

## THOSE IN-BETWEEN: (I)DENTITY CRISIS IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

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**Abstract:** As a consequence of the immigration waves, especially gaining acceleration after the World War II, from previously colonized societies that gained independence as a result of the power loss in United Kingdom, the empire on which the sun never sets; England, particularly London, had turned into a multicultural structure. In this sense, aforesaid structure that had been brought into existence by groups of different races, religions and colours having set foot on a new cultural environment, also led to such problematical concepts as integration, identity crisis and hybridity to come out. In this study, the main focus is the literary work, *White Teeth*, by Zadie Smith whom we can identify as hybrid in both biological and cultural terms. Some concepts, hybridity, have been used as baseline and during the process of hybridization of characters in the aforesaid literary work which comes out as a natural consequence of the integration, the character's oppressions, in-betweenness and crises undergone as a result of the dilemma between the necessitated values, discriminating attitudes of environment in which they dwell on and the values generating their own inherent identities are emphasized.

**Keywords:** Integration, hybridity, multiculturalism, identity crisis, postcolonialism

**Özet:** Üzerinde güneş batmayan imparatorluk olarak adlandırılan Birleşik Krallığın zayıflamasıyla birlikte bağımsızlığını kazanan kolonileştirilmiş toplumlardan, özellikle 2. Dünya Savaşından sonra ivme kazanarak gelen göç dalgaları neticesinde, 20. Yüzyılın ikinci yarısında İngiltere, özellikle de Londra, çok kültürlü bir yapıya bürünmüştür. Bu bağlamda, yeni bir kültürel çevreye ayak basan farklı ırk, din ve renkten grupların meydana getirdiği söz konusu yapı aynı zamanda entegrasyon, kimlik bunalımı ve melezlik gibi sorunsal kavramların da su yüzüne çıkmasına neden olmuştur. Bu çalışmada, Jamaikalı bir anne ile İngiliz bir babanın kızı olduğu için hem biyolojik hem de kültürel açıdan bir melez olarak tanımlayabileceğimiz Zadie Smith'in *İnci Gibi Dişler* adlı eseri ele alınmıştır. Başta melezlik kavramı olmak üzere, kimlik olgusu üzerine bazı kavramlar temel alınmıştır ve söz konusu eserdeki karakterlerin entegrasyonun doğal sonucu olarak ortaya çıkan melezleşme sürecinde, gerek doğal kimliklerini var eden değerler gerekse de yaşamakta oldukları çok kültürlü çevrenin zorunlu kıldığı değerler arasındaki ikilem neticesinde yaşadıkları sıkıntılar ve bunalımlar üzerinde durulmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Entegrasyon, melezlik, çok kültürlülük, kimlik bunalımı, post-sömürgecilik.

*Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time*<sup>1</sup>

Homi K. Bhabha

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There have been countless postcolonial novels discussing the concepts of multiculturalism, migration up till now. Nevertheless, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, which is the one of the 'most talked about fictional debut of recent years (published in 2000), more effectually represents ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse characters adjusting, negotiating and creating a sense of belonging in the city of London<sup>2</sup> depicted by Bhabha in such a way: "It is the city that the migrants, the minorities, the diaspora come to change the history of the nation"<sup>3</sup>. *White Teeth* also sets the background for understanding present-day multi-ethnic and multi-cultural British society by establishing a genealogy for British society which moves back to the British colonial period<sup>4</sup>.

From this point of view, throughout its history, British ideology has been known for its hegemony over some other races, especially colonized ones. Since the Elizabethan Age, United Kingdom had been considered as the society on which the sun never set and it owed this never-ending sunlight to many subjects of it all over the world. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it dominated the world by ruling more of the earth than any other country. With the outbreak of Industrial Revolution, United Kingdom tried to find workforce and raw material for its developing mass production in its factories and the subjects and resources of the dominated countries were great advantages to be used by the empire. Immigration waves, having surfaced as a consequence of this necessity, gained acceleration after World War II from previously colonized societies that gained independence as a result of the power loss in United Kingdom. In this sense, immigration waves from United Kingdom's former colonies to its capital resulted in the transformation of the metropolis into a multicultural space in which different cultures and traditions clash and intertwine.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhabha, H. K, ed. 2000. *Nation and Narration*. London and New York: Routledge. Pg, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Fernandes, Irene Perez. 2009. "Exploring Hybridity and Multiculturalism: Intra and Inter Family Relations in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*". *Odisea*. N 10, ISSN 1578-3820. 143-154. [www.ual.es/Odisea10\\_Perez.pdf](http://www.ual.es/Odisea10_Perez.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Bhabha, H. K. 2004. *Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge. Pg, 243.

