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White Teeth, Zadie Smith. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000. ISBN 0-241-13997-X.

W*hite Teeth* includes themes of Britain's imperial and colonial relationships with Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, and this gives it a stake in the literatures of those countries. Enigmatically, it is also a deeply English novel, and not just because within a year of its appearance, it was thoroughly canonized in Britain and placed right at the top of the literary tree by prominent critics.

From the first page, Zadie Smith's inventiveness with language pops open like a bottle of champagne and the fizz lasts to the end, however long it takes to complete your reading of this 460-page, demanding novel. The dust jacket sports the briefest of biographical notes – where she grew up and her university. You cannot help thinking she is far too young to have written this novel (only twenty-one and still at university when she began it). The opening themes are not the ones you expect a youthful first-time female author to present – an improbable friendship between an unlikely pair of middle-aged men when they are at the most vulnerable stage of their midlife crisis; but their midlife crisis is a metaphor for Britain's political and social crisis in the 1980s, especially the crisis of families, when unemployment and divorce were running at their highest levels.

Archibald Jones is a lower middle-class Englishman of no particular accomplishment, muddling along in his job as a printer at Morgan Hero on London's Euston Road. Samad Iqbal is a Bangladeshi Muslim consumed with hatred of his job as a waiter in a Soho Indian restaurant. There is more to them than this. Smith focuses on the heroic in their background. Archie and Samad met during World War II, defending Britain against Hitler; at least, they were trying to. If what they actually did amounted to little, it is the genuine heart and effort they put into it that counts. It reminds us that blacks and Asians were in the armed services and played their part in the war effort.

Samad's story also reminds us that the newest immigrants to Britain are predominantly Muslims. In the 1970s, he moved to north-west London on the back of the wave of Indians fleeing discrimination in Kenya and Uganda, only to be greeted by national racial paranoia voiced by Enoch Powell in his famous "rivers of blood" speech, a paranoia given active expression in the rise of racial attacks on Indians, all of whom racists denoted as "Pakis". The late 1970s were the "Paki-bashing" era, a time when racial killings went unnoticed, unpunished by the police and the law. Samad Iqbal's terror about his vulnerability as an Asian Muslim is totally understandable in this context. His fears fester and rule his life and decisions. By the 1980s, when Samad has already set his life and his family's in a direction determined by events in the 1970s, a Muslim community emerges (too late) around him, and his friendship with Archie, not another Muslim, continues to flourish. At any rate, it is a culturally and ethnically heterogeneous Muslim community that emerges. It requires more than religion for newcomers to unite. They include Ethiopians, Middle Easterners, and refugees from the Bosnian war in Europe. Listening to Samad's idiom, you don't have to be British to realize how, beneath his professing to be a true Muslim, Samad is a little bit of an Englishman.

Hampstead is the most affluent area in north-west London. It disguises the fact that the Borough of Brent as a whole is populated almost entirely by immigrants. *White Teeth* opens doors to the rooms, cultural spaces, of north-west London in its presentation of four different families:

1. The family of Englishman Archie Jones and Clara (of the Jamaican Bowden family). It is a period when the English have a sense of the death of Empire; of London becoming a multicultural rather than English capital, and they can no longer rely on Rule Britannia and Empire for a secure identity.
2. The family of Darcus and Hortense Bowden. They are first-generation Jamaican migrants, commonly referred to nowadays as the *Windrush* generation, a reference to the arrival of the *Windrush* on 22 June 1948 at Tilbury Docks, with 492

Caribbean passengers (many of them ex-servicemen in the British army). The *Windrush* marks the historical moment of this community's entry, en masse, into Britain. Their granddaughter is Irie Jones, born in London, still facing the same relentless racism that greeted her grandparents but, unlike them, subsumed in the English class system. Nevertheless, these three generations of Jamaicans are without the illusions of belonging of some immigrants.

