position in society, she must

² In “The Site of Memory” Morrison describes how she fills in the blanks in the lives of other people who have gone before her. Her theory is that memories exist as part of a cultural self-awareness and that when she writes a novel, she taps into the memories that were left out of, for example, in the case of a slave narrative. Morrison describes how, especially in her novel *Beloved*, she was only knowledgeable of some of the parts of the young woman’s life she was fictionalizing and that she filled in the rest through re-membering this woman’s experience. Morrison describes this process: “So if I’m looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn’t write it (which doesn’t mean that they didn’t have it); if I’m trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left – to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that I heard – then the approach that’s most productive and most trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from the image to the text. Not from the text to the image” (194). While the focus of this thesis is on characterization in Smith’s text, it is interesting to consider how Smith may have experienced “bumping into” old memories herself during the composition of *White Teeth*. Smith’s similarity to her character Irie invites this kind of an interpretation.

come to terms with her collective participation in her family's history. Irie struggles to place herself among the memories of her past and her family's past, and also struggles to place her self in her present. The belonging that she desires is complicated by the barriers of her past that she cannot help but bump into.

Irie's desire to belong is complicated because she is constructed by society as racially mixed (she is the daughter of Archie, a white British man, and Clara, a black Jamaican immigrant). Her 'mixed' status is difficult to negotiate and is complicated by Irie's family's history of familial unrest and migration. For example, Irie's grandmother Hortense Bowden, is estranged from her daughter Clara (she disapproves of Clara's marriage to Archie because Archie is white), and is a constant, living reminder to Irie of her historical roots in Jamaica. This reminder is a source of anxiety for Irie's mother, Clara, who remembers her grandfather, Captain Charlie Durham, with much distaste, having only heard stories of him from her mother. Clara says: "Captain Charlie Durham wasn't smart. He had thought he was, but he wasn't. He sacrificed a thousand people because he wanted to save one woman he never really knew. Captain Charlie Durham was a no-good djam fool bwoy" (355). Clara's dislike of her British grandfather, and Hortense's complicated diasporic experience, among other factors, contribute to Irie's feelings of displacement, or inbetweenness. Irie finds it difficult to locate herself in her family due to the tension between her family members. This tension is exacerbated when combined with Hortense and Clara's unexpected and thus unwelcome arrival in Britain. Irie is affected by her grandmother and mother's issues because of their familial connection which helps Irie locate herself in her past. Thus the relationships in her life that are so important to her desire for stability are challenged by her inability to fully understand her family's past. These factors, explored in more detail throughout this chapter, make Irie's agency and sense of self difficult to achieve.

"A Stranger in a Strange Land"³: Irie's Discomfort in her Body and her Country

Irie's discomfort with herself is immediately evident when Smith introduces her. It is clear that Irie is uncomfortable in her own skin, and cannot even locate herself within the country in which she was born. Irie describes her body shape as belonging to a different culture: "... (shelf space for books, cups of tea, baskets or, more to the point, children, bags of fruit, buckets of water), ledges genetically designed with another country in mind, another climate" (226). Smith articulates Irie's uneasiness saying: "But Irie didn't know she was fine. There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land" (266). Irie's assertion that she is without reflection is indicative of her struggle for a recognizable identity. Clearly Irie desires to be aware of and comfortable with her self in order to feel as though she belongs in

³ *White Teeth* 266

her society, and thus able to recognize her own reflection without feeling as though she is an imposter in her home country. In the above passage, Irie overtly desires an identity that she is comfortable with; her statement that she is “without reflection” (266) specifically points to her need to recognize herself and to be recognized by others in mainstream (white) Britain as a member of society and not just as an outsider. It is helpful to read Irie’s discomfort and feelings of displacement through Homi Bhabha’s theoretical work on the nation. Bhabha contends that representations of ‘nation’ are responsible for the inability to feel at home in one’s native country. This inability to feel at home is felt mostly by those citizens whose ancestral roots are located outside of Britain. In *Nation and Narration*, Bhabha cites ambivalence as a central cause for some British citizens’ overwhelming feelings of displacement. Bhabha articulates his idea of ambivalence through an explanation of how the nation is in a state of transition. He asserts that the ambivalence of the people who make up a nation “emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the ‘origins’ of nation as a sign of the ‘modernity’ of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality” (*Nation and Narration* 3). The uncertainty of the composition of nation that Bhabha describes here is similar to Irie’s feelings of uncertainty in the composition of her own life. Interestingly, Irie is not, in fact, an immigrant to Britain, yet she experiences the dualities and ambivalences that are central to those involved in diaspora.

Irie’s uncertainty, and her desire to belong, are evident in her low self-esteem and negative body image. Irie is especially unhappy with her hair, which she blames on her black genes, and wants “[s]traight hair. Straight, straight, long black sleek flickable tossable shakeable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair” (273). Irie’s experience of attempting to straighten her hair is psychologically draining, and sheds light on her deep-seated discomfort with herself and her inability to inhabit her body more comfortably. Irie’s desire to change not only her hair, but also how she is perceived by others, is evident in her description of what changing her hair means. She says that she is “intent upon transformation, intent upon fighting her genes” (273). Smith uses Irie’s hair struggles as a metaphor to explain what Irie wants (‘normalcy’) and what she struggles against (her physical appearance): “[At P.K’s hair salon] the impossible desire for straightness and ‘movement’ fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle” (275). Irie’s desire for straight (read: white) hair causes her to resent her “African follicle;” her struggle to belong is at the root of her hair problems, and not unlike white British society, she fears the ‘other’ (her own hair) and desires what she believes is a more widely accepted version of beauty (straight hair). Irie’s discomfort with her hair echoes her discomfort with her place in Britain – feeling as though she is a “stranger in a strange land” (266) – and her lack of a recognizable identity, which for Irie means a perception of herself that is comparable to those around her. This perception is

undoubtedly based on the oppressive definitions of normality that Irie encounters. Irie's subjective choices are limited to British codes of beauty that elevate the Caucasian form and colour above all others. These notions of beauty are especially disturbing in a country such as England that has a remarkably high immigrant population. Simply put, Irie desires to be what she considers 'normal,' and to look similar to other female members of her society.

In order to understand Irie's confused state as a young woman, it is helpful to examine her past as it sheds light on her feelings of instability and her belief that she does not belong in English society. Smith details the story of Irie's grandmother and mother's arrival in England beginning with the departure of Darcus Bowden, Irie's grandfather. Darcus Bowden left Jamaica for England without his family in order to make enough money to send for his wife and daughter. But, after waiting for fourteen years for Darcus to send for them, Hortense and Clara decide to make their own way to England; Smith explains that "on arrival [in England], a mysterious illness had debilitated Darcus Bowden. An illness that no doctor could find any physical symptoms of, but which manifested itself in the most incredible lethargy" (31). Hortense and Clara's arrival in England, then, is met with surprise and very little welcome. In fact, Hortense's anger consumes her during her journey as she and her daughter travel to a country and a husband that do not appear to want them. Smith describes Hortense's anger upon her arrival, an anger that she later transfers to her own daughter: "In 1972, enraged by a fourteen-year wait, Hortense decided finally to make the journey on her own steam. Steam was something Hortense had in abundance. She arrived on the doorstep with the seventeen-year-old Clara, broke down the door in a fury and ... gave Darcus Bowden the tongue-whipping of his life" (31). Hortense and Clara's unpleasant reception in England instills in Hortense a sense of hostility towards the country, which she later projects onto Clara who decides to marry a white British man (Archie). The estranged relationship between Hortense and Clara contributes to Irie's own feelings of being unwanted. Hortense explains to Irie her disapproval of Clara (on account of her marriage to Archie), saying: "Me always *like* Archibald ... Him was never my objection *as such* ... But it more de principle of de ting, you know? Black and white never come to no good. De Lord Jesus never meant us to mix it up" (385). As a result, "on hearing of [Clara and Archie's marriage], Hortense promptly ostracized her daughter one morning on the doorstep" (46). Irie seems to internalize the Bowden women's history of feeling ostracized. Irie's feeling of displacement, and her unfulfilled need to belong, is easier to understand after one considers her 're-memories.'

Irie is represented as feeling unwanted and unsure of her self because of her complicated family life and her status as a second-generation immigrant. However, Irie's feelings of displacement have deeper roots than her own lifetime. Arguably, Irie has a memory of her maternal line's history of abandonment. Irie begins to uncover these histories, which are central to her feelings of displacement and her memories of feeling unwanted, when she metaphorically

bumps into the memory of her great grandfather, Charlie Durham (through exposure to old pictures, letters and stories about him), while living with her grandmother, Hortense. Her exposure to pictures and stories about her grandfather engage her in a reconstruction of Ambrosia Bowden's struggle to carry her child to full term. Ambrosia's pregnancy was the result of "one drunken evening in the Bowden larder, May 1906" when Charlie Durham, "impregnated his landlady's adolescent daughter" (356). Although Charlie Durham did seem to care for, maybe even love, Ambrosia (Smith describes Charlie's love as follows: "oh, he *loves* her; just as the English loved India and Africa and Ireland; it is the love that is the problem, people treat their lovers badly" [361]), this love is not entirely convincing; not surprisingly, Charlie eventually leaves Ambrosia when she is five months pregnant: "And then one afternoon, when Hortense was five months unborn, Ambrosia sprinted up the stairs ... She wanted to surprise her lover with flowers she knew would remind him of home. She banged and banged and called and called. But he was gone" (357-8). Ambrosia ends up giving birth to Hortense during the 1907 Kingston earthquake, after narrowly escaping an attempted rape, alone and amidst a devastating natural disaster: "Any other afternoon in Jamaica, the screams of Ambrosia, the screams that followed each contraction of her womb as Hortense pushed out, would have caught somebody's attention, brought somebody to her aid. But the world was ending that afternoon in Kingston. Everybody was screaming" (361). Ambrosia's isolation during the birth of Hortense undoubtedly had an effect on Hortense, who claims to remember her time in her mother's womb. Hortense believes that information was "passed as if by osmosis into [her] soul" before her own birth (359). Specifically she feels that when her mother was pregnant with her and learned about the Jehovah's Witnesses, she was also taking in the information as an unborn child; she explains that it "felt like a 'remembrance' to read the six volumes years later in adult life; why she could cover pages with her hand and quote them from memory, though she had never read them before" (359). Irie too seems to remember certain events that her mother and grandmother experienced before her own birth. Irie's feeling like "a stranger in a strange land" is indicative of her mother and grandmother's unwelcoming experience of migration to England (266). Hortense and Clara are seemingly forgotten about when Hortense's husband, Darcus, leaves Jamaica to relocate to England, and remains there for fourteen years without sending home for his family. This type of exclusionary act helps explain why Irie has always felt unwelcome in England. Hortense and Clara's memory of their unwelcoming reception in England, and Ambrosia's abandonment by Charlie Durham, has clearly affected Irie's feeling of exclusion.

An analysis of Irie's remembered diasporic experience is helpful in shedding light upon her confused emotional and psychological states. When, during a late night argument, Irie discovers that Clara's front teeth are fake, she

considers this secret just one in a long list of uncertainties about her family's roots:

To her, this was yet another item in a long list of parental hypocrisies and untruths, this was another example of the Jones/Bowden gift for secret histories, stories you never got told, history you never entirely uncovered, rumour you never unraveled, which would be fine if every day was not littered with clues, and suggestions; shrapnel in Archie's leg ... photo of strange white Grandpa Durham ... the name 'Ophelia' and the word 'madhouse' ... These parents were full of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear. But she didn't want it any more. She was tired of it. She was sick of never getting the whole truth. (379)

Irie's parents keep these secrets from their daughter because they are painful memories of past experiences that they would rather forget. The shrapnel in Archie's leg is a reminder that he did not kill Dr. Sick. (Dr. Sick is a Nazi collaborator whom Samad and Archie capture with the help of a group of Russian soldiers at the end of the Second World War. Once captured Archie and Samad decided that they must kill Dr. Sick, but neither wants to take on this responsibility; Archie eventually takes on the feat to prove to Samad that he is not a "cipher" (*White Teeth* 121) and that he does indeed stand for something. Ultimately Archie fails to kill Dr. Sick and instead ends up being shot in the leg by him). Archie's lie that he killed Dr. Sick that day is the basis of his friendship with Samad. The photo of Grandpa Durham reminds Clara of her grandmother's struggle as a young pregnant woman abandoned by the father of her baby, and of the colonial presence in Jamaica that caused her family much strife, eventually resulting in her emigration from the country. Archie's first marriage to Ophelia is also something he would rather forget. Ophelia eventually went mad (an obvious allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with the added irony that Archie is quite the opposite of Hamlet), and in turn Archie, finding his life uninspiring and unbearable, attempted suicide. While these secrets are kept from Irie for a good reason – to avoid the pain and guilt of remembering – the remains of the secrets, the small clues that inevitably surface from time to time, alienate Irie who feels like an outsider in her parent's lives.

After this argument Irie seems determined to understand her past, likely as a way to understand her present through learning where she came from, and gathering information about the history of her family. The clues that Irie picks up on in her parents' dialogue pique her interest and also remind her of a shared past of which she is inevitably a part. Jan Assman's article "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" is helpful in this assessment of Irie's conception of a shared past with her parents. Assman explains that collective memory (which Halbwachs engages with, as noted earlier in this chapter), is based on the principle that "[e]very individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others. These "others," however, are not just any set of people, rather they are groups who conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past"

(127). Indeed Irie's past is entwined with her parents' pasts and her desire to learn this past stems not only from curiosity, but also from a desire to belong. For Irie, the need to belong stretches into her past as the secrets leave her feeling as though she does not belong in her own family's history, nor in her country's history. Irie's feelings of instability in England are similar to her feelings of marginalization within her family. Because of her second-generation immigrant status, Irie's past differs significantly from the pasts of non-immigrant communities in Britain. Irie's inability to belong in British culture is in part a result of not being able to access the same "common image" (Assman 127) that unites communities in a collective memory of their pasts.

In an effort to become part of a community whose collective memory she can access, Irie leaves home (after discovering her mother's false teeth) and goes to stay with her estranged Grandmother, Hortense Bowden. Hortense's home is laden with history; Irie seems comfortable instantly despite having been away from Hortense for six years. Irie describes the house as unchanging, or stuck in the past, saying: "As far as the house was concerned, six seconds seemed to have passed" (382) and later remarks: "that house was an *adventure*. In cupboards and neglected drawers and in grimy frames were the secrets that had been hoarded for so long, as if secrets were going out of fashion" (399). Irie's solace in her grandmother's house of memories and history is evident from the change in her character after her stay with her Grandmother. Irie completely immerses herself in her Grandmother's history. And for the first time, Irie feels as though she belongs somewhere. In one particular moment Irie seems to engage with the memory of her white, English Grandfather's past, and finds that she can locate herself there: "And in the mornings it wasn't Italianate vineyards out there any more, it was sugar, sugar, sugar, and next door was nothing but tobacco and she presumptuously fancied that the smell of plantain sent her back to somewhere, somewhere quite fictional, for she'd never been there" (400). It is significant to note that it is Irie's Jamaican roots that she ultimately lays claim to. Perhaps she is drawn to her 'white' ancestry here because she feels it will give her more legitimacy in 'white' mainstream British society. But ultimately she feels more at 'home' within her matrilineal heritage. Despite having "never been there" Irie's experience of a collective memory places her in a past where she feels she belongs. Irie reclaims herself through her remembered past:

She laid claim to the past – her version of the past – aggressively, as if retrieving misdirected mail. So *this* was where she came from. This all *belonged* to her, her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings or a post office bond ... Irie put an X on everything she found ... storing them under the sofa, so that as if by osmosis the richness of them would pass through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her. (400)

It is exactly this sense of belonging that allows her to begin to envision her own unified and recognizable self. In spite of the fact that mainstream, white Britain still discriminates against her on the basis of her familial roots, here she boldly

claims her right to belong somewhere and defies those who attempt to cast her as an outsider. It is clear in this passage that Irie is marking her place in history (with an 'X') and beginning to consider this place a point-of-reference from which she can work through her identity struggles and locate a place for herself in British society. The 'X' with which Irie marks her place symbolically represents the 'X' that many black people, in the 1950s and 60s, used to replace the surnames which they considered to have been given to them by slave owners. The 'X' symbolized the lack of their inherited African surname. Malcolm X famously rejected his surname 'Little' in this way and thus resisted the collective oppression of black people. The way that Irie lays claim to her past by marking it with an 'X' signals her emotional links to other black people trying to defy white oppression. In this way Irie achieves subjectivity and begins to gain the self-awareness and agency that she so desires.