<sup>4</sup> Fernandes, pg. 1.

In a general sense, multiculturalism is the tendency to appreciate all kinds of multi-formations in a society. The multiculturalist point of view accepts the involvement of all kinds of diversity, richness as fundamental in the social, cultural, political, academical and economic areas. Multiculturalists adopt the idea that "diversity has to be substantiated within an effective community which disposes of majority power"<sup>5</sup>. As John Clement Ball asserts; "multiculturalism and multicultural structure in England, having become a 'postcolonial' contact zone has brought about the interrogation of some issues such as nationality, race, identity crises, religious clashes, hybridity and so forth as mentioned subject matters in multicultural literature"<sup>6</sup>. Following this, when the cultural, social and racial backgrounds of the minorities have been contradictory to the cultural attitudes and values of the host society where they settled down, the crisis of integration, in-betweenness also show increase and the immigrants and their descendants encounter with the same question of belonging. They cannot decide where to belong. In this respect, this study is an attempt to explore how immigrants and their subsequent generations are depicted in the postcolonial metropolis in the novel of multiculturalism, *White Teeth*. By means of this impressive masterpiece, close attention is paid to focus on immigration into transnational and trans-ethnic lines, which brings about questions on cultural difference, identity crisis, hybridity, the clash of cultures, the experience of discrimination (racism), the immigrant's attempt and difficulty to adapt, assimilate, and withstand stereotypical conventions, attitudes of the host society. The concept of hybridity which is adopted by Homi K. Bhabha as a critical framework to analyse the aforementioned postcolonial subjects, provide the reader with exploring how immigrants and their following generations are perceived in the multicultural society.

As a third generation hybrid, postcolonial writer, Zadie Smith, who was born to a British father and a Jamaican mother, successfully represents cultural, religious and racial relationships and experiences of immigrants after World War II in *White Teeth*. As Laura Moss states, "Smith has created characters of mixed races, mixed cultures and mixed languages; in short, she has created a portrait of hybridity in a North London borough"<sup>7</sup>. The family roots of Smith

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, Raymond. 1966. *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*. Great Britain: Penguin Books. Pg. 319.

<sup>6</sup> Ball, John Clement. 2004. *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press. Pg. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Moss, Laura. 2003. "The Politics of Everyday Hybridity: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*". *Wasafiri*, 18:39. Pg.

provide her with cultural and social questions which are dramatically depicted in the novel. It is a book of cultural experiences of different generations where immigrants' status is revealed through exploration of integration process, identity and its space. History and life in London provide the reader with appropriate description of multicultural identity of migrant people<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. WHITE TEETH

As for the plot, *White Teeth* is a comic and realist narrative of multicultural London revolving around three families living in contemporary London: the Iqbals, an immigrant Bangladeshi family with a pair of British-born twins called Magid and Millat; the Joneses, consisting of a British father (Archibald), a Jamaican mother (Clara) and their British-born mixed-race daughter Irie; and the Chalfens a Jewish-Catholic family with four children<sup>9</sup>. The novel mostly emphasizes the friendship of Archibald Jones and Samad Iqbal and their families. Such characters, especially the Iqbals as immigrants are associated with the crisis of cultural identity caused by in-betweenness and hybridization, experiences of being 'other'. In this regard, especially in the process of character analysis, it will be more comprehensible to classify characters as immigrants and hybrids, that is, the former ones are those having settled in London, whereas the latter ones are born and brought in England with non-white or mixed parentage as exemplified in the Iqbals' and the Joneses' children. Even though both groups experience similar difficulties, the first generation immigrants will be mostly portrayed through the process of integrating, on the other hand, second generation characters that have less strong bound with the home country and culture, instead, have been bred in another cultural conditions will be analysed on the basis of hybridity<sup>10</sup>. In this sense, we will respectively discuss characteristic and psychological attitudes, ambivalences of Samad and his ill-tempered son, Millat by means of whom Smith may have portrayed, exemplified the concept of in-between and cultural identity crisis more dramatically although there appears some other characters somehow going through similar problems.