3. The family of Samad and Alsana Iqbal. Samad is a first-generation newcomer to London – a Bangladesh Muslim, at a time when north-west London, where he settles, is becoming a base for Muslim communities from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. His fears of immersion in a failing Christian society raises questions about where London's new Muslim communities fit into Britain's new multicultural equation.
4. The family of Marcus and Joyce Chalfen. Marcus is a Jewish (but atheist) scientist at Oxford University, married out, to a fellow Oxonian and Irishwoman, Joyce, who elevates motherhood, cookery and gardening to intellectual arts. They live in Hampstead, in an area where the Jewish community have a long history of settlement and assimilation. The Irish community in nearby Kilburn have an even longer history; so long that in this Jewish-Irish marriage between third-generation immigrants, their memory of their own immigrant past is so dim that they are able to view the newer immigrants as "other" and in their magnanimity deign to share out educational patronage to them. Joyce likes to acquire black and Asian children as if they are new species to add to her garden.

Mediating between these families are their children, Irie Jones, Magid and Millat Iqbal, and Joshua Chalfen. Their evolving relationship to London is based on closer ties to each other, across their cultural differences, than their parents have ever experienced. It seems that, for the first time, the progeny of the immigrants may, united, look forward to acquiring the status of insiders, even if it only means they are sucked into the class system to fight a class war. There is a clear divide between the story of the young generation and that of their parents – mirroring the reality of the 1980s.

The opening pages present Cricklewood Broadway as a part of London that has received successive waves of white, black and brown immigrants in the last century. The changing patterns are dramatized as we see Archie, depressed by the ending of his first marriage to an Italian, stage his suicide outside a butcher shop, the Hussein Ishmael, owned by Mo Hussein Ishmael. From above, the pigeons rain excrement upon the butcher's shop and upon Archie's car as he attempts to gas himself to death.

The image of Cricklewood bathed in excrement can be associated with popular racist language here that equates black and brown newcomers with bringing filth and disease to Britain. Certainly, an uncontrollable population of pigeons plagues London, and Londoners worry endlessly about the disease carried in the excrement they deposit daily on this once great imperial centre (the current mayor is trying to rid the capital of its pigeon population). A young boy, Varin, is sent up a ladder to kill the pigeons perched on the roof. He dispatches them and then is sent to move Archie's car from the roadside, where it is blocking the delivery van. This thwarts Archie's suicide bid. Symbolically, the immigrant invasion and death or disease it poses to English identity turns into a rescue mission, with the immigrants saving the native Englishman. The implication is that salt-of-the-earth Archie is the best of British and, as such, representative of what is worth saving and worth keeping about England. Far from bringing filth and disease to Britain, the immigrants clean it up and save the Archies of this world from the scrap heap of history. He lives on to marry Clara Bowden, with whom he finds contentment.

Clara's mother, Hortense, is a fanatic Jehovah's Witness. Her adherence to her religion is as quixotic as Samad Iqbal's to his Islamic faith. Both joust with a nationalistic right-wing British government and an insecure, fragmenting society full of broken families and promiscuous youth. They seek moral comfort and security in their religions. However, some of their children can see different options. Clara and her daughter, Irie, know that the sun has set on the British Empire and manage to muster a modicum of freedom and direction in their lives, rather like Archie, who maintains his sanity and stability through a regime of control over the tiny details and routines of the everyday.

If you have not lived in London in the last two decades, you could be forgiven for thinking that the contrast between Archie and Samad, Hortense, and Clara should be more extreme, because, unlike Archie's, their lives are so unsheltered, so unprotected from the onslaught of racism and disadvantage that it seems to storm through their doors and windows. You could be forgiven for thinking it strains credibility to think that they and the likes of Archie can ever tolerate each other, much less form friendships, marriages or raise a new generation of Londoners together. Yet, they did, in the 1980s, when the government was failing the working class and new immigrant communities, and people had to overcome their differences and form unprecedented alliances in order to survive. It was happening in popular, grass-roots politics – for example, the alliance between the National Union of Mineworkers and black and Asian activists marked the first occasion on which black and white political activists

had united so solidly and publicly to defend themselves against the British state. It comes as no surprise, then, that their children, the present generation of under-twenty-fives, grew up in their nurseries transcending difference more than any other British generation before.