Physical Separations and Emotional Connections: The Case of Millat and Magid Iqbal

Irie's subjective transformation can be read alongside the strange cultural experiment of Millat and Magid Iqbal. What is important about Irie's remembered experiences is that she has a sense of connectedness to her past, and specifically to her maternal line. Millat and Magid experience similar feelings of marginality and inbetweenness because of their second-generation immigrant status, and because of their parents' difficult diasporic experiences; but their connectedness to each other is far stronger than their connections to their parents' pasts. Millat and Magid are separated from each other when they are only nine years old due to their father's insistence that one of his sons (he cannot afford to send both) be raised in their motherland (Bangladesh). Both boys grow up very differently; Millat becomes popular in school (especially with young women), defiant to authority, and religiously confused in an increasingly secular England. Magid, on the other hand, learns discipline in his studies and returns to England to study law, and, much to his father's chagrin, does not practice the Muslim faith but instead trusts in the laws of nature and science and joins Marcus Chalfen, a prominent British scientist, in his FutureMouse project (an experiment in the treatment in cancer through a study of a mouse that will be displayed to the public). Clearly the twins' upbringings differ significantly, but they remain closely connected on an emotional level despite their physical distance.

Smith's metaphor of the Russian dolls is important to remember here. For if Millat and Magid are to locate their identities through a search backwards (into the past), they must first become important members of each other's lives again, because, after all, they did share the same womb. The task of fitting back into each other's lives is difficult because of the different paths each boy has traveled. Millat grew up in England, while Magid spent his childhood in Bangladesh. This separation saw each boy develop in very different ways, to the degree that, while

they remain somewhat connected because of their twin status, both become unable to fully recognize themselves in the other.

In an effort to avoid the 'corruption' of his sons in England, Samad Iqbal decides to send one of them back to Bangladesh. Samad tells Archie: "Archibald ... weren't you listening to my dilemma? I am corrupt, my sons are becoming corrupt, we are all soon to burn in the fires of hell. These are problems of some urgency" (192). Samad is experiencing a desire for "reversion," a concept that Hershini Bhana Young discusses in her text *Haunting Capital*. Young explains that according to Edouard Glissant (1989) "[r]everision is the obsession with a single origin: one must not alter the absolute state of being. To revert is to consecrate permanence, to negate contact" (Young 190). Young goes on to explain that "perhaps the lure of reversion lies in the (emotional) security that a stable, absolute identity can provide, with its appearance of being 'natural,' outside the rupturings of History" (190). It is clear that Samad fears that his children will lose crucial parts of their cultural identities when one considers his outrage at Magid's desire to change his Bangladeshi name. Samad yells at Magid saying: "I GIVE YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAGID MAHFOOZ MURSHED MUBTASIM IQBAL! ... AND YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH!" (151). Samad certainly seems to want his children to locate themselves in their Bangladeshi heritage, and, for financial reasons, he can only provide this for one of his children. What Samad does not realize is that splitting up his children so that Magid can obtain a 'natural' upbringing in Bangladesh will be more detrimental to their development and their conceptions of themselves. Samad does not realize that in order for his sons to become comfortable in their respective positions in life, they must grow and learn together. Thus, by splitting up Magid and Millat, Samad thwarts any chance for his sons to develop meaningful experiences in either England or Bangladesh. However, Samad's memory of his own migration to England, and his racial memories (the memories that have been passed on to Samad by means of the collective unconscious of his cultural and social heritage) of India's struggles in England overpower, perhaps, his paternal obligations. Samad's disappointment with England and its effect on his children is clear when he expresses his own feelings of inbetweenness and estrangement to Irie:

There are no words. The one I send home comes out a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer. The one I keep here is fully paid-up green bow-tie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist. I sometimes wonder why I bother ... I really do. These days, it feels to me like you make a devil's pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started ... but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food, dreadful newspapers – who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house trained ... it drags you

in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are
unrecognizable, you belong nowhere. (407)

Samad's frustration and deep sadness is clear in the above passage. Just like Irie, Millat and Magid, Samad too suffers from a feeling of being in the middle of worlds. Samad not only feels as though he is only being tolerated in England, but he also feels estranged from his sons with whom he feels he is unable to form a meaningful relationship. This inbetweenness is evident both at the level of his immigrant status (causing him to feel as though he does not belong in his home country or his adopted country) and at the familial level as his sons' choices in life leave him feeling as though he is stuck between two children whom he cannot recognize as his own. In some ways it seems as though Samad is the one who truly suffers from the separation of his children. In an effort to come to terms with his fragmented identity, and adjust to his new life in England, he sends a child back to Bangladesh. Clearly, though, his feelings of marginality are only heightened as his life progresses, and his separation from his sons, and their separation from each other, adds to Samad's inability to feel as though he belongs either in his country or in his family. His home country, adopted country and family all become alien to him. This difficulty makes sense when one considers that identity formation is closely linked with memory, specifically, collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs's theories on memory can be read in an effort to explain Samad's inability to locate his self in the absence of his children, who are themselves distanced from each other. Halbwachs notes that "the greatest number of memories come back to us when our parents, our friends, or other persons recall them to us ... it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (38). While he is separated from his sons, and living in an unfamiliar country, it is not surprising that Samad finds it difficult to locate and share his memories, and to recognize a unified self. Samad even finds it difficult to find someone who will appreciate his memories, such as the memory of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande whose memory Samad must battle for (*White Teeth* 250). Thus Samad goes back and forth in his mind between Bangladesh and England, and between his sons, in search of stability. Smith articulates this predicament of the immigrant figure when she writes: "... 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" (*White Teeth* 161). This depiction of the inability to find stability and the repercussions it has on the children of immigrants rings especially true for the Iqbal family.

Indeed, over the course of their separation Magid and Millat grow into two extraordinarily different men. After Magid's departure Samad begins to worship him, describing him as "invisible and perfect, frozen at the pleasant age of nine ... [Magid] stood silent, distant and was 'presumed well,' like one of Her Majesty's

colonial island outposts” (216). The reference to Magid as a “colonial island outpost” is a clear indication to the reader that any attempt for Magid to return to England will be compromised by the ‘education’ he receives, in the form of his upbringing, in Bangladesh. At the same time, Samad becomes ashamed of Millat:

It is best not to get Samad started up on that subject, the subject of *The Trouble with Millat* but *here goes*: he is the second son, late like a bus, late like cheap postage, the slowcoach, the catch-up-kid, losing that first race down the birth canal, and now simply a follower by genetic predisposition, by the intricate design of Allah, the loser of two vital minutes that he would never make up ... (216-17)

While Samad clearly grows more and more distant from his sons (physically distant from Magid, and emotionally distant from Millat), the boys remain curiously connected. The boys have obvious reasons to feel stuck between two places. They are caught between their parents’ arguments over their separation, they are caught between the two separate worlds that they live in, and they suffer from feelings of incompleteness due to their separation and simply their status as twins. But despite these challenges, the boys are able to maintain a strange sort of connection that is indicative of the strength of familial bonds and relationships, and the importance of the time they spent together both in their mother’s womb and throughout their childhood.

The similarities between the two boys are detailed in the text. Smith describes how Millat and Magid are connected through their status as twins, and how this contributes to their feelings of inbetweenness (which she calls “schizophrenic” [219]). The following passage is particularly telling of the twins’ relationship: “... the fact was Millat didn’t need to go back [to Bengal]: he stood schizophrenic, one foot in Bengal and one in Willesden. In his mind he was as much there as he was here. He did not require a passport to live in two places at once, he needed no visa to live his brother’s life and his own (he was a twin after all)” (219). Magid and Millat seem to have a memory of being connected that they revert to over and over again. While they have very little communication while Magid is in Bangladesh, they still separately remember each other, and their shared birth, and thus have uncannily similar experiences. On a symbolic level, the similarities of the twins’ experiences speak to the similarities in the British and Indian cultures. *White Teeth* is in part a social commentary on the status of multiculturalism in Britain, specifically, through characters like Magid and Millat, who symbolically represent Bangladesh and England respectively. As such, it mocks British society’s marginalization of immigrants from countries like Bangladesh by detailing the similarities in the lives of two separated brothers growing up in either country. Their connection to each other can be read alongside James Clifford’s text *Routes*, which studies the articulation of home, and the similarities between familial or familiar roots and any kind of identification that can be sought by travel. Clifford writes: “... a location ... is an itinerary rather than a bounded site – a series of encounters and translations”

(11). Thus the ‘encounters and translations’ that Magid and Millat experience in their respective locations speak to the similarities between ‘routes’ and ‘roots.’ Clifford believes that ‘roots’ are already constructed and provisional, and thus that the various ‘routes’ one travels do not disturb one’s ‘roots’ because ‘roots’ are not a ‘bounded site.’ Clifford continues on to explain that he does not

accept that anyone is permanently fixed by his or her “identity;” but neither can one shed specific structures of race and culture, class and caste, gender and sexuality, environment and history. [He] understand[s] these, and other cross-cutting determinations, not as homelands, chosen or forced, but as sites of worldly travel: difficult encounters and occasions for dialogue. (12)

When one considers that while one’s familial roots are always part of one’s sense of self, often, as Clifford explains above and as Smith’s characters prove, the journey or route towards a *full* understanding of one’s familial roots will always be connected and wrapped up in the roots one leaves behind.

Millat and Magid’s twin connection, despite their separation, is first apparent when they both break their noses around the same time. In a way, they seem to be living similar lives, and it is as though their location is irrelevant, because wherever they are, their separate fates will occur simultaneously. For Millat and Magid, feelings of inbetweenness are not necessarily confined to geographical boundaries since their main point of contention is not entirely about their physical space; rather, it is about their emotional connection. Millat breaks his nose as a direct result of a conversation about Magid’s broken nose. Upon looking at a picture of Magid that he has sent home, Clara comments “Oh! Look at his nose! Look at the break. He’s got a Roman nose, now. He looks like a little aristocrat, like a little Englishman. Look, Millat ...” to which Samad replies “ ‘he will be a leader of tribes. He is a natural *chief*.’ Millat laughed so loud at this, so hard, so uncontrollably, that he lost his footing, slipped on a wash cloth and broke his nose against the sink” (216). While Alsana does not know all the details of her sons connection, she does not seem particularly surprised by it either:

Alsana only knew the incidentals: similar illnesses, simultaneous accidents, pets dying continents apart. She did not know that while Magid watched the 1985 cyclone shake things from high places, Millat was pushing his luck along the towering wall of the cemetery in Fortune green; that on 10 February 1988, as Magid worked his way through the violent crowds of Dhaka, ducking random blows of those busy settling an election with knives and fists, Millat held his own against three sotted, furious, quick-footed Irishmen outside Biddy Mulligan’s notorious Killburn public house ... on the 28th of April, 1989, a tornado whisked the Chittagong kitchen up into the sky, taking everything with it except Magid, left miraculously curled up in a ball on the floor. Now, segue to Millat, five thousand miles away, lowering himself down upon legendary

sixth-former Natalia Cavendish (whose body is keeping a dark secret from her); the condoms are unopened in a box in his back pocket; but somehow he will not catch it; even though he is moving rhythmically now, up and in, deeper and sideways, dancing with death. (220)

In this passage the blending of Indian and British cultures is paramount. While Magid and Millat's experiences are essentially different, the similarities (surviving violent or dangerous activities) are strikingly evident. The ways in which Magid and Millat's lives mimic each other is symbolic of the relationship between England and Bangladesh. Smith is possibly playing with the processes of globalization (specifically the ways that technology has allowed communities to form across nations and for countries to connect with greater ease) and (de)colonization, which have blended these two countries and cultures together. If we are to understand Magid as representative of Bangladesh, and Millat as representative of England, then it seems as though both countries are experiencing similar sentiments, and experiences, but through very different lenses. Magid (Bangladesh) struggles through events over which he has little control (cyclones, violent protests, tornadoes), Millat (England) struggles through obstacles he has created for himself (risky terrain, bar fights, unprotected sex). The similarities in the struggles (which are considered from a British perspective), however, connect the brothers (and countries), but establish in them the status of 'other': that which is similar, yet fundamentally unlike themselves, but through whom they recognize their own image. Lacanian theory asserts that it is through the other that we seek confirmation of ourselves⁴; and indeed Magid (Bangladesh) and Millat (England), struggle through their attempts to do just that.

The Search for Neutrality in the Reunion of Magid and Millat Iqbal

Millat and Magid's connections through their adolescence are only amplified upon Magid's return 'home' to England. Both boys become entwined with the Chalfen family, Millat with Joyce, and Magid with Marcus. But they remain estranged from one another. Millat and Magid's political and personal views are opposed in the most fundamental ways, and as a result they avoid meeting each other again once Magid is back in England. The two go to lengths to avoid meeting:

First came the musical-living-arrangements, as everybody shifted one place to the right or left. Millat returned at the beginning of October. Thinner, fully bearded and quietly determined not to see his twin on political, religious and personal grounds. 'If Magid stays,' said Millat ... 'I go.' And because Millat looked thin and tired and wild-eyed, Samad

⁴ In brief, Jaques Lacan understands the 'other' as the antithesis to one's 'subject' that is essentially at the core of our being. Confrontation with the 'other' (that which differs from the subject under consideration) is responsible for the necessary formation of one's subjectivity (Holcombe).

said Millat could stay, which left no other option but for Magid to stay with the Chalfens (much to Alsana's chagrin) until the situation could be resolved. (425)

Magid seems to understand why Millat will not see him. He understands that Millat is acting on religious principles, telling Irie: "He marks me like Cain because I am a non-believer. At least not in his god or any others with a name. Because of this, he refuses to meet me, even to talk on the telephone" (429). Magid knows Millat's beliefs and his reasons for refusing to see him not because they have spoken, but because they have a unique connection that, in a way, allows them to understand each other. Magid says: "I don't need to speak to him to know what he thinks. He is my twin. I don't wish to see him. I don't need to. Do you understand the nature of twins? Do you understand the meaning of the word *cleave*?" (430). The nature of twins, Magid seems to imply, is that they are connected despite physical or psychological distance. However, this distance is damaging to both boys' desires to belong and to feel fulfilled. Their respective associations with radical experiments or groups or religions is indicative of some kind of search for truth or meaning that normally accompanies one's desire to achieve stability. And ironically, the groups in which each twin is involved are fundamentally opposed to the other. The crux of the differences between the two groups seems to be the debate between the "natural" versus the "scientific." Millat's group KEVIN (the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation, a group that promotes the Muslim faith and takes steps towards teaching and recruiting others in their faith) explains their stance against Magid's experiment called the FurtureMouse project ("an experiment into the ageing of cells and the progression of cancer within cells" [433] in a mouse that will be on public display for seven years) when they assert: "There is a man who presumes to change, adjust, *modify* what has been decreed. He will take an animal – an animal that Allah has created – and presume to change that creation" (475). The radical group that each twin joins is symbolically ironic given their separate upbringings. As discussed earlier, Magid and Millat can be understood to represent the respective countries in which they were reared (Bangladesh and England). Smith highlights the similarities between England and her former colony (since before Bangladesh was a country it was essentially part of India, which was a colony of Britain) by further entwining the countries through involving each twin in a group in which one would assume the other would fit more appropriately. Stereotypically, England is often understood to be a largely secular country that has, in the past (the Enlightenment period comes to mind), proposed that the laws of science can conceivably trump the laws of religion. Likewise, Bangladesh is understood as a country that in the past has been torn by its differing religious beliefs and therefore might be more likely to give birth to a more radically religious citizen. In *White Teeth*, Smith humourously plays with the stereotypes attributed to various cultures and peoples in an effort to highlight the need for a more serious consideration of people at the level of relationships and shared

histories and memories. Thus Smith undoubtedly places Millat and Magid in groups that might be superficially assigned to the opposite twin in an effort to extend her point about the inherent similarities in all peoples (for the title implies that we all, after all, have white teeth). The boys' participation in such radical groups, and their inability to talk to each other, or to even face each other, is indicative of their difficulty in dealing with various external pressures, such as racism, that in turn effects their understanding of their own status in society. Millat and Magid see so much of themselves in each other, and have such difficulty locating their own identities, that meeting each other, and forming a new relationship, will inevitably complicate their own self-explorations.