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11-17. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/026900508589837>

<sup>8</sup> Adilova, Tamila. 2008. *Space and Identity in Andrea Levy's and Zadie Smith's Novels*. Diss. Ege University.

<sup>9</sup> Lau, Esther Hor Ying. 2008. *The Migrant Experience, Identity Politics and Representation in Postcolonial London: Contemporary British Novels by Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali*. Diss. Hong Kong University. Pg, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Pg, 23.

At the beginning of integration process, Samad, one of postcolonial subjects, who live 'border, liminal live' and find themselves taking part in 'in-between' position, set foot in multicultural London on the purpose of 'initiating new signs of identity'<sup>11</sup> for both himself and his family. Nevertheless, Samad arrived in the adopted country not only with 'his own physical baggage but emotional and cultural baggage' as well<sup>12</sup>. Thus, as a typical immigrant, Samad, with wife, Alsana, struggles to fit into multicultural atmosphere of London with his Bengali (Bangladeshi) features and background. However, their cultural and emotional baggage deter them from integrating and idealized situations in the adopted country, right from the start, burst Samad's bubble and, thus, he is obliged to have a low-paid job as a waiter in his cousin's Indian restaurant in spite of his education of engineering in Bangladesh and his more omniscient, sophisticated-looking manners rather than any other original British in the same level. Unfortunately, he mostly encounters with the same fact reminding his lower position in the society as in the meeting of his children's music teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones: "Are you, I don't know, a professor of some kind, Mr Iqbal? 'No, no; said Samad, furious that he was unable to lie because of Archie and finding the word 'waiter' stopping in his throat"<sup>13</sup>.

The gap between Samad's idealized and real life is the initial obstacle to integrate into the host culture and such situation leads him to lament for his cultural heritage rather than initiating a new identity. Similarly, racist and discriminating attitudes towards Samad's family and other immigrants also mostly occur throughout the novel as such: "[...] can get a decent night's kip! Bloody Pakis'. Shouted a neighbour"<sup>14</sup>. Such stereotypical attacks making them move from Whitechapel to Willesden, undoubtedly remind Samad of his background, which obstructs his adaptation and degrades him into in-betweenness. In spite of describing himself with traditional, faith-based attitudes, towards the midst of the novel, Samad seems more English and an English man. While sitting on the bench with Poppy-Burt Jones who is both his children's music teacher and his lover for a while, on one hand, he utters his regret for this sexual relation because of his wife and children, on the other hand, he ironically tries to correct the mistakes of Poppy using elliptical sentence in her reaction to Samad's regret: "What kind of a phrase is this: "So what?" Is

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<sup>11</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge. Pg, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Mcleod, John. 2000. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press. Pg, 211.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. 2000. London: Penguin. Pg, 135.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, pg, 200.

that English? That is not English. Only the immigrant can speak the Queen's English these days"<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, on watching the destruction of Berlin Wall and conurbation of West and East Berlin, he takes the role of a typical racist who strongly opposes to the flows of immigration:" Foolishness. 'Massive immigration problem to follow', [...] 'You just can't let a million people into a rich country. Recipe for disaster'"<sup>16</sup>. In this context, it can be discerned that Samad proceeds as an ambivalent personality, who is, on one hand, cling to his Eastern, cultural, religious heritage, on the other hand, tempted by sexual relations, alcohol, Western pragmatism and behaviours. Thus, Samad flings himself again into the doctrines of Islam in order to pull through in-betweenness, cultural identity ambiguity and also intends to prevent his sons, Magid and Millat, from falling into same problems:" I looked at my boys, Archie. [...] and my heart cracked. [...] how can I show the straight road when I lost my own bearing?"<sup>17</sup>. Samad seeks sending both sons to Bangladesh in order to be brought up with their original culture and he accordingly succeeded in only sending Magid without notice of Alsana. Unfortunately, he is not able to attain his aim because, six years later, Magid turns back to London, as an English gentleman.