No wonder, then, that in this novel the young Irie Jones of English and Jamaican parentage, the twins Magid and Millat Iqbal of Bengali parentage, and Joshua Chalfen of Jewish and Irish parentage are able to negotiate their difference as healthy hearts are tuned to beat. Their common English idiom bespeaks their commonality. Not so their parents, whose registers clash. Zadie Smith portrays the misunderstandings, mishaps and insurmountable struggles of an older immigrant generation with Standard English; how it constantly backfires on them in their frustrated attempts to negotiate British culture. It also puts their courage and heroism in the right perspective when they do garner triumphs out of their battles with Britain. The humour is in language itself, what happens to words and meaning when they do not connect us to each other easily. While insiders can get a legitimate laugh from this, it is not funny at all. It is a very serious matter indeed when outsiders view it as an incompetence with English, even as an incompetence of race, and use it viciously as happens with the Jones and Iqbal children, when their school sends them to deliver gifts to an elderly man, J.P. Hamilton. He subjects them to cruel racism by conveying his hatred to them in the guise of telling them how to keep teeth white. The novel takes its title from this scene, and reminds us that this generation, insiders though some might have become, still has to fight racism.

While *White Teeth* celebrates difference, particularly the overcoming of cultural differences among the children of British immigrant groups, several generations on, it would be wrong to credit English liberal culture with their ability to do so. This message is unmistakable in the novel's criticism of an English liberalism obsessed with political correctness, typified in the Chalfens' adoption of black and Asian children in a politically correct spirit, and their attempts to treat them as if they are white, middle class and privileged like them, with disastrous consequences. Conversely, Samad Iqbal, in an effort to raise his sons as good Muslims, takes the position that the English education system has nothing to offer them. He can only afford to send one son, Magid, back to Bangladesh to be educated. He overlooks the grief this causes Millat, who rejects schooling altogether. Magid returns to Britain later, not a good Muslim but turned into a caricature-westernized man. In Bangladesh, he gravitates towards the very Western influences his father sent him there to avoid. It is one of the novel's dramatic tropes that the father separates the twins in an effort to ensure the continuity

of the Islamic faith in his family, but he misreads the global current of politics that blows the winds of change and continuity in the most unpredictable directions. The son he kept in Britain, Millat, turns into a fanatic Muslim who joins in the attacks on Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses*. Magid, the son in whom he invested his dreams of Islamic integrity, rejects Islam for Western intellectual rationalism and Enlightenment thought. In this novel, liberalism, however radical, is the immigrants' curse, not their salvation; and blacks and Asians are caught between it and Thatcher's conservatism, as if between the devil and the deep blue sea.

The only source of real resistance seems to emanate from Caribbean culture and its legacy in the melting pot of Britain's multicultural youth culture. Although the friendship between Samad and Archie takes centre stage early in the novel, it is really Irie Jones, third-generation Jamaican with an English father, who is the common link between this racially and culturally diverse cast of characters. From the point of view of its Caribbean characters, the history of their settlement in London that the novel conjures takes its starting point with the so-called *Windrush* generation. The area of London associated with their settlement is Notting Hill, where they had to fight on the streets during the 1950s for their right to settle. Now, Notting Hill appears much more fashionable and affluent, popular with intellectuals and artists, but they have second homes elsewhere and are not permanent residents. It is ironic that the film *Notting Hill* offered the vision of the place as a location where the glamour of the United States and the United Kingdom meet in the romance between Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts. This is an artificial image. The American tourists who come to look for the glamour see old and young drug addicts stumbling round in the dirty, littered streets. The white people who are permanent residents are working class, and live mainly on the council estates, and they are not a thriving working class but blighted by drugs and poverty.