As a result of their complicated distance the necessity of finding a neutral place for the boys to finally meet again after so many years of separation is a taxing feat. John Clement Ball discusses Millat and Magid's desire to find a neutral space in which to meet, and the impossibility of finding such a space, especially in London. Ball asserts that "[b]y extension, the city itself can never be neutral, and so it is fitting that the sterile 'final space' near Trafalgar Square in which the FutureMouse is launched should become contaminated by the accidental consequences of history" (242). The boys' respective travels lead them to finally meet in

A room, in a red-brick university, South-West by the Thames ... Contents: one blackboard, several tables, some chairs, two anglepoise lamps, an overhead projector, a filing cabinet, a computer. Nothing older than twelve years old. Built on empty waste land – no Indian burial grounds, no Roman viaducts, no interred alien spacecraft, no foundations of a long-gone church. Just earth. As neutral a place as anywhere. (*White Teeth* 458)

But this space is not in fact neutral at all. And Millat and Magid's shared histories and memories, as well as their pent up frustrations and feelings of inadequacy around each other determine that the space that Millat and Magid occupy is necessarily 'involved.' Smith seems to meditate on the word *involved* at various times in the text as a way to complicate the relationships in the text and to call attention to Britain's struggle to attain its own homogenous identity. When Magid and Millat meet in this superficially neutral space,

they make a mockery of that idea, a neutral place; instead they cover the room with history – past, present and future history (for there is such a thing) – they take what was blank and smear it with the stinking shit of the past like excitable, excremental children. They cover this neutral room in themselves. Every gripe, the earliest memories, every debated principle, every contested belief. (464)

The involved status of Millat and Magid's relationship extends into their past and into Smith's metaphor of their relationship. While the twins' relationship certainly seems to symbolize the very real and very intricate feelings of inbetweenness that plague the immigrant experience, it also seems to be

representative or symbolic of the relationship between Bangladesh and England that is unquestionably troubled because of its involvedness.⁵ In his text *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* Kobena Mercer, a cultural worker and critic who studies and writes about visual arts of the African diaspora, states that the immigrants in Britain are “a reminder and a remainder of its historical past,” and that this reminder, essentially is that “we are here because you were there” (7). Due to their shared colonial past, England and Bangladesh are involved. Alsana reflects on the word *involved* and its inevitability in the lives of her children, despite her resentment of its connotations. She says:

Involved happened over a long period of time, pulling you in like quicksand. *Involved* is what befell the moon-faced Alsana Begum and the handsome Samad Miah one week after they’d been pushed into a Delhi breakfast room together and informed they were to marry. *Involved* was the result when Clara Bowden met Archie Jones at the bottom of some stairs ... Involved is neither good, nor bad. It is just a consequence of living, a consequence of occupation and immigration, of empires and expansion, of living in each other’s pockets ... one becomes involved and it is a long trek back to being uninvolved. (*White Teeth* 439)

The respective ‘involvedness’ of Millat and Magid, India and England, Irie and Clara, Irie and Hortense, Hortense and Clara, and various other relationships in *White Teeth* reminds us of Smith’s metaphor of the Russian dolls that must fit into each other in order to compose a complete entity. While this completion is, as Alsana says, not necessarily good or bad, it is necessary for the characters in *White Teeth* to strive to attain a recognizable sense of completion. For Millat and Magid, it is their connection to Irie that finally unites them once again, at least in Irie’s mind.

Looking Forward: New Life, Old Connections and Remembered Pasts

I agree with Smith that “endgames” are tempting to play, and recognize, along with Ball, that Smith has a penchant for beginnings and endings, and indeed that her endings are often beginnings, her beginnings, endings; but, it does seem that Irie’s child (whose father’s identity will never be known since Irie slept with both Millat and Magid within minutes of each other) connects the twins once again and allows them to collectively look forward. Smith’s assertion that “the past is always tense, the future, perfect” (541) supports the idea that while Millat

⁵ England’s presence in India, beginning early in the 19th century, has had astounding repercussions in India that are still present today. The British colonized India with the intention to gain power and ‘educate’ the people to become more like British citizens and in effect attempted to destroy India’s culture, religion, and practices. India gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1947. Importantly, Bangladesh was formerly East Pakistan, which was formerly India and therefore while the country was never a colony of Britain, for the purposes of this thesis, it is important to note that it was once a part of England and therefore carries with it the repercussions of (de)colonization.

and Magid may not be able to connect to each other in the past, their future looks brighter. Furthermore Smith's pun on the word 'tense' alludes to her characters' struggles in accepting and learning about their own pasts. This search for a complete understanding of one's past creates a lot of the tension in the text, and looking forward into the future, as the knowledge of Irie's pregnancy forces the characters (and the readers) to do, alleviates this tension and allows those involved to imagine a future that is less complicated. Irie imagines this future when she says:

She's asked her unborn child to offer some kind of a sign, but nothing. She's had a lyric from Hortense's house going through her head – Psalm 63 – *early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee* ... But it asks too much of her. It requires her to go back, back, back to the root, to the fundamental moment when sperm met egg, when egg met sperm – so early in this history it cannot be traced. Irie's child can never be mapped exactly nor spoken of with any certainty. Some secrets are permanent. In a vision, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won't matter any more because they can't because they mustn't because they're too long and they're too tortuous and they're just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it. (527)

James Clifford's research on 'roots' supports the type of sentiment that Irie is feeling. In *Routes* Clifford explains how one's roots are essentially constructed, and that we are all basically "dwelling in travel" (2). Thus the roots that Irie hopes "won't matter anymore" (*White Teeth* 527) have the potential to become less important in our growing global community. Irie's wish for her child, like the wish of many parents for their children, is that she lives a less complicated and painful life than Irie has. For Irie, this means less searching for roots and more concrete knowledge of where one belongs. This knowledge is impossible for Irie's child, but it seems as though what Irie has learned is that knowledge is sometimes impossible to retrieve (especially in the form of memories, and histories), but that true feelings of belonging flourish in the relationships one forms. In this sense, Irie looks forward to a future where the roots and memories that are impossible to unearth are replaced with the warmth and care of a healthy, loving familial atmosphere where her child will not yearn for the sense of belonging that has plagued Irie's adolescence.

Smith too seems to look forward to this future; a future where memories of struggle, diasporas and secrets are intact and people are unafraid to inform future generations of their pasts in order to fulfill those who still struggle today. This idea is presented to the reader in the form of a child, and thus the story finishes where it began, with emphasis on the importance of relationships, and the experiences of children of immigrants and the connections they form.

Chapter Two

Intergenerational Conflict and Belonging: First- versus Second-Generation Immigrants

The cultural space presented in *White Teeth* is home to immigrants and children of immigrants, both negotiating their respective geographical and psychological locations, and both challenged by their immigrant status on a familial and societal level. This chapter is concerned with how the second-generation immigrants in *White Teeth*, specifically Irie and Millat, locate themselves in an ever-changing multicultural Britain; and how their relationships with their parents complicate their understanding of their place and role in society. Undoubtedly, the Britain that second-generation immigrants experience is different from the Britain their parents know. Smith's text grapples with the intergenerational dichotomy between the Westernized ideals of the children and the more traditional, non-British ideals of the parents. In *White Teeth* Smith's characters struggle to construct their identities, which is to say that they find it difficult to interpret the competing cultural codes they encounter in their daily experiences as immigrants in Britain. Paul Gilroy takes up the concept of this kind of fluctuating cultural allegiance in his study of contemporary British fiction. He notes that "difference exists within identities – within selves – as well as between them. This means that the longed-for integrity and unity of subjects is always fragile" (*British Cultural Studies and the Pitfalls of Identity* 228). Irie's struggles in *White Teeth* highlight this fragility of identity as she competes with cultural contradictions and mixed signals in her day to day routine. In the text, the children's status as second-generation immigrants becomes difficult to negotiate, and their parents are unable or unwilling to help the children understand their feelings of inbetweenness.

The Plight of the Second-Generation Immigrant to Britain

Smith discusses this conflict between generations in an interview with Kathleen O'Grady. When asked about the connections between the generations in the text and the ways in which the children in *White Teeth* take on the uprooted feeling that their parents experience, Smith says: "...your roots come with baggage. And the baggage isn't always fun" (O'Grady "White Teeth: A Conversation with Author Zadie Smith"). In *White Teeth* Smith further implies that children partially take on the history that has been passed down to them from their parents. Sometimes this history feels like a heavy burden, like unwieldy baggage to carry; but it is unavoidable because it is a part of who her characters are. Smith provides a useful metaphor of Russian dolls fitting into each other to help her readers work through the process of remembering and locating the past. This metaphor can be applied once again in this discussion of intergenerational relations. Smith tells us "... if this story is to be told, we will have to put them all

back inside each other like Russian dolls ..." (356). Like Russian dolls that must fit into each other in order to create a unified doll, for Irie's story to be told, she must come to terms with the baggage that she carries from her mother and father's pasts, and from her own memories of growing up in a culturally mixed home. Only through this process can she form a cohesive sense of self. Irie's feelings of inbetweenness can be attributed, in large part, to her upbringing and her relationships with her parents (Archie and Clara). Irie's familial relationships will be the central focus of this chapter, but Millat's relationship with his parents (specifically with his mother, Alsana) will be discussed as well.

Many theorists have taken up the discussion of inbetweenness in relation to the British immigrant experience. Interestingly, the experience of second-generation immigrants differs significantly from first-generation immigrants. Immigrants (such as Clara, Irie's mother, and Hortense, Irie's grandmother) tend to experience a major shift in location and culture and therefore find themselves unable to recognize or accept their identity as an immigrant; this feeling is compounded in second-generation immigrants who feel little connection to their parents' home countries, and little connection to the country in which they were born, and therefore feel as though they are split between two worlds, leaving them feeling ungrounded. Thus the second-generation feeling of inbetweenness is arguably more uncomfortable as the affected person, in this case Irie, does not even have a memory of belonging (while the first-generation immigrant remembers belonging to their home country before they migrated). Molly Thompson takes up this issue in her article "'Happy Multicultural Land'? The Implications of an 'excess of belonging' in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." Thompson notes that first-generation immigrants can identify and connect with a recognizable 'home' where they can locate and trace their history and roots (122). Second-generation immigrants, however, "have arguably had to navigate a more problematic relationship with their racial identities, often having to straddle two different, conflicting cultures" (Thompson 122). Thompson refers to this 'straddling' using the terms "in-between identity" and "hyphenated identity" (124). These terms are helpful ways of describing Irie's status in Britain and in her family. Due to her difficulty in understanding her parents and her changing conceptions of them, she often feels confused, both physically and culturally, and, as demonstrated in chapter one, she feels stuck between conflicting cultural codes as a second-generation immigrant to Britain.

Hybridity and the 'Third Space': Irie's Contested Place in British Society

Homi Bhabha contends that the offspring of immigrants must inhabit what he calls a 'third space.' This space is the product of cultural hybridity that occurs during the immigrant experience when two cultures make contact, and instead of forming a hybridized culture that somehow encompasses both original conceptions of culture, a new, or 'third space' emerges. The offspring of immigrants do not fully occupy space in either their parents' or their home

country's conception of culture, but instead they form a new cultural space and experience. In "The Commitment to Theory" Bhabha explains that the 'third space' is "the 'hybrid' moment of political change. Here the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One ... nor the Other ... but something else besides* which contests the terms and territories of both" (13). For Irie, her 'third space' is neither Jamaican nor British, but a new amalgamation of the two, combined with the experience of feeling as if she belongs somewhere inbetween and is not simply a product of her parents' cultural experiences.

The 'contestation' noted above by Bhabha is an essential element in a discussion of hybridity. For the 'third space' that the children of immigrants occupy is necessarily contested and thus engages in questions of resistance and power. Irie's discomfort in England is a product of the pressures of power relations that necessarily accompany the immigrant experience. Irie, a child whose race is socially constructed as 'mixed,' experiences the effect of power dynamics on her second-generation immigrant status. Part of Irie's discomfort with her social status is a result of society's view of her as a hybrid figure. This hybrid figure is problematic, for example, in British society because it challenges the authority of Britain as the dominant culture. Bhabha explains that the power the immigrant assumes simply by virtue of their difference is a result of their hybridity; he explains that hybridity is "a problematic of colonial representation ... that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority" ("Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817" 156). Thus, essentially, the immigrant is necessarily a hybrid figure simply by virtue of entering a new culture equipped with knowledge of their home culture. In this sense Irie's struggle to belong is complicated by factors over which she has no control: her parents' racial statuses and her connection to her family's history outside of Britain.

Even Irie's physical appearance confuses her sense of racial identity. She is especially troubled as she feels that her larger frame fits more appropriately in Jamaican culture, while her lighter skin places her in British culture. Smith describes Irie's figure as follows: "The European proportions of Clara's figure had skipped a generation, and she was landed instead with Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangoes and guavas; the girl had weight; big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth" (265). Indeed, when Irie looks in the mirror she does not feel she recognizes her own reflection because of the way she looks. She feels as though she does not even belong in her own skin. She describes herself as "without reflection" (266). The racial identity that Irie struggles with is a result of being the product of a white British father and a black Jamaican mother. Irie describes her body shape as belonging to a different culture: "[her body had] ... (shelf space for books, cups of tea, baskets or, more to the point, children, bags of fruit, buckets of water), ledges genetically designed

with another country in mind, another climate” (*White Teeth* 266). Irie is not satisfied with her mother’s explanation of her figure. Clara (Irie’s mother) tells Irie that she is “fine,” that she looks “fine” like “an honest-to-god-Bowden” (266). Looking like a Bowden (Clara’s maiden name) is not sufficient for Irie who feels conflicted about her cultural heritage, because the truth is that she does not only look like a Bowden; Irie has to come to terms with looking different from her mother and her father. She also must deal with the negative stereotypes that British hegemonic society inscribes on her physicality as a result of certain codes of beauty. This inability to ground herself, or recognize her features in either of her parents, is troubling for Irie and adds to the conflicts she encounters with her parents.

Black British Youth

Irie’s familial difficulties stem from several sources. One is her discomfort with her physical appearance and her feelings of ‘homelessness’ in Britain. Another source of Irie’s familial difficulties is peer pressure she feels from black British youth. Irie was born into a Britain that was at war with its black youth. The 1980s were especially turbulent years for black youth in Britain who, according to Ernest Cashmore and Barry Troyna, were involved in a “crisis” (5). In the collection *Black Youth in Crisis* Cashmore and Troyna discuss the difficulties and struggles of black youth living in England in the 1980s. The problems that black youth were encountering originated from their parents’ experiences as immigrants to England. In 1948 Britain experienced mass migration from the West Indies, South Asia, and Africa following the Nationality Act that allowed citizens from any commonwealth country to attain British citizenship and travel freely in the British Empire (Ball 223). This migration was met with a mixture of welcome and racism. As a result of the huge influx of immigrants to Britain, the British government restricted the rights of recent immigrants in the 1981 Nationality Act (Ball 223).⁶ Meanwhile, immigrants to Britain continued to experience racism, and a feeling of being unwanted in a country they had learned to consider a land of great economic opportunities (given that colonialism had disturbed their home countries). Cashmore and Troyna blame the racism new immigrants encountered, and the inferiority they felt as new citizens in a country that did not seem to want them, for the troubled status of the offspring of these same immigrants (4-5). According to Cashmore

⁶ The 1981 British Nationality Act erased the category of Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKC) and established three categories of British citizenship: British citizenship, British Overseas Territories citizenship, and British Overseas citizenship. The Act essentially limits former CUKCs from obtaining British citizenship unless they had been granted a Right of Abode under the 1971 Immigration Act. Importantly, under the new Act, children of former CUKCs can no longer become British citizens simply by virtue of being born in England; their parents must have British citizenship in order for their children to be granted automatic citizenship (“British Nationality Act 1981 Chapter 61”).

and Troyna, the inferior status attributed to new immigrants in England established in them a feeling of helplessness and an inability to organize their lives around any hope for a comfortable future (5). As a result of this instilled feeling of hopelessness, black youth in the 1980s, who were second-generation immigrants, believed that their blackness was an obstacle that kept them from social advancement and relegated them to an inferior role in society (Cashmore and Troyna 5). Consequently, “[black youth] ... have cultivated values and attitudes which elevate that quality of blackness to a position of importance. For many young blacks, being black is the salient link which unites them in the face of what they regard as an unaccommodating society” (Cashmore and Troyna 4-5). Evidently, the damage done to black youth at this time was deep-seated and required healing at a more fundamental level. The British government’s attempts to resolve the problems with the black youth in their country had inadequate results. The “urban aid grants, community development projects and education priority area programmes” were not helpful to the young black community whose problems were “entrenched in the furrows of culture, power and identity” (Cashmore and Troyna 6). Black youth in this time period were known for how they reacted to their status in society. They were a source of consternation for mainstream British society in the 1980s; according to Cashmore and Troyna “accounts of fecklessness, improvidence, violence, laziness and dishonesty were not uncommon” (15). Furthermore, black youth struggled with unemployment, street offences, and theft convictions and as a result “feelings of disengagement intensified” (Cashmore and Troyna 15). Likewise, the youth in *White Teeth* struggle with feelings of “disengagement” with society, and certainly are portrayed as being affected by the hostile environment created by the conflicts and misunderstandings between second-generation immigrant youth and the dominant society.