To resolve his identity crisis and being caught between two worlds Samad struggles to maintain his Muslim male superiority on his wife and children but eventually cannot achieve the goal, which corroborate his feelings of in-betweenness, crams him into cultural identity dilemma and meaninglessness of inhabiting multicultural London:" 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"<sup>18</sup>. Shortly, Samad primarily identifies himself as a Bengali man with his own values. Nevertheless, the British culture also has an impact upon him. This change affects him in a negative way and he finds himself and his pure cultural heritage as stained. Moreover, two cultures do not harmoniously "coincide; negotiate within Samad, consequently, his loyalty to the cultural heritage has weakened and he no longer pinpoint where he belongs and, thus Samad cannot initiate a new sign of identity but end up in

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pg, 181.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pg, 241.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pg, 188-89.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pg, 407.

Identity Crisis"<sup>19</sup>.

Prior to discuss Millat within context of hybridity leading him to in-betweenness and identity crisis, touching briefly on the concept, hybridity, which Homi Bhabha came up with, will be more stimulating for the readers to decipher Millat's psychological stage. According to Bhabha, hybridity is where people can 'elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves'<sup>20</sup>. He also sets forth in an interview, hybridity does not mean 'tracing two original moments from which the third emerges', but rather, in a truly Hegelian dialectic manner hybridity is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge'<sup>21</sup>. In addition to this, Bhabha states further that "hybridity bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, [...] but does not give them the authority of being prior in the sense of being original: they are prior only in the sense of being anterior"<sup>22</sup>. In this sense, the third space is where identities are constructed, reconstructed, negotiated and characterised by fluidity and flux<sup>23</sup>.

Unlike his father who brought his emotional and cultural baggage, seesaws between two cultures and laments for his homeland, history past in Bangladesh, Millat appears with his 'double consciousness', at the same time, he is 'both in UK and in Bangladesh, in the midst of two culture'<sup>24</sup>, which means his position in the third space as a typical figure. Nevertheless, through his chronologically personal flow in the novel, Millat mostly loses the balance in the third space that allows no room for either of cultures constructing hybridity to take priority. Thus, he oversteps the bounds of hybridity and falls into the position of in- between and identity crisis. During his chronological progress from his early teenage to adolescence, Millat behaves with full of discrepancy and inconsistency in his culturally hybrid identity. He firstly displays a typical English rascal, who do not step outside without popular British clothing in fashion such as 'red-stripe of Nike, strange jumpers that had patterns on the

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<sup>19</sup> Holopainen, Jonna. 2010. "He worshipped elephants and wore turbans". The Construction of Cultural Identities in Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*. Diss. University of Jyväskylä.

<sup>20</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge. Pg. 39.

<sup>21</sup> Rutherford, Jonathan. 1990. "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha". In: Ders. (Hg): *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart. Pg. 211.

<sup>22</sup> Rutherford, pg. 211.

<sup>23</sup> Bhabha.1994, pg.37.

<sup>24</sup> Holopainen, pg. 30.

inside and out'<sup>25</sup>, he insistently attempts to sing the songs of Michael Jackson or those of some other popular western singers rather than authentic Southern Asian songs in spite of his music teacher's request. Even though Millat shows western posture, some kinds of stereotypical and racist attacks, utterances put the sense of being 'other' into his mind, towards the midst of his adolescence and such insulting and generalised expressions as " man worshipping elephants and wearing turbans, bloody Pakis, why don't you speak English truly you little bastards, Do you have to talk your Paki language" pave the way for his identity dilemma since his country of origin, as far as he knows, is Bangladesh, but, still he is eternally marked as Indians or Pakistanis, or worse, 'Pakis'. He is condemned to displaced situation just in his childhood, because his 'home' is irretrievably lost when his parents left Bangladesh for England and yet England, the place he wants to call 'home', does not welcome him because of original culture, which is also a part of his third space<sup>26</sup>.