Notting Hill epitomizes the intersections over time between race and class. So London encourages pretensions to sophistication, glamour, wealth and success which it fails to live up to for most Londoners. Yet these pretensions are so much a part of everyday life that all Londoners, black and white, rich and poor, walk the thin line between the promise and the illusion of class mobility, even when they live in one of the London boroughs almost entirely colonized by immigrants. Irie walks this line continually. So do the young who live in other similar boroughs, including Brent, Tower Hamlets, Hackney, Ealing, Lambeth and Newham. Southall and Wembley are Indian towns, Brixton and Acton are Caribbean, the East End is Bengali, Neasden is Nigerian, Golders Green is Jewish, Kilburn is Irish. Hounslow has taken the overspill

of South Asians in Southall, and in the last decade the Chinese community has been growing. The Oxford Street end of Edgware Road looks like a Middle Eastern bazaar with its large Arab population and shopfronts signposted in Arabic. The novel reminds us that it is not only the adults of Britain who must find answers to where they fit into its increasingly multicultural equation but also its youth, none more so than the likes of Irie, to whom the issues are not only political but also highly personal. The degrees to which the political issues are personal vary immensely in the lives of the adults, but in the lives of the young, there is hardly a gap in between.

In an interview in the *Brent Magazine*, Zadie Smith stated,

I was actually born in the Royal Free Hospital in Camden, but was brought up on the Brent side of Kilburn and in Willesden Green. Apart from a few years when I went to Cambridge University, I am a lifelong Brent resident and have no plans to ever leave . . . I am not a very good traveller. I hate being away from home, so I suppose you could say I miss everything about this area: my family, the streets, the sound, the spirit, and the community. Brent is a major source of strength and inspiration for me, so there's not much I'd want to change.¹

Charles Dickens grew up in Camden, too. *White Teeth* is partly nineteenth century in the inspiration for its form, in the grand manner in which it modulates the inner-city London milieu, and its lofty humanism. The Dickensian echoes of the architecture and atmosphere of north-west London are unmistakable. In a Dickens novel, the individual is knitted into the social fabric of family and society and has nothing of the extreme autonomy and alienation we get in modern novels. For all the pressures on them, the characters in *White Teeth* fall short of suffering the alienation we expect them to, though it is evident in the black and Asian mad who walk the streets of Willesden.

Dickens wrote about London as a city of migrants overcrowding its hovels and streets. Zadie Smith's London at the end of the twentieth century is still a city of migrants, not only from the British Isles and Europe but also Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Middle East. Like Dickens, she sometimes uses the novel in a pamphleteering way, to draw attention to the plight of a rootless and disadvantaged underclass. She also sometimes draws minor characters, like Dickens, with swift strokes and packs them in like sardines to reflect the urban overcrowding of large sections of deprived north-west London. However, a nineteenth-century literary form is appropriated minimally, only to provide the barest frame in which to insert new,

1 Zadie Smith, interview, *Brent Magazine*, May–June 2000.

popular end-of-century idioms and remind us that while the nineteenth-century Victorian architecture and streets of Dickens's London still exist, they are peopled by new immigrants whose origins are not Anglo-Saxon or Judaeo-Christian, and they are not just passing through but are as organic to London as Dickens's people. A recent report from the Runnymede Trust made the headlines when it indicated that by the end of the twenty-first century white people will be a minority in Britain; the majority will be "mixed", derived of the groups that people *White Teeth*.² In the novel, they are no longer the outsiders Zadie Smith's precursors (the first, second and third generation of Caribbean and black British writers) have portrayed them as but insiders, however embattled. If the Runnymede Trust report is to be believed, by the end of this century, this novel will be viewed like a Dickens novel, as a social and cultural map of a London past.