British Hostility and Irie Jones’s Troubled State-of-Mind

Zadie Smith, born in 1975 in northwest London, grew up in this hostile environment for young black people. Like her character Irie, Smith was born to one black parent and one white parent and she consequently based much of her character’s difficulties on her own experience. Indeed, in an interview with Kathleen O’Grady, Smith notes that she is “obsessed” with people’s origins. She attributes this curiosity to her own experience as a child whom society constructed as ‘mixed race.’ Smith thinks her curiosity “may be because people asked me so often when I was a child, where I was from, what my parents were about, how come one was black and how come one was white. It makes you attentive to those details.” Like Smith’s own experiences, Irie’s difficulties in the text are likely compounded by the tensions and difficulties that faced black British youth during her already confused adolescence. The hostile British environment that Smith creates and represents in *White Teeth* is evident, for instance, in Irie’s encounter with her English teacher. In this segment, Irie is in class, learning a

Shakespeare sonnet, which she, according to her teacher, misinterprets. Irie questions the complexion of a woman in one of Shakespeare's sonnets who is described as dark. She asks her teacher, Mrs. Roody, "Is she black?" to which Mrs. Roody responds, "No, dear, she's *dark*. She's not black in the modern sense. There weren't any ... Afro-Carri-bee-yans in England at that time, dear. That's a more modern phenomenon, as I'm sure you know" (271-272). This passage helps the reader understand why Irie feels as though she does not belong in British society. She feels invalidated at home where she does not look like either of her parents, and she feels invalidated at school as well where she seeks a recognizable figure in the literature she is reading, but is quickly and rudely refuted. Mrs. Roody's condescending response including the way she calls Irie "dear;" her emphasis on the word *dark*; her awkward pronunciation of the word Caribbean; and her comment "as I'm sure you know" as if, because Irie is black, she must be aware of the "modern phenomenon" of black people in England; all alienate Irie, causing her to believe that it is absurd for her to think that a Shakespeare poem could be about a black woman. This episode is a small but powerful example of how the black youth in *White Teeth* and indeed in Britain in the 1980s were made to feel as if they did not belong in Britain, as if they were some kind of phenomenon that was impermanent. Moreover, this episode is an example of the Eurocentric education that students in a very multicultural Britain were subject to. The state of education in Britain at this time was debated heavily as people began to question the school's curriculum and how it may not be inclusive, considering the number of second-generation immigrant students. Cashmore and Troyna touch on the subject of school curriculum in their text, noting that black youth had difficulty relating to the curriculum and it became clear that a change had to be made in the school system. Evidently, "there [was] a need for children born in Britain but continually referred to as being different and not accepted because of colour to develop a positive self-image and identity as well as a sense of pride in being black in a society where this [was] not valued" (22). Reducing the feelings of alienation experienced by immigrant children to a product of their "colour" only is far too essentialist a reading; however, the fact remains that second-generation immigrants were and are discriminated against and struggle to feel proud of themselves. As a result, structural changes were made in many British schools to make content more multicultural and accessible to black youth and more widely accepted as factual.

Paul Gilroy in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* takes up the notion that black people in Britain at this time were necessarily a "problem." Irie's experience with her teacher, who, according to Irie, is "the colour of strawberry mousse," (272) is fairly typical of the black experience in England in the 1980s especially. Gilroy calls this time in Britain "crisis-bound" and explains that racist reasoning in Britain is formed with the belief that blacks "comprise a problem, or more accurately a series of problems" (*There Ain't No Black* 11). This kind of racist reasoning is certainly present in the text (as demonstrated by the way Irie's

questions at school are dismissed) and Smith's representation of these realities is helpful in enabling readers to understand the racist Britain that Irie grows up in and how it contributes to her feelings of isolation.

Archie, Clara and Irie: Negotiating the Dynamics of a Culturally-Mixed Family

Irie's trouble at school is, as stated above, just one of several factors contributing to her familial difficulties. Irie struggles to fit in at home, feeling as if she does not fit in with either her mother or her father's cultural heritage; and she struggles outside of her home, in the hostile environment in Britain for second-generation "black youth."⁷ But, what is most troubling for Irie, and what likely causes her to feel somewhat uncomfortable and unwanted in both her country and her family, is the attitude of her parents, in particular her father, Archie, who fails to address or consider the potential problems and the difficulties in raising a daughter who is constructed as racially mixed. Likewise, Clara does little to help her daughter feel more comfortable in her own skin. Neither Archie nor Clara takes the time to address these issues with their daughter, or consider Irie's difficulties in any substantial way.

Irie's problems with her parents cause her to eventually leave home to live with her maternal grandmother, Hortense Bowden. She leaves home because of what she perceives as "parental hypocrisies and untruths" (379). The disconnect she feels with her parents is understandable when one considers Archie's naiveté concerning the racism he encounters even before the birth of his daughter. Irie's insecurities are in part due to her father's failure to recognize that his child might have a difficult life due to her socially-constructed mixed-race status. Archie's own insecurities are to blame for his naiveté; when he learns that Clara is pregnant, his first reaction is shock and disbelief. Clara confirms her pregnancy to Archie, saying: "'I am! And I arks de doctor what it will look like, half black an' half white an' all dat bizness. And 'im say anything could happen. Dere's even a chance it may be blue-eyed! Kyan you imagine dat?'" (67). Archie's disbelief is evident to the reader; the narrator explains that "Archie couldn't imagine that. He couldn't imagine any piece of him slugging it out in the gene pool with a piece of Clara and *winning*" (67). Evidently, Archie does not think his genes are good enough to make a child with his wife. This kind of insecurity undoubtedly affects his daughter's self-image later in her life.

⁷ I've inserted black in quotation marks here because of its ambiguous meaning in many discussions of immigrant youth in Britain. According to Shelia Allen, in her article "Confusing Categories and Neglecting Contradictions," "black youth" is a social construct and in most cases it actually refers to young men of West Indian decent (7). Furthermore, Allen writes that the category "black youth" "oversimplifies the structure of a class society and the relations of culture within it which function to reproduce the social relations between classes, generations, genders and ethnic groups" (144).

Archie and Clara both fail to consider the potential pain their child could suffer as a result of its mixed ethnicity. In fact, in the above quote Clara seems awestruck and pleased that a child of hers could look remarkably different from her, that it could potentially have blue eyes. Archie is particularly ignorant of the challenges of bringing up a child of mixed parentage in late 20th century Britain. He is even oblivious to the racism that permeates his work environment. Even before Irie's birth, Archie is the target of the racism of his co-workers' at his office (a paper company called *MorganHero*) because of his friendship with Samad, and his marriage to Clara. Archie's co-workers judge him based on his choice of friendships and partner. His co-worker Maureen is especially judgmental:

... 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'd 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. (69)

Maureen's belief that Archie is "strange" because he is friends with immigrants to Britain and "doesn't even notice" the colour of their skin or their ethnic differences is actually quite apt. Archie does come across as a bit strange to the reader, which has both positive and negative repercussions. While Archie does not judge people based on the colour of their skin or where they are born, his total obliviousness to the racialized environment in which he lives and works is potentially damaging to his wife and his child. It should be unnecessary to have to warn his co-workers that his wife is black before they meet her; but it does seem strange that Archie had never mentioned anything about his wife that might indicate that she is not a white, British-born woman or that might reflect any awareness on his part of the blatant racism that exists at his workplace. Presumably, he has no pictures of her at work, and speaks very little about his home life, or his relationships. This is not to say that some sort of warning was necessary, but just that Archie's social awareness is relatively low. Archie does not pass judgment on others for superficial, racist reasons, but this acceptance does not come from an enlightened position; rather, it is a result of Archie being completely uninformed and oblivious to the power dynamics at work in his environment. Archie cannot even tell when his boss, Mr. Hero, is being blatantly racist, asking him not to bring Clara to a company dinner because of her colour. The following passage is an example of the racism Archie encounters at work, of which he is totally unaware:

'That company dinner last month [when Archie first introduced Clara to his co-workers] – was awkward, Archie, it was unpleasant. And now there's this annual do coming up with our sister company from Sunderland ... as I say, it's not that I'm a racist, Archie ... I'd spit on that Enoch Powell ... but then again he does have a point, doesn't he? There comes

a point, a saturation point, and people begin to feel a bit uncomfortable ...'
(72)

Archie responds to his boss with confusion, as if he does not understand what his boss is insinuating. When Mr. Hero tells Archie that Clara's blackness makes the other wives feel uncomfortable Archie responds saying "Who? ... Who are we talking about Mr. Hero?" (72). Finally Mr. Hero changes the subject by offering Archie some food vouchers which completely distracts Archie from the conversation and the topic is dropped with the agreement that Archie and Clara will not go to the company dinner. This incident in particular showcases Archie's somewhat simpleminded approach to life. Mr. Hero is basically able to distract Archie with food, not unlike a child who is distracted with candy or a toy to avoid a difficult situation. While at times his naiveté is refreshing, and he appears progressive in his ability to be totally accepting, the truth is that Archie is simply oblivious to the racist environment in which he works and lives. Archie's ignorance is a problem later on for Irie, who could certainly benefit from some support from her parents regarding her difficulty at negotiating what feels like an unaccepted identity. Irie's frustrations with her parents' unwillingness to help her, and their seemingly secretive lives, drive her out of their home. After Irie discovers Clara's set of false teeth one night (she was never told her mother's teeth were fake: "It wasn't that she had deliberately not told her. There just never seemed a good time" [*White Teeth* 379]) Irie decides that she is tired of not knowing about her parents, and feeling as though they were keeping things from her: "[T]his was another example of the Jones/Bowden gift for secret histories, stories you never got told, history you never entirely uncovered, rumour you never unraveled ... [t]hese parents were full of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear" (379). The discovery of her mother's false teeth is symbolically significant for Irie because of Smith's focus on teeth as a metaphor for fixedness and similarities across racial and cultural lines. Smith's attention to teeth asks the reader to question the significance or importance of teeth in our bodies, and then to extend that thought to a greater significance on a symbolic level. Teeth, after all, are one of few parts of the body that have roots (hair does as well, but hair is essentially just dead skin cells). The fact that our teeth have roots fits in with the characters' struggles to acknowledge their own familial roots in order to negotiate their place in society. Thus, when Irie discovers that her mother's teeth are false, and thus that they lack roots, she feels as though her family's past has been full of falsities and thus leaves her parents' home in an effort to recover her past outside of what she knows, or indeed infers, from her parents. Irie must leave her parents and the home in which she grew up in order to locate her family's history and begin to understand and accept herself as she is. She is unable to connect with her parents who do not seem aware of the difficulties she faces in society. It is, however, somewhat understandable that Irie's parents cannot help her with her identification struggles. The experience of a second-generation immigrant to England is very different from that of a first-

generation immigrant (such as Clara), and is certainly different from someone who has never emigrated (such as Archie). Irie's particular situation can only be navigated by herself. Since her parents are of particularly little help she must attempt to handle her situation on her own.

Alienation and Longing for Home: Alsana and Millat's Disconnect

Irie's frustrations with her parents and her feeling that things are being kept from her, and that she is not included in her family's secrets mimics the way she does not feel included in British society, where she also feels alienated. The inhospitable nature of British society (that for Irie is reflected in her home life) is a common feeling among second-generation immigrants in England. Dominic Head, in his article "Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: Multiculturalism for the Millennium," notes the uniqueness of the post-war black British experience. He asserts: "[T]he concepts of 'migrancy' and 'exile' have become too distant to carry their former freight of disabling rootlessness. *White Teeth* does not avoid the fact of ethnic tension, but ... it presents the social problems of ethnicity as the shared problems of a diverse citizenship with a common 'home'" (107-108). Tracy L. Walters agrees that the text does not shy away from what Head calls "ethnic tension," and indeed this tension is particular to the second-generation immigrant experience which the parents of second-generation immigrant children, in *White Teeth*, fail to help their children work through. In "'We're All English Now Mate Like It or Lump It': The Black/Britishness of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*," Walters writes:

Smith does not pretend that racism in England is obsolete. Racial conflict occurs in *White Teeth* ... [and instead of] simply focusing on the cohabitation between Blacks and Whites, Smith forces us to recognize that interracial unions have crossed racial *and* ethnic lines. And thus in today's world, it is the immigrant who must recognize that their ethnic identities are in jeopardy. (316-317)

The notion that Britain's "diverse citizenship" shares the "problems of ethnicity" (Head 108), and that these conceptions of "ethnic identities are in jeopardy" (Walters 317), is especially prominent in *White Teeth*. Alsana Iqbal, an immigrant to Britain from Bangladesh, struggles with this exact issue (a feeling that her ethnicity is disappearing). Laura Moss takes up this idea in her article "The Politics of Everyday Hybridity: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." Moss speaks to the fear of losing one's sense of self as a result of immigration and conflicting influences: "Although [Alsana and Samad's fears] of innocuous drugs, poor fashion, and questionable majors might evoke a chuckle, they do speak to a larger set of cultural misgivings. Multiculturalism troubles Alsana and Samad because of their fears of loss of culture" (13). Moss's article suggests that these types of fears, such as the loss of one's culture, have become commonplace in British society, and that *White Teeth* in particular illustrates this new 'normalcy' through Smith's comedic representation of immigrant families. However, for Alsana, the

fear of losing one's ethnic identity is very real, and sheds light on the difficulties of raising a child in a country to which you are not native. Smith articulates this fear as follows:

... 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. Even the unflappable Alsana Iqbal would regularly wake up in a puddle of her own sweat after a night visited by visions of Millat (genetically BB; where B stands for Bengalianness) marrying someone called Sarah (aa, where a stands for Aryan), resulting in a child called Michael (Ba), who in turn marries somebody called Lucy (aa), leaving Alsana with a legacy of unrecognizable great grandchildren (Aaaaaaa!), their Bengalianness thoroughly diluted, genotype hidden by phenotype. (317)

The inability to recognize a part of your life (whether it is yourself, your offspring, your surroundings, or in Alsana's case, your grandchildren) is shared by first and second-generation immigrants alike, and in the text the fear that one is becoming unrecognizable, or the knowledge that one does not recognize oneself, is at the center of the majority of the conflicts between the generations. The parents fear their history and traditions are becoming non-existent, while the children cannot locate themselves either in contemporary Britain or in their parents' memories of their native countries and its traditions and histories. These fears permeate Alsana's relationship with her son Millat.