In spite of his prior tendency to Western popular culture and identity, he realizes his original heritage and real position, which is mostly said to his face, and thus, he begins to shadow forth his rebellious, status-demanding world-view referring to his in-between hybrid mood. Accordingly, he takes part in groups, organizations that challenge both the order of the host culture and the culture of diaspora people in minority. As a result, Millat is promoted from the leadership of the youth at school to that of the Raggastanis<sup>27</sup>:

Millat's crew looked like trouble. And, at the time, a crew that looked like trouble in this particular way had a name, they were of a breed: Raggastani. [...] manifesting itself as a kind of cultural mongrel of the last two categories [Nation Brother, Raggas and Pakistanis]. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be that, was equally a hybrid thing: Allah featured, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as fuck geezer who would fight in their corner if necessary; Kung Fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy [...]<sup>28</sup>.

As can be inferred from the quotation, the Raggastanis are culturally multifarious group, made up mostly of non-British, culturally or racially hybrid youngsters. The Raggastanis, thus, also employ cultural diversity both

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, pg, 134.

<sup>26</sup> Mcleod, pg, 211.

<sup>27</sup> Holopainen, pg, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, pg, 231-32.

explicitly and implicitly, they prefer such diversity to spread over the British society. In addition to this, the use of a mixture language of hybrid guys' immigrant parents is common among Raggastanis refers to in-betweenness, cultural dilemma of youngsters. Moreover, we also testify the shift of Millat from adopting and living within the British culture towards Bengali one<sup>29</sup>, which is also apparent in his speech emphasizing his loss of hope as follows: " Millat was a Paki no matter where he came from; he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country..."<sup>30</sup>.

On contrary to Millat, Magid seeks being adapted into western, scientific environment, calls him with English name, Mark Smith, participates in Christian activities such as harvest festival, thanksgiving and also thinks that " we Bengalis, we Pakistanis throw up our hands and cry "fate"! In the face of history. But many of us are uneducated, many of us do not understand the world, we must be more like the English"<sup>31</sup>. On the other hand, Millat intends to head back his original, Bengali culture, as a binary opposition of Magid. Moreover, Millat's identity dilemma has complexified, shattered when he is introduced to KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation), an Islamic fundamentalist group, which is more serious and radical than the Raggastanis. Nonetheless, even in such an obvious identity crisis and radical change in his behaviours, Millat still cannot give up his tendency to western culture, which is embodied with gangster posters, chasing blondes, smoking marijuana, creating some sorts of trouble for his parents. Millat's membership in KEVIN with his ambivalence, conflicting attitudes proves the fixed, unbalance relation of cultures in his third space, which may be also discerned through this quotation: " Millat was neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian, Englishman or Bengali; he lives for the in-between, he lived up to his middle name, name, Zulfikar, the clashing of two swords"<sup>32</sup>. In this respect, in-betweenness and identity crisis deter Millat from initiate a new kind of identity, which is totally deviating from both the host and original culture disrupting his hybrid- third space, which is a 'camouflage' in multicultural London.

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<sup>29</sup> Holopainen, pg, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, pg, 234.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pg, 288.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pg, 351.

### 3. CONCLUSION

All in all, inhabiting in-between is a striking obstacle for the migrants and their culturally or racially hybrid children who mostly suffer cultural differences, the clash of conventional attitudes, stereotypical and attitudes, the crisis of integration and influences on their positions throughout the novel, however, in-betweenness and identity Crisis come out to be more conspicuous issues for Samad and his ambivalent son, Millat as more central characters. Zadie Smith applies to these qualities, concepts to “paint a realistic picture of London, which differs and challenges the glorified and romanticized notion of what it means to live as a migrant in a society still ingrained with the vestiges of colonialism”<sup>33</sup>. *White Teeth* is a mongrel narrative that is grounded in many stories, cultures of migrant and hybrid people, reminding its reader a nation, which has lost its origin throughout the myths of time.

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<sup>33</sup> Falender, Robert. 2007. *In-Between and the Complications of Migrancy in Zadie Smith’s White Teeth*. Diss. Södertörns University College. Pg. 39.