Zadie Smith has also been compared to Jane Austen. This is because of her fine and certain touch with drawing out how deeply the English class system resides in the heart and soul and how, when it does, you know that the characters are definitively English, woven into the fabric of English society. However, it is contradicted in Zadie Smith by a brand of cynicism about class that is very different from that of Jane Austen, and this is a clear indication that Smith is coming at Britain from a very different understanding of history and from a very different Britain. While she is capable of Austen's ironic and witty flourishes, this has a harder edge, a late twentieth-century London edge, an almost twenty-first-century London where young people lack the inhibitions of Austen's provincial nineteenth-century characters.

Martin Amis is the British writer usually credited with writing London youth cynicism best. *White Teeth*'s cynicism is hardly of the Martin Amis school. It is far too politically and socially responsible and lacks his nihilism, though it is what we might expect of one of "Thatcher's children". The phrase "Thatcher's children" ran like an anthem through the mid and late 1980s. They were an abandoned generation that seemed to escape into US rap music with its criminal overtones, vulgar and explicit sexual body language and consumerist obsession with designer sports clothing and cultural toys.

For socialism, the writing was on the wall, and the wall crashed when Margaret Thatcher sent in the riot police to hammer both the miners in the north and the most troublesome immigrants at the time – the blacks in Brixton, Bristol and Leeds. It

2 Runnymede Trust, "The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain", 11 October 2000.

would take another decade for a real rather than symbolic wall to come tumbling down, in Berlin. In the meantime, in Britain, social institutions crashed like ninepins, including schools and the family. Margaret Thatcher underfunded and plunged schools and universities into crisis, subjected teachers to unacceptable levels of scrutiny then blamed them for incompetence. The children of that decade had to cope, in a sea of defeated parents. The phrase “broken families” denoted not a subculture but a national crisis.

The choices for youth seemed to be, either a road to almost certain conservatism swotting for O levels, or escape into the body and its appetite for music and apparel that bespoke sex and more sex; or born-again Christianity and fundamentalist religion and politics. Few saw anything positive for this generation. Their defenders were to be found among cutting-edge sociologists who were redefining the discipline, breaking it up into new entities – cultural studies, media studies, communication studies, women’s studies – and tuning their antennae to new signs and portents of creativity among the young.

In *White Teeth* a literary author speaks for the first time for “Thatcher’s children” and writes their semiotics at the heart of the modern English literary canon, where its prominent spokespersons have enshrined it enthusiastically. How ironic this is, for the vocabulary of academic literary criticism, for all its movement away from F.R. Leavis and its embracing of a few black British and Asian authors, is still too conservative here to take stock properly of *White Teeth*, which exposes the very class war and liberal pretensions that underpin English literary culture. *White Teeth*, for all its pastiche of the nineteenth-century novel, has its end-of-century semiotics buried too deep in British popular and media culture and writes idioms too far to the other side of Standard English on the sliding scale of Standard and Non-Standard that young Londoners speak. We have not seen this represented so completely in a literary novel before, not in the work of Hanif Kureishi or Salman Rushdie, because they slide along the scale too but not all of it like Zadie Smith. Her proficiency includes lower middle-class and working-class Non-Standard and Standard English, British Asian Standard and Non-Standard English, black Standard and Non-Standard English, Caribbean Standard and Non-Standard, as well as African American Standard and Non-Standard. She also brings into the meld the new Estuary English that breaks down the class distinction between the BBC Received Pronunciation Standard of west and north-west London and the outcrops of Surrey and Barnet to which they extend; and the lower-class idioms of east and south-east London, and the outcrop of Essex to

which their locals migrate on the shifting tides of change and continuity in class demographics.

In addition to their ability to adapt along the sliding scale of class, the young also practise a more dynamic cultural mobility. It is apparent not only in their linguistic range but also their music culture, especially club and dance culture with its elaborate, dense codes of clothing and sexual mores which undergo several incarnations within one decade. To decode them in this novel, you would have to read the work of cultural studies and media and communication studies academics and intellectuals, and the master's theses and doctoral dissertations of their graduate students who were living this life when not swotting. The youth culture in *White Teeth* existed two decades before the date of the novel's publication, though you would think not, from the gasps of astonishment from literary critics as they discovered it for the first time in *White Teeth* when the twenty-first century opened.