Millat's experiences as a second-generation immigrant are similar to Irie's in that he also struggles to belong. Yet Millat, unlike Irie, develops into a young man who is comfortable with the way he looks and grows to be very popular at school: "Millat was like youth remembered in the nostalgic eyeglass of old age, beauty parodying itself: broken Roman nose, tall, thin; lightly veined, smoothly muscled; chocolate eyes with a reflective green sheen like moonlight bouncing off a dark sea; irresistible smile, big, white teeth" (269). Millat is popular in his own hometown (Willesden) and those surrounding it. He fits into all kinds of different groups, including the "Raggastani crowd," the "cockney wide-boys," the "black kids," and the "Asian kids" (269). The problem is that Millat feels as though he has to please everyone, and that he must be someone different for each group in order to fit in with their way of life. Despite the fact that Millat is physically beautiful, and that, importantly, his teeth are big and white, he still lacks the necessary understanding of his roots. Smith's emphasis on the whiteness of teeth figures interestingly in Millat's situation. While Millat is very popular and very good-looking, his true pain and discomfort lies under the surface. His difficulties are a result of buried roots (which, like the roots of our teeth, are not visible) that he needs to negotiate and understand in order to feel a sense of belonging in his society. Thus the fact that his teeth are very white (or the fact that some people's skin is white) is irrelevant when it comes to Millat's emotional well-being. Millat is really looking for somewhere that he truly feels comfortable, and while it

appears as though this place is with Irie, he never seems to fully accept or formally recognize it. Millat tells Irie: “you’re *different*. We go way back. We’ve got history. You’re a *real* friend. [My other friends] don’t really *mean* anything to me” (270). But despite his insistence that this history is important and that it has meaning to him, he continues to neglect Irie and take her for granted. Likely this is due to his struggle to negotiate his place in Britain. Smith describes Millat best when she says: “underneath it all, there remained an ever present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere” (269). Likewise, Irie, who is unsure of where she belongs, has the same feelings of belonging nowhere. The equation of these two experiences speaks to the development of a normalcy surrounding the immigrant figure in British culture. Millat’s inability to belong anywhere makes him seek out different vehicles for belonging and for self-identification. Since he does not have a good relationship with his parents, Millat completely rules out attempting to belong in his parents’ native culture. Millat’s strained relationship with his parents is the main site of his instability.

Undoubtedly, Millat feels as though his father chose his brother Magid over him at a very young age when he decided to send only one son back to Bangladesh for what he thought would be a more traditional and respectful upbringing. Samad feared for his children’s lives in Britain, at one point telling Archie: “there is rebellion in them, Archie. I can see it – it is small now but it is growing. I tell you, I don’t know what is happening to our children in this country ... No respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!” (190). As a result, he sends Magid to Bangladesh since he can only afford to send one child and because “Magid was really Samad’s favourite” (195). Compounding his already strained relationship with his parents (as a result of feeling as though his twin brother was chosen over him) is his parents’ inability to accept how Millat has chosen to live his life. Alsana, Millat’s mother, is particularly set in her ways, and fails to engage with Millat in any meaningful way. Alsana fails to accept the culture in which she is living and raising a son, and punishes her son for growing up to be more “British” than “Bangladeshi.”

Alsana’s ideas as to what constitutes family life are very unhealthy and indicative of her own upbringing. In an effort to offer advice before the birth of Irie, Alsana tells Clara and her niece Neena that: “when you are from families such as ours you should have learnt that *silence*, what is *not* said, is the very *best* recipe for family life ... what you don’t understand, my Niece-of-Shame, what none of your generation understands ... is that not everybody wants to see into everybody else’s sweaty, secret parts” (77). Alsana and Millat’s difficulties obviously come from their very different childhoods; this is a particular problem for immigrant families. Alsana and Samad’s upbringings are not described in the text, but one can gather from their reactions to British life that their lives in Bangladesh were very different, and that their upbringing was perhaps more strict

than that of their son in Britain. While she continues to think nostalgically of her home country, Alsana finds Britain particularly offensive: “‘The English are the only people’ she would say with distaste, ‘who want to teach you and steal from you at the same time’” (356). While she loathes Britain, Alsana feels very attached to her home country; she feels she has responsibilities there to her family and friends. Alsana’s nostalgia for her home country is evident when she learns of the death of Indira Gandhi. Samad discovers her in tears, to which she cries:

I am not crying for her, you *idiot*, I am crying for my *friends*. There will be blood on the streets back home because of this, India *and* Bangladesh. There will be riots – knives, guns. Public death, I have seen it. It will be like Mahshar, Judgment Day – people will die in the streets, Samad. You know and I know. And Delhi will be the worst of it, is always the worst of it. I have some family in Delhi, I have friends, *old lovers* ... (198)

While Alsana is a difficult character to like (despite being one of the funniest characters), she reveals a bit of herself in this passage. The reader sees Alsana beyond just her role as wife and mother, and is allowed a brief glimpse of what her life was like before she married Samad and moved to Britain. Evidently, her childhood and adolescence in Delhi were at the least, troubled, presumably by the political atmosphere in South Asia in the mid-20th century.⁸ This tense atmosphere undoubtedly affects Alsana’s ongoing emotional connection with Bangladesh which is evident in her dislike of England. Although it is her adopted country, Alsana feels contempt for England due, it seems, to her experiences growing up under British colonial rule in her country. Alsana’s view of the British is interestingly similar to the Bowden women’s perspectives on the intentions of the British. Alsana, Ambrosia Bowden, Hortense Bowden, and Clara Bowden all grew up in countries being colonized by the British (Alsana in India, the Bowdens in Jamaica) and thus their opinion of the country to which they emigrated is decidedly poor. Similarly Hortense Bowden warns Irie about the dangers of obtaining a British education: “Everybody always tryin’ to heducat you; heducate you about dis, heducate you about dat ... Dat’s always bin de

⁸ India gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1947 (notably, the struggle to gain independence from British rule began at the beginning of the century, although the actual beginning of India’s struggle for independence is a contested point among scholars in the field, many of whom place the date much earlier in the country’s history). India was partitioned on the same day it gained its independence; it separated into India and Pakistan. The aftermath of the end of colonial rule and the partition of the country was brutal and bloody. The countries were riddled with political unrest and riots, which claimed the lives of many innocent Indians and Pakistanis. In 1971 East Pakistan separated from West Pakistan and Bangladesh was born. The conflicts between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh remain unfinished today. In *White Teeth* Samad refers to the inconstant nature of his homeland in response to being called Indian. He says: “I’m not actually *from* India, you know ... No. I’m from Bangladesh ... Previously Pakistan. Previous to that, Bengal” (133).

problem wid de women in dis family. Somebody always tryin' to heducat them about something ... no one gwan try to heducat *me*" (409). Alsana, like Hortense and the rest of the Bowden women, is still emotionally connected to her home country because of deep-seated wounds left behind by her experience of British colonialism. She undoubtedly feels a sense of guilt living in the country that has caused her family, and her home country, so much pain. This kind of glimpse into Alsana's past reveals a part of her character that is rarely seen in the book.

Alsana Versus Joyce Chalfen: India Confronts England

Alsana clearly has her own history to deal with, but what is of great concern to her for the most part of the text is her sons' lives in Britain and the history they are leaving behind them. For example, Alsana is indignant about her sons' relationships with the Chalfens. Millat grows close to the Chalfen family after being tutored by their son Josh Chalfen. Josh, Millat and Irie are punished at school for possessing marijuana, and Millat and Irie are made to visit the Chalfen house where Josh must tutor them. Josh's mother, Joyce Chalfen, grows especially fond of Millat, whom she believes is deeply troubled. She makes it her responsibility to take care of Millat, often neglecting her own children along the way. Alsana is, understandably, threatened by Millat's relationship with the Chalfens, and she shows her commitment and responsibility to her children through an expression of aversion to Joyce Chalfen. Alsana's strong dislike of Joyce is closely linked to her reasons for disliking England. In a sense, for Alsana, Joyce is representative of colonial England attempting to 'educate' India (with Joyce representing the colonizers and Millat the colonized). As mentioned earlier, Alsana is weary of the British, who she believes are trying to steal from those they colonize under the guise of providing education (356). Indeed Joyce believes she is teaching Millat to be a better student, and to be more emotionally balanced (she even pays for his therapy sessions with an "analyst" [443]). Understandably, Alsana draws similarities between Joyce and England, naturally equating the two and becoming fiercely opposed to Joyce's involvement in her family's life. Initially, Alsana refuses to even meet with Joyce, who wants to talk to Alsana about Millat's well-being. Alsana asks her husband: "She has her own family, no? Why does she not go and for a change mess them up? She has boys, four boys? How many boys does she want? How bloody many?" (438). Despite the fact that Millat came to Joyce already sufficiently troubled as a result of his upbringing, Alsana still blames Joyce for Millat's problems. Alsana is particularly annoyed that Joyce has involved herself in her family's affairs and she tells Joyce: "Mrs. Chalfen, ... There are two rules that everybody knows, from PM to jinrickshaw-wallah. The first is, never let your country become a trading post. Very important. If my ancestors had followed this advice, my situation presently would be very different, but such is life. The second is, don't interfere in other people's family business" (441). While Alsana's relationship with her son is not good, the problems they have are not due to a lack of love, but

instead to an insurmountable gap in their understandings of each other. This gap is created as a result of generational misunderstandings that, combined with the crises of identity that accompany immigration, and life as a second-generation immigrant, plague the immigrant family and make connections between the generations almost impossible. This painful process is aptly described by Maria Cristina Paganoni in her essay “Zadie Smith’s New Ethnicities.” Paganoni describes the different experiences of immigrants and children of immigrants, saying that first generation immigrants experience “the trauma of eradication and displacement” while second-generation immigrants have to deal with “the inevitable act of emancipation from the colonial past.” These separate challenges, with the younger generation taking on the responsibilities and challenges left behind by their parents’ generation, makes co-existence between the two generations difficult, almost guaranteeing strained familial relations.

The Immigrant Experience and a Desire for Normalcy

The representation of the strain of immigration on families is one of the ways through which Smith articulates the difficulties of hybridity (in this sense, hybridity referring to the joining of first-generation immigrants to their second-generation immigrant children). Moss provides a helpful description of this hybridized space: “Simply put, Hybridity is the joining of two entities to create a third entity. Such Hybridity, in cultural terms, is neither an appropriation of one culture by another, nor the acculturation of one and another. Instead it is the third element produced by the interaction of cultures, communities, or individuals” (12). This third element is challenged in *White Teeth* through Smith’s representation of the conflicts between generations. Smith’s text normalizes this process, which is to say, she writes the lives of immigrant families – including their struggles, their losses, their complicated histories – in such a way that their problems become commonplace. While immigrant families certainly have different and arguably more complex problems than non-immigrant families, a lot of the challenges that the families in *White Teeth* face are not uncommon to ‘regular’ family life. For example, Irie’s self-esteem issues, her awkwardness, and her unrequited love for Millat, are not necessarily unique to the second-generation immigrant; instead they are quite common feelings to young women. Nor is Millat’s recklessness – his promiscuity, disregard for authority, and use of recreational drugs – uncommon behaviour for teenaged boys in British society. While the conflicts that Irie and Millat have with their parents stem from somewhat deeper roots (indeed at times they seem completely disconnected from their family’s past), the hybridized space that they encounter and negotiate is written as somewhat normalized. Smith’s writing reveals the normalcy of immigrant families who experience the same struggles as non-immigrant families in 20th century Britain. Perhaps this representation of normalcy is Smith’s attempt at writing a narrative in which immigrants can recognize themselves, thereby creating a space in which they might feel as though they belong. The text’s

humour and candid rhetoric normalizes the immigrant experience and creates a safe space where the problems of integration (or what Samad calls “assimilation” and “corruption” [190]) are experienced by many British citizens to the point where it becomes the norm. This normalization of hybridity is articulated by Moss, who asserts that “[h]ybridity is no longer an exception to a concept of identity based on some kind of unity, or even unity in diversity. Instead, the myth of ‘an’ English national, or even post-national, identity has been replaced by an acceptance, or at least acknowledgement of a multiplicity of identities” (12). While *White Teeth*, as demonstrated in this chapter, certainly does not attempt to present this transition as seamless (the conflicts between the generations are considered seriously and in depth), it does encourage a hopeful future in which “everyday cultural and racial hybridity” (Moss 12) will no longer be as taxing and painful of an experience as it is today for second (and future) generation immigrants, like Irie and Millat, in England.

Chapter Three

Memory and Femininity: The Bowden Women's Connections

While *White Teeth* is a text that deals with the problems and issues of immigration, integration, racism, and specifically belonging, it is overwhelmingly a text about women. As such, this chapter is devoted to the examination of women, specifically the text's black women (Irie, Clara, and Hortense) and how their racialization as black and their positioning as women shape their identities. The relationships among these three women are central to the text's focus on its protagonist, Irie. Indeed relationships are the focus of the novel itself, which is essentially a complicated web of interaction between family members and friends. Smith emphasizes the necessity of relationships and the ability for deep connections to usurp surface-level differences. The relationships in which each character is involved are essential to the ways in which their identities are formed and shift as their relationships form and shift. Irie's relationships, specifically her relationships with her maternal line, are of particular interest in understanding how she shapes her identity. As discussed in my first two chapters, in order for the reader to connect with Irie's experiences, and indeed for Irie to fully accept her role in society, she must come to terms with her familial past and the significance of her maternal heritage in her own life. Smith's image of the Russian dolls is perhaps most apt in this discussion as Irie's past is deeply connected to the women in her life. If Irie's life story is to be appreciated, as Smith says, "we will have to put them all back inside each other like Russian dolls, Irie back in Clara, Clara back in Hortense, Hortense back in Ambrosia" (356). Smith's emphasis here on the need to understand one's familial history in order for one's story to be told in its completion is the basis of this chapter's focus on femininity and race. This metaphor speaks especially to the women in the text because the dolls represent pregnant women whose story can only be told if their child is returned back to their womb and they are, essentially, whole again. The connections between these three women will be examined for what they reveal about Irie's eventual ability to resist conforming to the societal molds to which she is exposed. Irie's acceptance of herself is a feat that is, arguably, not accomplished by her mother or grandmother as a result of their varied experiences. The social and historical circumstances that surrounded the Bowden women's experiences as immigrants (or, in Irie's case, a second-generation immigrant), and specifically as women of colour, make their attempts to belong in their societies particularly difficult. Irie, Clara, and Hortense will be the focus in this chapter because of their significance in the text and because their positioning as immigrants makes them particularly interesting to the study of belonging and the longing for 'home' with which this thesis is centrally concerned.

'Race,' 'Gender,' and Irie's Familial Roots

The black women in *White Teeth* who are the focus of this chapter are connected because of similarities that are rooted in their 'race' and 'gender.'⁹ In her article "Problematizing the Race Consciousness of Women of Colour" Paula Stewart Brush reminds us that "... race, racism, and race consciousness must be understood historically and culturally. Considerable research examines race as a historically and socially constructed category ..." (176). Indeed, this thesis acknowledges the fact that 'race' is a social construct and intends to prove that the connections between Irie, Clara, and Hortense are not based solely on their 'race' so-to-speak, but instead on shared experiences of racism and their race consciousness that is manifested in them because of their immigrant status in Britain during the late twentieth century. Brush's article is concerned with the assumption that black women are necessarily race conscious (meaning they are aware that, as Brush notes, "the personal is political" and that their experience is inherently attached to social conditions [171]) because of their racialization as black. Thus the ways in which Irie, Clara, and Hortense are racialized as black are dependent upon their positioning in English society as immigrants.

Irie's connections to her mother and grandmother are curious in the text as they are the basis for her inability to feel a sense of belonging. In order for her to understand and recognize herself, and for her story to be told (as Smith puts it [356]), she must appreciate her past and the role the maternal figures in her life plays in her present. As discussed in my first chapter, memory plays a central role in Irie's ability to realize how her sense of self is continually changing and forming and what these changes mean to her on a day-to-day basis. Irie's present is understood throughout the text in relation to its past. The text is thoroughly bound up with the past, as demonstrated by its continual shifting from generation to generation in an effort to inform the present series of events. Likewise, Clara is described to the reader through an explanation of her mother's and grandmother's experiences growing up in Kingston, Jamaica. Indeed, the text's relationship with the past is an essential part of its composition.

Gendering Memory

Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith also work through the importance of our pasts in our present as discussed in their article "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction." Hirsch and Smith assert that: "Identity, whether individual or cultural, becomes a story that stretches from the past to the present and the future, that connects the individual to the group, and that is structured by gender and related identity markers" (8). Hirsch and Smith outline the links

⁹ As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the inverted commas placed here around the words 'race' and 'gender' are meant to acknowledge that this thesis is using these terms with an understanding that they are culturally constructed performative categories. For a further explanation, please see the introduction on pages 7-8.

between gender and memory, and note the role that cultural and collective memory play in the desire for a better understanding of one's self, namely that cultural and collective memory are central to the process of identity formation. Hirsch and Smith's assertions reinforce Maurice Halbwachs's conclusions on collective memory, particularly that "there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection" (38). The collective memory and social frameworks for memory that Halbwachs discusses are clearly evident in Irie's life. The life experiences of Irie's family (specifically her female family members) resonate with Irie on a deep level. In order to become comfortable within her own body, and in her home country, Irie seeks out her past.

Irie's desire to learn about her past takes shape primarily at her grandmother's home, the home her mother grew up in, and it is here that she (re)discovers events in her family's past that help explain her present. This process is detailed in my first chapter, and therefore does not need to be revisited here, but what is important to note is that the connections that Irie has to her female family members is a result of a shared cultural memory that is gendered. What Irie remembers is intricately bound up with her family's past and thus serves as a lens into her understanding of herself and her place in society and in her family. Gayle Greene studies the intricacies of memory and its connection to feminist fiction in her article "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory." Green's assertions can inform Irie's situation, and Smith's character's relationships with their past. Green writes: "memory is our means of connecting past and present and constructing a self and versions of experience we can live with" (293). Green's assessment here sounds similar to Irie's struggles. She must feel connected to her past in order to construct her present identity in a way that she can live with.

Perhaps Smith's need to write about female characters who feel alienated and fragmented because of obstacles in their family's pasts speaks to her place in contemporary feminist thought. Green attests that scholars like herself have difficulty discussing and writing about feminism and the plight of women because they constantly have to re-establish themselves and repeat the struggles of women in the past: "one of the most painful facts about the struggle for emancipation is that we have to keep starting it over again. This may be true of any effort at social change: each generation seems to need to make its own errors, and a kind of collective amnesia [erases] all memory of the struggles of the past" (298). Indeed Smith's character Irie must make her own errors before she turns to the generations before hers for answers that will help her understand and accept her present. Irie too is involved in the struggle to raise awareness about the plight of women in a largely patriarchal world, but her predicament is specific to her maternal family's past as she seeks to re-learn and re-member the problems in her mother's and grandmother's histories.

Identity Formation and the Composition of Narratives

Compounding Irie's struggles to accomplish a sense of belonging is her mother and grandmother's pasts and how patriarchy limited the choices available to them. As noted above Smith details the pasts of her characters in an effort to provide her readers with a full understanding of them. However, this full understanding of oneself is a feat that will likely never be accomplished. Such is the nature of identity formation. More specifically, in order for Irie, or any of the characters in *White Teeth*, to attain a workable understanding of their identities they must learn to recognize the ways that their conceptions of themselves inform how they perform their identities socially. This combination of self- and social-construction is a delicate composition and is essentially a life-long dance with no foreseeable ending. Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn describe the precariousness of (racial) identity formation in the introduction to their text *Under Construction: 'Race' and Identity in South Africa Today*. Distiller and Steyn note that the self can be conceptualized as "a matrix, a complex shifting and interconnected series of strands. This matrix has no core, and is not stable. Its possibilities are informed by the material and ideological contexts in which the self finds itself; so our senses of selves are reliant on the worlds we live in, not independent of them" (4). Thus the seeming search for a knowable self that Smith's characters embark upon will not yield any concrete answers or full understandings. However, the desire for this kind of self-fulfillment is an understandable driving-force in the life of an especially lost character such as Irie Jones.

Similar to Smith herself, Irie feels the need to compose a narrative, specifically of her maternal line, in order to locate herself in her familial context. The narrative that Irie must work through is riddled with disappointing men in her family's past and thus her composition of the past has to do with her desire to break the cycle that her maternal line has composed. It is helpful to use Gayle Greene's assessment of recollecting familial narratives when discussing Irie's plight. Greene notes: "In a sense, all narrative is concerned with change: there is something in the impulse to narrative that is related to the impulse to liberation. Narrative re-collects, re-members, repeats [...] in order for there to be an escape from repetition, in order for there to be change or progress" (291). Similarly, Irie is concerned with changing the cycle of marginalization that the women in her family are subject to. The way that Irie brings about this change is through the agency she invests in herself. Irie is determined to diverge from the path that her maternal line has followed and compose her own narrative based on her ability to make choices that will positively affect her future and help her to live comfortably within her psyche and her society. Irie attains this agency through an acknowledgment of the nature of performance in her social life. Distiller and Steyn explain how performance relates to race when they discuss the ways in which race "needs props, a social and economic script, and co-actors, before it can

assume its commonsensical proportions. In addition, it is most obviously registered visually, which implicates an audience in the meaning of the social stage on which [it] is performed” (4). They also draw on Judith Butler’s work on gender as a way to explain how race is performative and something that we *do*. Referring to Butler, Distiller and Steyn explain that “her work has shown how constructs such as ‘race’ and ‘gender’ have no existence prior to our performances of them, prior to our enactment of norms ...” (*Under Construction* 4). Irie becomes aware of these processes throughout the course of *White Teeth*. The episode in which Irie shifts her focus inward and becomes aware of her own agency occurs when she takes control of her feelings for Millat and has sex with both Millat and Magid. This episode is explained in detail later in this chapter, but it is important to note that Irie does eventually begin to compose her own narrative and to change the cycle of marginalization and re-establish the plight of women in her own family and in her society.

Ambrosia, Hortense and Clara Bowden: A History of Marginalization

Ambrosia, Irie’s great grandmother, Hortense, her grandmother, and Clara, her mother, are each initially presented to the reader in terms of their relationships with men. Irie’s connections to her maternal family members instill in her a disappointment in men. Interestingly, Irie is not particularly interested in her father’s past. While Archie’s history is provided for the reader, when Irie seeks to learn more about herself through an exploration of her family’s past she is drawn to her mother’s side of the family rather than her father’s. Hirsch and Smith speak to the tendency for history and especially cultural memory to be gendered, which highlights Irie’s own tendency to lean towards the female side of her family in order to compose her family’s past in a manner that is helpful to her in the present. The importance of linking oneself to one’s past is also discussed by Greene who finds that “[t]o lose the connection between past and present ... is also to lose the narrative thread that supports [identity] and reality” (294). Thus Irie begins to compose her past in an effort to connect the threads of her maternal line to her present situation. Irie’s thread begins with Ambrosia’s past and how it impacted Hortense’s life and thus Clara’s and Irie’s. Each woman’s present is connected to her mother’s past, which is an important notion for Smith who writes that these women have the ability to perfectly fit in to each other, like Russian dolls, making them whole.

Ambrosia’s past is situated in her home country of Jamaica. Thus, her history with men is complicated by her status in her country while it was colonized by England. Ambrosia, the daughter of a white soldier’s landlady, was involved with Captain Charlie Durham, an English colonialist in Jamaica who impregnated her “one drunken evening in the Bowden larder” (356) (interestingly, the only information given about Ambrosia’s family is that she was the daughter of a landlady, at no point does Smith even imply that Ambrosia’s father was anywhere in the picture). Captain Charlie Durham does not leave Ambrosia to

struggle through the pregnancy on her own. Instead, he insists on educating her. Ambrosia visits Charlie Durham three times a week at which time he teaches her “[l]etters, numbers, the bible, English history, trigonometry – and when that was finished ... anatomy, which was a longer lesson, given on top of the student” (357). Ambrosia believed that Charlie Durham would take care of her and her baby. Indeed, Charlie tells her “that their secret child would be the cleverest Negro boy in Jamaica” (357). But, like three generations of men involved with Bowden women after him, Charlie Durham disappoints Ambrosia, in this case leaving her when she is five months pregnant. Ambrosia’s mother explains: “‘Don’ arks me why,’ said Ambrosia’s mother, eyeing her daughter’s stomach with suspicion. ‘Im jus’ get up an go, on de sudden. But ‘im leave a message dat he wan’ you to be looked after still ...’” (358). Before Ambrosia gives birth to Hortense she must endure a rape attempt and the Kingston earthquake of 1907. Ambrosia feels deep animosity towards men at the time of her daughter’s birth. First she experiences a near rape by Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, a friend of Charlie Durham’s to whom Ambrosia was first sent to continue her English ‘education;’ then she must give birth to her daughter alone, without the help or support of the baby’s father. Ambrosia’s struggles are symbolic of the colonization of Jamaica and the influence of ‘white men’ both on her and on Jamaica. The attempted rape of Ambrosia by a white man who was initially meant to ‘educate’ her is symbolic of the invasion of Jamaica by English colonizers, an invasion that was strongly opposed by the Jamaican people. The fact that a natural disaster saves Ambrosia from being raped by Sir Glenard symbolically implies that there was something unnatural about the way that the colonizers invaded the lives (and in this case, the body) of the Jamaican people. Therefore, when Hortense Bowden is brought into the world she has already learned things by osmosis through her mother’s womb, and thus Ambrosia has transferred some of her emotions regarding men onto her daughter.

Hortense’s assertion that she remembers events that happened while she was in her mother’s womb adds considerable weight to the argument that the Bowden women have a deep connection to each other. Indeed, Hortense’s relationships with men in her life can be traced back to her fetal existence as one of her first memories is repelling the advances of Sir Glenard. Hortense asserts that she has a memory of Sir Glenard’s advances towards her mother: “Hortense remembered well the feel of that fat hand landing hot against her mother; she remembered kicking out at it with all her might” (*White Teeth* 360). Hortense believes that she remembers these events as they happened to her mother. According to Smith: “... any root canal of Hortense must go right to the very beginning, because [Hortense] was there; she remembers; the events of 14 January 1907, the day of the terrible Jamaican earthquake, are not hidden from her, but bright and clear as a bell” (359). In fact “[i]t was Hortense’s belief that at the moment her mother recognized Jehovah, Hortense herself became conscious, though still inside the womb” (359). Despite her early aversion to men, Hortense

ends up marrying a man who is content to leave her behind while he moves to England. Hortense's husband, Darcus Bowden, leaves his wife and daughter (Clara), in order to move to England and set up a home for them. But, in the tradition of the Bowden women's men, Darcus disappoints; he fails to secure a job, or to make enough money to send for his family from Jamaica. Eventually, "... enraged by a fourteen-year wait, Hortense decided finally to make the journey on her own steam ..." (31). Once Hortense and Clara arrive in England, Darcus is given "the tongue-whipping of his life ..." (31) and from then on the only word that Darcus ever musters again is 'Hmph': "*Hmph* was all Darcus said or ever was to say after. Ask Darcus anything; query him on any subject at any hour of the day and night; interrogate him; chat with him; implore him; declare your love for him; accuse him or vindicate him and he will give you only one answer ... *Hmph*" (31). The text does not provide much detail into the life of Darcus Bowden, but what we do know is that he is a decidedly broken man. Perhaps Darcus is meant to represent the plight of black immigrant men in Britain as well. Although Smith's character Samad does give the reader insight into the male experience of immigration and displacement, Darcus's lethargy and hopelessness is a poignant example of the helplessness felt by those who fail to beat the odds that are so unfairly stacked against them in their adopted country. Unfortunately, not enough information is given about Darcus for any concrete conclusions to be drawn about his life and struggles. Nevertheless, his inability to provide for his family and to succeed in England is a great disappointment to Hortense and Clara. Even so, Hortense does come close to achieving liberation from the disappointing men in her life and in her family's past. She commits herself to the kingdom of God through her involvement with the Jehovah's Witnesses, and thus considers herself on the same level as men, with the understanding that God loves all his children, men and women alike, equally. And perhaps she finally finds a male figure she can trust in an all-powerful, eternal Father. It is likely that Irie's desire to break free of the Bowden women's penchant for choosing poor mates, and putting up with disappointment from the men in their lives, comes from her grandmother's views about men and how they have impacted the Bowden family women. Hortense explains to Irie why she endures the sexism in the Jehovah's Witnesses and the connections she feels between her mother, herself, her daughter, and Irie:

Lemme tell you someting. I'm not like dem Witnesses jus' scared of dyin' ... I still hope to be one of de Anointed evan if I am a woman ... I want to be dere wid de Lord making de laws and decisions ... I gat so tired wid de church always tellin' me I'm a woman or I'm nat heduated enough. Everybody always tryin' to heducat you; heducate you about dis, heducate you about dat ... Dat's always bin de problem wid de women in dis family. Somebody always tryin' to heducat them about something ... no one gwan try to heducat *me*. Dat would be *my* job! I'd make my own laws an' I would be wanting anybody else's opinions. My mudder was

strong-willed deep down, and I'm de same. Lord knows, your mudder was de same. And you de same. (*White Teeth* 409)

Hortense draws a clear connection here between the Bowden family women and contributes to an explanation of Irie's coming-of-age through the trials of the women in her family that have come before her. The strong-willed women that Hortense describes in this passage are reminiscent of the similarities between each Bowden woman that make them so connected to each other. The result of these connections is that in order to gain a full understanding of each woman separately, one must understand their connections to each other.

Hortense's assertion that no one is going to try to educate her speaks to the way her mother was treated by Charlie Durham (who, you will remember, 'educates' Ambrosia in an effort to authenticate his relationship with the black daughter of his landlady), and speaks, in general, to the tendency that she sees for members of a dominant society (in her own family's history, the British) to take advantage of another society under the guise of 'education.' In fact, what Hortense (and Smith, of course) is likely referring to here is the colonization process that has caused so much damage to countries around the world, including, for the purposes of this novel, Jamaica. Elleke Boehmer, in *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature: Second Edition*, notes the desire for colonialists to learn about the country and people they were colonizing (though they did not 'learn' about the countries so much as they imposed pre-conceived notions onto the colonized people), and indeed to educate them in what they considered the enlightened way of the Europeans. Boehmer explains: "It became habitual for Europe to approach other cultures as *objects of study*, bodies of knowledge to assemble and to bring into shape" (69). Boehmer discusses the oft-used metaphor in postcolonial narrative theory called the "colonial gaze," which "was made manifest in the activities of investigation, examination, inspection, peeping, poring over, which were accompaniments to the colonial penetration of a country" (68). Interestingly, Boehmer also notes that the process of educating the colonized was never intended for the betterment of the colonized people (here Hortense's mistrust of 'educators' rings true): "Even if educated in the white man's schools, even if accepted as part of metropolitan intellectual life, as happened under French colonialism, the other could never, finally, become the European" (78). Hortense, unlike her own mother and grandmother, is mistrustful of white men attempting to 'educate' black women (Ambrosia's mother believed that education from the white man was an act of generosity: "Be tankful for gen'russ-ity. Dere is not required whys and wherefores when a hansum, upright English gentleman like Mr Durham wan' be gen'russ" [*White Teeth* 356])). While it is never the intention of any of the women in the novel to "become the European," the pressure in British society (whether that society is imposed upon them as it was on Ambrosia and her mother through colonization, or was entered into as is the case with Hortense, Clara, and Irie) causes the women, Irie

especially, to develop a sense of inferiority and question their status in life making it difficult for them to exist comfortably in their own bodies.

Despite Hortense's view on education, and her strong assertions that she is equal to men in the eyes of God, she still endures discrimination on the basis of gender in the Jehovah's Witness organization. The sexism that she condones in her relationship with Ryan Topps (who is an ex-boyfriend of Clara's whom Hortense converts to the Jehovah's Witnesses) seems to contrast with her otherwise dominant personality. Hortense is thwarted by Ryan and the Jehovah's Witness organization to which she devotes so much of her life; she is not respected in the organization on account of her gender, and yet she fully accepts her place and allows Ryan to treat her in a derogatory manner. Because of her status as a woman, Hortense is not eligible to take on a leadership role within the Jehovah's Witness organization. Hortense, deeply committed to her religion, asks Ryan for new information about the expected date of the end of the world every morning, to which, one day, he responds:

We are still completing our studies. You must let my colleagues and myself deliberate thoroughly. In this life there are them that are teachers and then there are them that are pupils. There are eight million Witnesses of Jehovah waiting for our decision, waiting for the Judgement Day. But you must learn to leave such fings to them that 'ave the direct line, Mrs B., the direct line. (*White Teeth* 398)

Ryan's treatment of Hortense in this passage is surprising given that Hortense is the one who initially recruited Ryan to the Jehovah's Witnesses and exceeds him in seniority both in the organization and in life. Hortense does not even receive basic respect in this exchange, to which she is entitled given the fact that Ryan lives with her, and was brought up in the faith under Hortense's careful direction. Hortense's life is completely devoted to the Jehovah's Witnesses, so much so that she loses touch with her only daughter and cuts herself off from any relationships outside of the Witness community. While her faith is certainly admirable, she does forgo many of the pleasures in life, such as a relationship with her daughter, in order to one day feel as though she truly belongs somewhere, which for Hortense is the Kingdom of God.