Because it jumps across walls of race and class in a manner typical of late twentieth-century multicultural youth culture in London, this novel will not obey attempts to fit it neatly and entirely into any past or present literary tradition since one by itself would be too narrow to accommodate its author's polymorphous talent. Neglecting one of her talents runs the risk of distorting the whole. There is also the minor problem of Britain having yet to come to terms with the still largely misunderstood young of the 1980s, who are still derided as "Thatcher's children". Cynicism is to be expected in a writer of this generation, but it is a new and different cynicism we get from Zadie Smith, one that is typical of the young of her culturally and ethnically diverse background. Her London brand of cynicism is softened considerably by her respect for other people's traditions and cultures and for the humanity of people, whatever their race, class or gender.

Smith possesses a timeless maturity and sensitivity that makes her an "older" writer. She is as capable of writing like an English nineteenth-century writer, or speaking the idiom of a first-generation Jamaican, Bengali, Italian, or Jewish immigrant, as she is of writing stylishly as a twenty-first century young, cynical Londoner. *White Teeth* has plenty of evidence of Zadie Smith's affinity with the nineteenth-century novel in her ability to pastiche Dickens's crowded London streets, and Jane Austen's drawing-room rituals of love, courtship and marriage as well as George Eliot's social and documentary panoramas, her magisterial and expansive exposition of characters governed by their deep sense of the values of wider society and a struggle to maintain a position of prestige and be knitted into the wider scheme of public life. Ultimately, this demonstrates less that she is like Austen, or Dickens or

Eliot and more that she can write about the English class system and how it knits the personal and political in everyone, especially immigrants, who were not the primary subject of Martin Amis or those nineteenth-century authors.

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There is certainly no nineteenth-century female character like Irie Jones, for whom the struggle between the personal and political is written far more deeply into her skin and body than any girl in Austen, Dickens or Eliot. It inspires Zadie Smith to write some of the novel's most moving passages: for example, Irie's search in the stores and hairdressers of Willesden for hair-straightening products. For Irie, what should be part of ordinary, innocent everyday ablutions (looking after your hair) turns into political crises that slap her so hard in her face, political consciousness-raising is a necessity, a question of survival, and not a choice that can wait for the next century to come around. The same is true for Neena Iqbal, Samad's niece. Neena is a lesbian who has "come out" within the Muslim community and suffers no fate greater than having flung in her face continually the nickname "Niece of No Shame". It takes as much courage for Neena to come out as it takes for Irie to fall in love with Samad's son. Zadie Smith never exploits this to score points for feminist political correctness.

The novel does not demonstrate the transition from race to class and to culture without interrogating the risks involved. *White Teeth* is equally interested in Marcus Chalfen as a third-generation Jewish immigrant as it is in him as a scientist who has achieved a secure position at Oxford University, and in knitting him back into the society of other immigrants. He desires to stay as far ahead in his profession as he can, so he breeds a new strain of a genetically advanced mouse, in the same spirit as he and his wife are raising an intellectually superior breed of Chalfen children. Their neurotic overreaching of themselves exposes how, in spite of their professional success, they are still, at heart, afraid of racism, still insecure Jewish and Irish immigrants who must ever prove their indispensability to society or face rejection. They are therefore as psychologically, if not socially and materially, insecure as the Asians and blacks in down-market Willesden who are struggling up the ladder of class and culture to join them among the successful middle class.