Clara's strained relationship with her mother is one of several obstacles that she encounters as a black woman living in England in the late 20th century. Clara and Hortense's relationship essentially falls apart because Hortense does not approve of the men in Clara's life. Indeed Clara's choice of men in the text is poor, and she, like her mother and grandmother before her, falls victim to feelings of disappointment and incompleteness. Clara, Hortense and Irie all deal with issues of familial strife and unsatisfactory relationships with the men in their lives. Additionally, as black women living in a country where white perspectives are privileged, each woman must negotiate their identities in the company of people who essentially treat them as outsiders. In her article "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory" bell hooks notes the precarious station that black

women occupy in society. hooks is writing from an American perspective, but she is inclusive of, seemingly, all black women. She often includes herself in her argument by positing herself and other black women as 'we.' According to hooks: "Black women with no institutionalized 'other' that we may discriminate against, exploit or oppress often have a lived experience that directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology. This lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege ..." (39). hooks's interpretations of the plight of black women can be applied to the Bowden women in that each of them is shaped by their environments, and thus their relationships, and the way they see themselves in relation to others, is affected. Their relationships with men are shaped by their experiences of marginalization and exploitation. As a result, the women in *White Teeth* tend to consider their relationship with each other as the only opportunity for them to vent their anger and frustrations, and thus their bond suffers; both Clara and Hortense, and Irie and Clara, experience this kind of rift due to societal pressures and exploitation on the basis of gender and race.

Clara's relationship with her mother and with men begins to suffer when her boyfriend Ryan Topps is persuaded by Hortense to join the Jehovah's Witnesses. Hortense essentially steals Ryan from Clara, converting him to the Jehovah's Witnesses and convincing him that she and he could 'save' Clara together. Ryan reveals this plan to Clara, telling her: "'Your mum – your mum and myself,' mumbled Ryan, 'we're worried. 'Bout you. There ain't that many wot will survive the last days. You been wiv a bad crowd ...'" (*White Teeth* 42). Clara's reaction to Ryan is to dismiss him, her mother, and her father collectively and to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses and her family's home. She tells Ryan: "I'd rather be sizzling in de rains of sulphur wid my friends than sittin' in heaven, bored to tears, wid Darcus, my mudder and you!" (43). Clara's relationship with her mother is obviously already strained even before Hortense uses Ryan against Clara to scare her into converting to the Jehovah's Witnesses. Hortense's desire to feel needed within her religious community, and indeed within her family and her adopted country (England), all contribute to her effort to instill in Clara the same feelings of marginalization that she feels herself. Additionally, men play a large role in the rift between Clara and Hortense. In the above passage, when Clara tells Ryan what she thinks of his apparent concern for her, she includes Hortense, Ryan and Darcus in her list of people she would rather be without. Clara asserts that the disappointment that she feels towards her mother is extended to the men in her life and she wishes to rid herself of each of them.

It is not long after her altercation with Ryan Topps that Clara meets Archie. Not surprisingly Clara elevates Archie to a saviour figure and, lacking the presence of a stable man in her life, she clings to the idea of Archie and promptly marries him. Clara decides to marry Archie not for love but rather out of spite towards her mother: "Clara saw Archie through the grey-green eyes of

loss; her world had just disappeared, the faith she lived by had receded like a low tide, and Archie, quite by accident, had become the bloke in the joke: the last man on earth” (45). Clara successfully continues the tradition in the Bowden women’s history to marry a man that is bound to disappoint when she agrees to become Archie’s wife. While Archie is not a bad man, his indifference to life and his lack of enthusiasm towards Clara and their relationship makes him a poor choice for a life partner. Although Clara is aware that she does not love Archie, her anger towards her mother prompts her to marry Archie and divorce herself completely from the Jehovah’s Witnesses and her parents. Indeed Clara hopes to move far away from her mother and sees Archie as the vehicle through which to accomplish this: “she did it (married Archie) on impulse and begged Archie to take her as far away from Lambeth as a man of his means could manage” (46). Clara is largely responsible for what will become a disappointing and unfulfilling marriage to Archie. Smith explains:

She did not love Archie, but had made up her mind, from that first moment on the steps, to devote herself to him if he would take her away ... No white knight, then, this Archibald Jones. No aims, no hopes, no ambitions. A man whose greatest pleasures were English breakfasts and DIY. A dull man. And *old* man. And yet ... good. He was a *good* man. And *good* might not light up a life, but it is something. (48)

Clara does not enter into her marriage with high expectations. A combination of her difficult relationship with her mother, and her complicated status as a black woman in a predominantly white society, causes her to set her sights low and essentially to settle for a man that she does not love. The fact that Archie is, according to Clara, “a *good* man” (48) does not justify her decision to marry a man in order to spite her mother.

Interestingly, several theorists of black feminist thought have taken issue with the pressure that the cult of domesticity has placed upon black women specifically. Clara certainly suffers under the pressures of family life and indeed makes life choices (such as the decision to marry) based upon what society demands of women and what society demands of the family unit. While the women’s movement in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s challenged the role that the family has played in the oppression of black women (Amos and Parmar “Challenging Imperial Feminism”), Clara still feels pressure to enter into a loveless marriage (she is clearly also motivated by a desire to spite her mother). Despite her experience with men up to this point in her life, Clara obviously still feels dependent on men in order to achieve happiness; for in order to defy her mother, she must depend on Archie to marry her. As a result of her marriage to Archie Clara indeed achieves the effect she desires: she is quickly disowned by her mother: “Hortense was fiercely opposed to the [marriage], on grounds of colour rather than of age, and on hearing of it had promptly ostracized her daughter one morning on the doorstep” (*White Teeth* 46). It makes sense that Hortense is opposed to the union of Clara and Archie “on grounds of colour”

given her own history. As noted earlier, Hortense's first encounter with a white man (experienced while still being carried in her mother's womb) is violent (she remembers kicking the belly of her mother while it is touched by a white man who soon after attempts to rape her). Furthermore, Hortense's white father, Charlie Durham, left her mother while she was pregnant with Hortense and was never present in Hortense's life. As a child who grew up in colonized Jamaica, Hortense understandably is mistrustful of white men. While Clara successfully damages her relationship with her mother, she does so at her own expense, ending up in a marriage based on traditional gender roles despite her previous aversion to domesticity. Clara's disappointment with Archie is evident from the beginning of their marriage; she is almost immediately disillusioned with Archie whose disinterest in her is evident early on:

One month into their marriage and he already had that funny glazed look men have when they are looking through you. He has already reverted back into his bachelorhood: pints with Samad Iqbal, dinner with Samad Iqbal, Sunday breakfasts with Samad Iqbal, every spare moment with the man in that bloody place. (48)

Archie's and Samad's relationship is yet another example of how Clara is marginalized by men in her life. Even in her marriage, she feels she must compete with a man, in this case for the attention of her husband. Like her mother and grandmother before her, Clara becomes less and less important to the man in her life and resigns herself to a lonely existence. Ambrosia suffered a similar fate when she was abandoned by Charlie Durham and forced to carry their child to term on her own; Hortense, likewise, was abandoned by her husband and left to fend for herself and their daughter while he moved to England, presumably never intending to send for his family. Both Clara and Alsana (Samad Iqbal's wife) are aware that they are put second to their husband's relationship with each other. After Alsana tells Clara that she is pregnant, she asks why Archie had not already informed Clara of the news, saying "Don't our husbands tell each other anything?" (66). It is at this point that Smith notes the women's acknowledgment of their husbands relationship: "But as soon as she had said it, the weight of the other possibility rested on the brains of the two girl-wives. That their husbands told each other everything. That it was they themselves who were kept in the dark" (66). The novel's emphasis on the secret lives of men (specifically the deeply rooted secret between Archie and Samad regarding the Nazi doctor that Archie was meant to kill while he and Samad were in the war), and the inability for women to penetrate the kind of relationship that men like Archie and Samad have, is the basis of the oppression of many of the women in the text (including Hortense, Clara, Alsana, and Irie). But, interestingly, Smith does insert an oppositional voice to this homosocial club in the form of Alsana's lesbian "Niece-of-Shame" Neena.

Neena is arguably the only female character in *White Teeth* who is able to clearly see that men in her society marginalize women and thus she resists this

marginalization. In an effort to teach Clara about feminist thought she secretly lends her books so Clara can educate herself about the plight of women: "... [Clara] reads, in a few short months, Greer's *Female Eunuch*, Jong's *Fear of Flying* and *The Second Sex*, all in a clandestine attempt, on Neena's part, to rid Clara of her 'false consciousness'" (78). Neena's is the first voice of aversion towards sexist men in the text. She questions the authority of men and asserts power on behalf of women. Neena, while conversing with a pregnant Alsana and Clara, asserts: "I mean, I just think men have caused enough chaos this century. There's enough fucking men in the world. If I knew I was going to have a boy ... I'd have to seriously consider abortion" (79). Irie is the only other female character in the text who is not bound to the men in her life. Although Irie's realization does not come immediately, eventually she is able to find the strength and courage to identify herself as a woman and to be proud of herself and comfortable in her own skin. Irie's journey towards this state is, however, not effortless.

Rejecting her Roots: Irie's Relationship with Millat

Irie's struggles throughout the text are extensive and have been discussed at length in this thesis. Perhaps what is central in Irie's life throughout these struggles is her unrequited love for Millat. Like a typical Bowden woman, Irie initially allows a man to determine her self-worth. Irie clings to her dream of being with Millat and as a result allows him to treat her poorly. Her reasons for accepting the way Millat treats her have to do with her discomfort in her own body, and in her home country. In *Devolving Identities: Feminist Readings in Home and Belonging*, Lynne Pearse notes how women of immigrant status in the United Kingdom (for her study extends to Northern Ireland, Eire, Scotland and Wales) are marginalized, at one point candidly asserting: "... Great Britain and its empire has been seriously 'bad news' for women and other so-called minority groups" (16). This 'bad news' that British women (including immigrant women) have had to endure, according to Pearse, includes women being "[l]ong excluded from, or negatively positioned within" society (18). Trinh-T. Minh-ha takes up the issues of women, authorship, subjectivity, and identity in *Women, Native, Other* and contributes to the understanding of the marginalized position of women (immigrant and otherwise) in society. Minh-ha writes: "The search for the claim for an essential female/ethnic identity-difference today can never be anything more than a move within the male-is-norm-divide-and-conquer trap. The malady lingers on" (101). Essentially Minh-ha discusses the marginalization of immigrant women in a society that is already centered around men. Minh-ha calls for women to search for a place in their society in which their gender and ethnicity can safely inform their identities so that they can comfortably inhabit a space that is, for the moment, male-dominated. The plight of the immigrant woman, then, is even more precarious as she has varied obstacles to overcome. The male-centered world that Irie lives in complicates the ways in which she feels

as though she does not belong in England. This unsettling feeling contributes to her low self-esteem and thus her acceptance of Millat's tendency to take advantage of her.

Irie's feelings of inbetweenness in England are echoed in the work of Jamaica Kincaid, whose experiences of English imperialism in her native country Antigua are remarkably similar to Smith's characters' experiences. Kincaid's anger towards the British is prevalent in her writing and echoes Irie's struggle to find a stable site of identification in Britain. In "On Seeing England for the First Time" Kincaid addresses her own struggles with inbetweenness in relation to race and nation. Kincaid's experience of England as a colonial power, and a racist country, are certainly reflected in the experiences of Hortense, Clara, and Irie in England. Kincaid's exposure to England and British society leaves her feeling silenced, ostracized, and oppressed: "The reality of my life was conquests, subjugation, humiliation, enforced amnesia" (6). And ultimately, she is made to feel, as Irie is as well, as though she is not welcome and does not belong in England. Kincaid asks: "[W]ho are these people who forced me to think of them all the time, who forced me to think that the world I knew was incomplete, or without substance, or did not measure up because it was not England; that I was incomplete, or without substance, and did not measure up because I was not English. Who were these people?" (10). Kincaid's distaste for British society understandably leaves her feeling bitter and disenfranchised. Irie, however, does not reach this enlightened state until the end of the novel, and endures racism and sexism at different stages in her adolescence. Irie's instability keeps her from arming herself against this kind of treatment and instead she allows herself to be marginalized, especially by Millat, whose own insecurities keep him from respecting and loving Irie.

Smith sets up a dichotomy between Millat and Irie, noting the ways that Irie is "all *wrong*" (*White Teeth* 268) and Millat is, conversely, all right. This dichotomy is the basis of Irie's feelings of instability in her own body, especially in comparison to Millat. Irie describes herself as follows:

Puberty, real full-blown puberty ... had separated these old friends, Irie Jones and Millat Iqbal ... Irie believed she had been dealt the dodgy cards: mountainous curves, buck teeth and thick metal retainer, impossible Afro hair, and to top it off mole-ish eyesight which in turn required bottle-top spectacles in a light shade of pink ... And this belief in her ugliness, in her *wrongness*, had subdued her; she kept her smart-ass comments to herself these days, she kept her right hand on her stomach. She was all wrong. (268)

Irie's belief in her 'wrongness' is a result of complicated feelings of inbetweenness and instability resulting from both her second-generation immigrant status, and her status as a black woman. She is also clearly troubled by her inability to achieve British society's standards of white beauty. Millat, on the other hand, while a second-generation immigrant himself, fits into popular

conceptions of beauty and, due to his status as male, and his personality in general, is able to overcome some of the obstacles with which Irie struggles daily. Likely, Millat is successful at fitting into conceptions of British beauty because his appearance is similar to that of an ideal white British male. Smith describes Millat as near perfection: “Millat was like youth remembered in the nostalgic eyeglass of old age, beauty parodying itself: broken Roman nose, tall, thin; lightly veined, smoothly muscled; chocolate eyes with irresistible smile, big white teeth” (268-69). Millat’s ability to appeal to British standards of white beauty can be attributed to his “Roman nose” which is not the nose he was born with, but instead is a result of breaking his nose at a young age; his agreeable complexion, the softness of his skin, beauty of his eyes and, importantly, his big white teeth which inscribe upon Millat a Westernized conception of surface-level beauty. But, Smith notes that the most important factor, and indeed the one that allows Millat to transcend discriminatory racial labeling, is his sex appeal. Smith writes: “In Glenard Oak Comprehensive, black, Pakistani, Greek, Irish – these were races. But those with sex appeal lapped the other runners. They were a species all of their own” (269). The differences between Irie and Millat’s appearances are the basis for Irie’s feelings of inadequacy around Millat, whose popularity at their school drastically exceeds Irie’s. But Irie cannot help but love Millat: “She loved him, of course. But he used to say to her: ‘Thing is, people rely on me. They need me to be Millat. Good old Millat. Wicked Millat. Safe, sweet-as, Millat. They need me to be cool. It’s *practically* a responsibility” (269). Unfortunately Millat does not extend this responsibility to his childhood friendship with Irie; to Irie Millat is not “safe,” and she cannot rely on him. Nevertheless, she continues to love him and makes plans to get his attention by trying to change herself into someone that she thinks Millat will love. Millat encourages Irie’s crush on him by telling her that they have a special friendship that is based on shared history. Millat explains his popularity to Irie and defends his neglect of their relationship: “‘But you’re different,’ Millat Iqbal would say to the martyr Irie Jones, ‘you’re *different*. We go way back. We’ve got history. You’re a *real* friend. They don’t really *mean* anything to me.’ Irie liked to believe that. That they had history, that she was different in a good way” (270). Because of Millat’s encouragement, Irie feels she has a special place in his life, and as a result her infatuation with Millat grows. This is not to say that Millat is not sincere in his praise of Irie and their friendship, but while Millat’s intentions are to stay true to his roots, and to respect the history he has with Irie, his own personal difficulties with understanding his past keep him from honouring their friendship. Smith’s description of Millat’s “big white teeth” (269) (noted above) in her appraisal of his physical appearance is a signal to the reader that Millat is more concerned with aesthetics (such as the whiteness of his teeth) than with what is most important to the vitality of his life, and the vitality of his teeth: the roots. Millat cannot locate his past (his roots) and instead chooses to focus his attentions at the surface-level; this means that his relationship with Irie is especially important to him, but also too difficult for him

to deal with as it would require him to locate and accept his past. Irie's desire to conform to British molds of beauty and her struggle to gain Millat's attention lead her to endure the painful experience of straightening her hair and dying it red. Irie's desire for "[s]traight hair. Straight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakeable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair. With a fringe" (273) is indicative of her longing to secure Millat's attention. "She had it all planned; she was going to go round to Millat's this very evening with her new mane, all tied up in a bun, and she was going to take off her glasses and shake down her hair and he was going to say *why Miss Jones, I never would have supposed ...*" (274). But, Irie's intentions are thwarted by Millat's absence. Instead, Irie arrives at Millat's to find his cousin Neena and her girlfriend Maxine who are candidly vocal about their opinion of Irie's new hair. "You look like a freak! Fuck me! Maxine, man, check this out. Jesus Christ, Irie. What exactly were you aiming for?" (283). Neena offers Irie advice about Millat in an effort to help Irie get over her love for him:

Irie, will you take some advice? Every since I've known you, you've been following that boy around like a lost dog. And in that time he's snogged everyone, *everyone* apart from you. He's even snogged *me*, and I'm his first cousin, for fuck's sake ... Haven't you ever wondered why he hasn't snogged you? ... because you're all he's *got*. He *needs* you. You two have history. You really *know* him. (284)

Despite this sound advice, Irie continues to harbour her love for Millat, and she continues to be disappointed by the way Millat treats her, and the way she is treated differently from Millat. Neena's comments do ring true in a consideration of Irie and Millat's relationship. As noted earlier, Millat does need and respect his relationship with Irie, but his selfishness, and his fragile sense of self make him unable to participate responsibly in Irie's life.

Millat and Irie's experiences with the Chalfens is an example of the way that Irie is once again marginalized, but this time it is at the hands of Joyce Chalfen rather than just Millat. Irie and Millat are punished by their school principal for smoking marijuana at school and are sent to the Chalfens to be tutored. Josh Chalfen, their schoolmate, was with Irie and Millat when they were caught smoking and thus his "punishment" is tutoring Irie and Millat. Josh's parents, Joyce and Marcus, catch on quickly to Irie's crush on Millat. Joyce assumes that Irie must be bothered by Millat's dating habits. She responds to news that Millat will be late for their meeting because he is on a date by saying to Irie: "When isn't he on a date! All those girls! ... He spends more time with them than us. But we shouldn't joke. I suppose it's a bit difficult for you" (330). But Irie's disappointment in the way Millat strings her along under the guise of their close friendship is only amplified at the Chalfen house where she feels that Joyce begins to treat her with the same disrespect that Millat does. Joyce and Millat both take Irie for granted and pay little attention to her, believing that she is somehow unworthy of respect and attention:

In the four months that she and Millat had been turning up to the Chalfens, ... a strange pattern had developed. The more progress Irie made – whether in her studies, her attempts to make polite conversation or her studied imitation of Chalfenism – the less interest Joyce showed in her. Yet the more Millat veered off the rails – turning up uninvited on a Sunday night, off his face, bringing round girls, smoking weed all over the house ... telling Marcus he was queer, threatening to castrate Joshua, calling Oscar a spoilt little shit, accusing Joyce herself of being a manic – the more Joyce adored him. (334-35)

Millat's ability to generate pity from those around him and then to take advantage of that sentiment is exactly what he does with Irie and Joyce. For most of her life Irie takes care of Millat, sticks up for him, and pines after him; but Irie's tolerance for Millat begins to wane during her time with the Chalfens. Once Magid returns home from Bangladesh Irie finds herself torn between the two twins; her exhaustion with Millat, and the trouble he has caused her over the years, begins to show. As Irie becomes less and less interested in Millat, she becomes less and less concerned with her physical appearance. Her comments about her weight or the way she looks become obsolete, and she no longer puts herself down while elevating Millat to regal status. While she is still, and likely always will be, in love with Millat, Irie eventually has had enough of both him and Magid, who continue to take her for granted in the midst of their own self-absorbed relationship. When Irie is asked by Joyce to give Millat the key to a 'neutral' classroom that is to be the meeting place of Magid and Millat after their years of separation, Irie asserts her exhaustion with her ill-fated relationship with Millat and explains that she is tired of loving Millat. Irie is fully annoyed with Joyce when she uses Irie's feelings for Millat to convince Irie to deliver the key to him. Irie responds by voicing her frustration in the following exchange:

'But why me? I'm not involved.' 'Exactly, dear. And I'm too involved ... And because you love him, though he doesn't love you.' 'Yeah, thanks, Joyce. Thanks for reminding me.' 'Love is the reason, Irie.' 'No, Joyce, Love's not the fucking reason.' Irie was standing on the Chalfen doorstep, watching her own substantial breath in the freezing night air. 'It's a four-letter word that sells life insurance and hair conditioner.' (458)

Clearly Irie is disenchanted with her feelings of love for Millat, and with love in general, likening it to a marketing ploy rather than to genuine feelings. She discovers that the love she feels or felt is no longer a good enough reason to help Millat. Shortly after this conversation, on her way over to Millat's to give him the key to his "neutral" classroom, Irie decides "she didn't *want* to be involved in the long story of those lives, but she *was* and she found herself dragged forward by the hair to their denouement" (459). Importantly, Irie decides here that she wants to be responsible for her choices, and that she no longer wants to be written into the story of others' lives. Here she invests herself with agency and begins to narrate her own life story. Unlike her mother, grandmother, and great

grandmother before her, Irie does not accept being marginalized by the men in her life. Although she knows that Millat will never love her, and that her love for him is still strong, she takes steps towards releasing herself from the confines of her unrequited relationship with the inaccessible Millat. When Irie arrives at Millat's to give him the key from Joyce, she and Millat unexpectedly make love. The encounter happens "[a]lmost without meaning to" and ends "as suddenly and feverishly as it had begun" (461). Irie is left embarrassed and ashamed knowing that Millat will regret their union, and Millat is left feeling extremely guilty and praying for mercy "because he believed he was being watched by the great camera in the sky" (461). Once Irie leaves Millat she is enraged and seeks revenge for Millat's inability to love. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, or feeling used and cheap, Irie feels enlightened; she releases anger and energy that has been pent up in her for years and she takes her anger out on Magid. Irie becomes proactive: "Millat didn't love Irie, and Irie was sure there must be somebody she could blame for that. Her brains started ticking over. What was the root cause? Millat's feelings of inadequacy. What was the root cause of Millat's feelings of inadequacy? Magid. He had been born second because of Magid. He was the lesser son because of Magid" (462). Importantly, Irie does not blame herself for Millat's inability to love her. Her revenge on Magid, for being the cause of Millat's inadequacies, and indeed her revenge on Millat, for not loving her, is to promptly and fiercely make love to Magid "without conversation or affection" (463). Irie empowers herself by choosing to avenge Millat and by accepting that Millat will never love her and thus she moves on.

Breaking the Cycle: Irie Looks to the Future

When Irie learns that she has become pregnant as a result of sleeping with both Millat and Magid, she acknowledges that her life, and her child's life, will be bound to the lives of Millat and Magid forever and that her relationship with the twins is a bond that will never break. Irie is aware that she will never know which brother is the father of her child, and she recognizes that, because of the choices she made she will be connected to Millat and Magid forever. Smith explains Irie's feelings:

Irie was eight weeks pregnant and she knew it. What she didn't know, and what she realized she may *never know* ... was the identity of the father. No test on earth would tell her ... She could not know her body's decision, what choice it had made ... She could not know if the choice would make any difference. Because whichever brother it was, it was the other one too. (515)

Smith importantly invests Irie with agency in the above passage when she uses the word 'choice.' Here Irie is represented as a woman with power and subjectivity, and thus the reader is left with the knowledge that Irie no longer depends on her relationships with Millat and Magid as the sole source of her happiness, and thus that she and her unborn daughter can live comfortably

without her biological father. Symbolically, Smith ends her novel by linking England to its colonies and its colonies to each other through inextricably entwined relationships. While Millat, Magid and Irie are all British citizens, they are also second-generation immigrants from Bangladesh and Jamaica, and their relationship to each other, including the creation of a child, binds them together for life. Likewise, the complex relationships between Bangladesh, Jamaica and England can never be broken. The memories, histories, and new lives that have been established and born from the intermingling of these countries and cultures, like the mixing of the Iqbal, Bowden, and Jones families, are connections that are most certainly permanent.

Irie's decision to take on the responsibility of her pregnancy and to accept that neither Millat nor Magid would be an appropriate partner for her shows how much she has learned in her short life. Irie's feelings of inadequacy, her hatred of her body and her appearance, and her unrequited love for Millat are all rectified by the novel's end. Irie begins to look forward to the future: "In a vision, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won't matter any more because they're too long and they're too tortuous and they're buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it" (527). Essentially, Irie looks forward to a time when the roots, and the history that she and Millat struggled so much with in their relationship, do not matter anymore. Moreover, she looks forward to a future for her unborn daughter that does not include a struggle to re-inscribe agency in the Bowden family women. Irie's difficult journey through her past ultimately leads her to a place where she no longer needs to feel marginalized, and where she can fit into her mother and grandmother's pasts because she does not feel she must make them her enemies in an effort to elevate herself. Indeed, in a time without roots, Irie's children will be able to comfortably fit into Irie's life, like Russian dolls, without feeling tied down. She looks forward to a time when where someone is from and what he or she looks like will no longer be important. And she looks forward to this time because she is about to give birth to a daughter, like her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother before her, and she hopes that by breaking the cycle of oppression that the Bowden family women have suffered for four generations, she can instill hope in her daughter and future generations to come.

Conclusion

The “*endgames*” (*White Teeth* 540) that Smith plays at the close of her text leave the reader with a somewhat artificial sense of closure. Smith wraps up her lengthy novel by using, for the first time, a metafictional voice. She writes: “*But first the endgames. Because it seems no matter what you think of them, they must be played, even if, like the independence of India or Jamaica, like the signing of peace treaties or the docking of passenger boats, the end is simply the beginning of an even longer story*” (540). In this passage the reader catches a glimpse of the author for the first time. And this glimpse is of a disgruntled writer who feels she has to artificially end her novel for the sake of gratifying her readers’ need for closure. Smith goes on to wrap up her characters’ lives in a sarcastic tone and with obvious hints that she is artificially placing her characters in safe places. For example, Smith desires to appease a certain demographic of her readers when she writes that Irie and Josh Chalfen end up ‘happily ever after.’ She asks:

And is it young professional women aged eighteen to thirty-two who would like a snapshot seven years hence of Irie, Joshua and Hortense sitting by a Caribbean sea (for Irie and Joshua become lovers in the end; you can only avoid your fate for so long), while Irie’s fatherless little girl writes affectionate postcards to *Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid* and feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings? (541)

Indeed all of her “*endgames*” are played tongue-in-cheek and are written in an obviously sarcastic voice. The suggestion is that the text’s complications cannot achieve closure because of their symbolic implications. Throughout the text Smith symbolically links the characters to England (The Chalfens), Bangladesh (The Iqbals) and Jamaica (The Bowdens), and thus finds herself unable to leave her characters in a comfortable existence while, in reality, these countries remain troubled by their colonial pasts. Indeed, in her last pages Smith jokes about Irie, Joshua and Hortense returning to Jamaica (presumably) and living a peaceful and content life, after separating themselves from Britain. Smith is insinuating here that despite the independence of Jamaica and Bangladesh (and implicitly other ex-colonies of England), the strings that attached these countries to England (their “paternal strings” [541]) are not obsolete. Due to the way that she symbolically connected her characters to their colonial roots, in her concluding pages she is unable to leave them without the baggage that these countries have acquired as a result of their colonial histories.

However, Smith’s characters are not abandoned by the novel’s end. Importantly, the novel’s protagonist, Irie Jones, comes full circle in her desire to attain a comfortable sense of self and a healthy relationship with her family and friends. Granted, when the novel comes to a close Irie is eight weeks pregnant and aware that she will never know the true father of her child, but by this point in the novel she has obtained agency and has begun to take responsibility for her

life. Irie does not need the artificial “*endgames*” in order for the reader to feel that she is safe. Smith’s characters are all essentially left with the knowledge that they have the capacity to heal their relationships, and that this healing will empower them to live comfortably within their families and their society where they have learned to resist the hardships that they encounter in this society. Relationships are of utmost importance in the text because they equip the characters with a sense of normalcy in their lives. This normalcy is at the root of the novel. Smith’s novel asserts that it is within family and close relationships that one can recognize oneself since one’s surroundings are familiar. Smith seems to insinuate that if a sense of normalcy is achieved (by her characters, and by British society) then the racist and sexist environment of post-war Britain can begin to be altered for the better.

Smith leaves her readers with hope for a future where a sense of ‘normalcy’ can be attained in a multicultural society such as Britain. She achieves this enlightened sense of normalcy through humour. Indeed, Smith details the lives of her characters with a humourous, witty, and at times sarcastic voice that alleviates the tensions inherent in her serious subject-matter, but also invites interpretation of the implications of this kind of alleviation. The last few passages of the text are examples of Smith’s sarcastic voice and the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) ways in which she makes political and social commentaries under the guise of humour. Smith exerts her humour through her whimsical and oftentimes unreasonable characters (such as Alsana, Hortense, Archie and Samad), her outlandish characters who say whatever is on their mind (such as Neena and Magid), and also through absurd situations (such as the incident at P.K’s salon that Irie visits). The humourous overtones of the text make fun of, and thus normalize, the immigrant personality in a British context. Simon Critchley takes up the discussion of humour and ethnicity in his text *On Humour*. In his chapter “Foreigners are Funny – the Ethnicity and Ethnicity of Humour,” Critchley notes that the basic strategy of humour is to defamiliarize in an effort to make the readers or audience aware of their cultural assumptions (65). He explains the workings of humour, stating: “Humour views the world awry, bringing us back to the everyday by estranging us from it” (65). The act of making the everyday absurd in an effort to normalize it is a helpful way to think of what Smith does in *White Teeth*. Smith seems to be calling attention to the inequality and discrimination encountered by immigrants in England by candidly writing about the sometimes absurd lives of her characters, or at least, about the absurdity of some of the discrimination they encounter. Indeed, Critchley asserts that much humour “can be read in terms of what or simply who a particular society is subordinating, scapegoating or denigrating” (76). Thus, when Smith makes her characters’ lives or personalities or experiences funny for her readers, she is normalizing these scenarios in an effort to debunk any pre-conceived hatred or tolerance towards immigrants. In a sense, she makes the lives of her characters, although sometimes absurd, quite normal on the most fundamental

levels. Her characters desire to fulfill basic needs such as love, acceptance, and understanding. Thus by using humour to naturalize or normalize the character of the immigrant, Smith is taking steps towards creating a more accepting and informed environment.

The humour and candid wit that permeate *White Teeth* are what makes the text stand out in the large body of postcolonial fiction. Similarly, this thesis stands out in the body of scholarship on *White Teeth* because of its emphasis on the importance of healthy and functional relationships and how these connections have implications for the characters' varied identity formations. This text, and literature itself, plays a vital role in deepening our understanding of interpersonal connections because the stories and characters exist abstractly, and essentially only in the realm of the imagination. Likewise, the importance of relationships, and the ways in which one exists comfortably in one's body, family, and society, are abstract ideals that initially take form also in the realm of the imagination. This connection between the existence of relationships in an abstract, or intangible environment links the reader more closely with the text's sentiments. It is in this way that literature penetrates our lives and can affect us in very concrete ways. Smith's text has implications for its readers across borders because it deals with concepts (which are, once again, abstract) that are important to a variety of different people. The commentary in *White Teeth* on the significance of familial connections, the role of memory in our understandings of ourselves and others, the effects of conflict between generations, the workings of gender and femininity, and the troubled status of race relations are all very real and prevalent in contemporary postcolonial society. This thesis highlights these social and personal issues in an effort to both obtain and share a fuller knowledge of the workings of both abstract and concrete conceptions of the self.

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