The repressed Chalfen insecurities are buried in the deep past, in the historical experience of European Jews whose presence in Britain was recorded in the thirteenth century when in 1290 King Edward banned them from Lincoln, York and London and sent them abroad; and in the historical experience of the Irish whose relationship to British culture is still afflicted by unresolved political power struggles dating back to earlier times. Today, acceptance still eludes the Chalfens, for they can never achieve what they aspire to and are forced to mimic the culture of English liberal intellectuals

and become distorted by it. The liberalism of the anglicized Jew, Marcus Chalfen, and the anglicized Irishwoman, Joyce Chalfen, backfires on them and reminds them that they are still victims of racism; in the same way that Samad Iqbal's patriarchal and dictatorial strategies to manoeuvre his sons around British racism also backfire on him. This is inevitable and drives home the fact that as long as the communities they originate from remain politically powerless, their struggles to survive and succeed are thankless.

Unlike Marcus, who has given up Judaism, Samad wants Islam to guide his daily conduct but, unstable and promiscuous, individualistic London presents him with the nightmare of temptations of defilement that make it impossible for him to contain his libido, bad temper and barely controlled love of alcohol and drugs. He blames his profane appetites on British culture and sees neocolonialism everywhere, always threatening to undermine him, even in the bastion of his home, where the only authority he wields is that of father and husband. The ability of a Jewish and Muslim immigrant to adapt to London is placed under further pressure by the ripples of the political conflicts of the Middle East. North-west London became a magnet for Muslim communities only in the latter half of the twentieth century. Can Muslims and Jews there live peacefully together while in the Middle East, they are at war? The author is sceptical about the ability of the English liberal tradition to mediate between them, a scepticism obvious in her portrait of Marcus, who hides behind his English liberal's façade a Messiah complex. He wants to change the world but cannot find potential converts among the children of those with roots in a Judaeo-Christian culture – for example, his students at Oxford – so he exerts his influence on the impressionable children of Asian Muslims and African Caribbean Jehovah's Witnesses.

Archie Jones appears to have become what Enoch Powell feared and what Margaret Thatcher and right-wing English nationalists fear most – the deculturated English person, without a tribal or group identity, mixing only with the immigrants. Is this the reality or a figment of racial paranoia? The novel teases you with this question. Smith's portrait of an Englishman is more detailed and sustained than V.S. Naipaul's portrait of Mr Stone in "Mr Stone and the Knight's Companion". Like Mr Stone, Archie's life mirrors the end of Empire, but, unlike Mr Stone, he is not set adrift by the subsequent loss of identity, for it is so entirely dispensable to him. He certainly stands in the novel as a trope of the British national psyche. Archie has given up trying to be anything, but, ironically, it helps him avoid the hubris suffered by those who tilt at the windmills of race, class and sex. Hubris is certainly the risk immigrants run in their jousting over the politics of identity. There are voices in the novel that alert the

protagonists to its pitfalls. Zadie Smith pays homage to the first generation of Jamaicans in her portrait of Clarence and Denzel, two Jamaican old timers. They are so old they are almost dead, but they function like a chorus in the novel. They sit in a corner of O'Connell's Café on the Finchley Road and comment on life as it passes by, but they are like oracles. They see all, know all and say all in Jamaican Creole. Their presence in the novel gives it an aura of myth – these ancestral archetypes, casting their vision at everyone and everything, endowing them with meaning and significance beyond this life.

Unlike their parents, Irie's generation has not grown up in the shadow of the British Empire but in a time of its ebbing that, however embattled, actually provides them breathing space to acquire a sense of the possibility of race barriers loosening, even as they meet the class barriers no one can escape, not even the culturally polymorphous young. In this lull, they get to acquire an unusual brand of confidence about negotiating race, class and culture, new in their generation both in the novel and in actuality. The novel gives the impression that they have experienced London as a genuine melting pot, however troubled. In their schools, streets and the spaces they can appropriate they do syncretize new friendships, new love affairs, new linguistic and musical idioms and are even trying to evolve a new politics, however awkwardly. Their new world is half their parents' but half entirely theirs. Their liberal, well-meaning teachers, who are busy planning for them a fictional and hypothetical multicultural future constructed from politically correct equality policies and programmes, are blissfully unaware that their charges already have it covered. It remains to be seen how far this new confidence gets them. If Zadie Smith's confidence and authority is anything to go by, the future is promising.

Like James Joyce syncretizing the Irish idiom with that of Greek mythology, and Derek Walcott the Caribbean idiom with Greek mythology and Shakespearean verse, Zadie Smith syncretizes Jamaican Creole, Bengali English, and the public school and Oxford Standard English of the Chalfens. She also mixes in the new multicultural English idiom of youth culture. There are also the idioms of religion. Hortense and Samad are frustrated preachers, quoting directly from the Koran or Jehovah's Witness doctrines or integrating it into everyday conversations. But even the "secular" characters are influenced by religion, even if they do not know it. Marcus Chalfen's Messiah complex makes him use science like Old Testament religion, to convert the world to the Utopia he wants to live in. For all his scientific rationalism, his voice, his dreams and plans have the urgency of Old Testament prose. Hortense Bowden, Samid Iqbal and Marcus Chalfen cast long shadows over their families and drive them to

justify everything they do in religious or quasi-religious terms. No wonder the English registers of their children betray roots in preaching traditions, and this is reinforced by the influence of African American and Caribbean music on them, with its roots in “truth telling” or “telling it like it is”. All this directness means that the truth is never far from the surface, especially political truth. *White Teeth* takes us along the Thames, on the buses, in Trafalgar Square, walking in the footprints of Dickens’s Londoners, but we hear the new voices of a new world and new Londoners in the voices of anglicized European Jews and Irish, Asian, African and Caribbean immigrants and their progeny.

This is the second first novel by a writer of Caribbean origin Salman Rushdie has endorsed (Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* was the first). This and *White Teeth*’s moving portrayal of the struggle and failure of a Bengali Muslim to raise his family in London in the Muslim faith lead commentators to compare Zadie Smith and Salman Rushdie in terms that cast her as “the next Salman Rushdie”, and to view *White Teeth* as a kind of *Satanic Verses*, Mark II, as if she were following deliberately in Rushdie’s footsteps. It is misleading because *White Teeth* is not strictly about Samad Iqbal and his family. It is easy to lose sight of Irie, who is actually holding the whole novel together. The novel is suffused with her stylized cynicism. It is at root the cynicism of the immigrant’s London, laced with the courage and toughness one generation passes on to another. You can laugh as much as you like at the jokes (and there’s at least a laugh a page), you can thrill to the delightfully exuberant inventiveness of its language as much as you like, and you may admire the courage and guts of its characters too, but you can never forget the bitter struggles, defeats and loss of older generations and the countries they came from, nor can you forget that racism is as bad as ever in London and the world. The memory of the third generation enshrines the bitter history of the ancestors and inherits its cynicism in spite of reaping the rewards of their struggle. It is from history that the cynicism of *White Teeth* emanates, from an inability to ever trust London completely, to ever really believe that its sparkling, witty surface is safe enough ground. It is a complex tale of London that Zadie Smith weaves, and to get to the complexity you have to negotiate its cynical view of how London has treated its black and Asian immigrants as well as its celebration of what they have bequeathed London – this dubious place, this half-hell, half-heaven.

The key to explaining the importance of the novel and why it has made such a huge impact in Britain is found in decoding its semiotics, couched so deeply in popular language rendered in an extremely formal and sensitive literary style, of what it was for a new non-privileged generation (born in the mid 1970s) to grow up in

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London in the fissures of the Thatcher era when an older Britain was fragmenting or cracking up but its most nationalistic patriots were pretending the opposite by taking on the Falklands War. What was it like to be so young and realize the only future for you was to take what was not tainted by Thatcherism and find out for yourself where the new Britain actually lay, then grow yourself up from the creative components to be found on the rubbish heap of British history where Thatcher disposed of everything she found unacceptable, especially immigrants and the working class? This was the challenge for Zadie Smith's misunderstood generation, growing up in a world where the adults lost their way.