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## **“HISTORY” AND “ROOT” IN ZADIE SMITH’S WHITE TEETH**

*ZADIE SMITH’IN WHITE TEETH ROMANINDA “TARİH” VE “KÖKEN”*

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### ***Abstract***

The debut novel of Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, handles the notions of “history” and “root” momentarily. The novel, which presents the characters’ past and root with many minor stories, functions as a historical bond connecting the past to the present and the future. As a postcolonial and multicultural novel, *White Teeth* presents historical consciousness in two-dimensional manner; racial history and personal history. By depicting the stories of immigrant and multi-ethnic families of the novel, Zadie Smith reveals a racial history which examines the colonial background of Britain as a colonizer. In *White Teeth*, this racial and colonial history is related to the familial and personal one and by this way how history and root affect the first and second generation immigrant and multi-ethnic families is questioned in a critical way.

In this respect, this study examines the place and significance of “history” and “root” in the life of multi-ethnic and/or immigrant families and their racially and/or culturally hybrid children in *White Teeth*. In the study, the notions of “history” and “root” are handled related to the racial and personal stories of the characters. That’s why; the characters’ relation to their racial, familial and personal history, their search for a historical

identity, the difficulties and dilemmas they experience in the process of gaining a historical consciousness and how much they achieve to form a historical consciousness and root in their lives will be presented as significant determiners in this study.

**Key Words:** Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, racial and personal history, root, family.

### Öz

Zadie Smith'in ilk romanı *White Teeth* "tarih" ve "köken" kavramlarını önemle ele almaktadır. Karakterlerin geçmişini ve kökenini birçok yan öyküyle okuyucuya sunan bu roman, geçmişi şu ana ve de geleceğe bağlayan tarihi bir zincir işlevi görür. Postkolonyal ve çokkültürlü bir roman olarak *White Teeth*, tarihsel bilinci iki boyutta ele alır; ırksal tarih ve kişisel tarih. Zadie Smith, romandaki göçmen ve multi-etnik ailelerin öykülerini anlatarak, bir sömürgeci olarak Britanya'nın kolonyal geçmişini irdeleyen ırksal bir tarihi gözler önüne serer. *White Teeth*'de ortaya konulan bu ırksal ve kolonyal tarih, ailesel ve kişisel olanla bağlantılıdır ve böylece tarihin ve kökenin birinci ve ikinci nesil göçmen ve de multi-etnik aileleri nasıl etkilediği eleştirel bir şekilde sorgulanır.

Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma *White Teeth* romanındaki multi-etnik ve/ya göçmen ailelerin ve onların ırksal ve/ya kültürel olarak melez çocuklarının yaşamlarında "tarih" ve "köken" in yeri ve önemini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışmada, tarih ve köken nosyonları karakterlerin ırksal ve kişisel öyküleri ile bağlantılı bir şekilde ele alınmıştır. Bu nedenle, romandaki karakterlerin ırksal, ailesel ve kişisel tarihleri ile olan ilişkileri, onların tarihsel kimlik arayışları, tarihsel bilinç elde etme sürecinde yüz yüze kaldıkları zorluklar ve yaşadıkları ikilemler ve bu tarihsel bilinç ve kökeni yaşamlarında ne kadar elde edebildikleri bu çalışmada önemli belirleyiciler olarak sunulacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, ırksal ve kişisel tarih, köken, aile.

The structure of England, as a society consisting of different people from different nations, coming especially from the colonized countries, has been discussed since the entrance of the 'first immigrants'. The new multi-cultural structure has been discussed and analyzed in many fields, and literature, as a form of social anthropology, has been one of the main fields of that analysis. By the new multicultural structure of Britain in the twentieth century, the literary studies began to give products not only by the native-born members but also by some others, who are of culturally different or ethnic backgrounds. In this way, literary studies gained a multicultural structure and this tendency resulted in a literary category named as "multicultural literature or postcolonial literature". Postcolonial literature is the literary dimension of postcolonial theory (also named as postcolonialism), which

deals with the cultural identity of colonized countries. This theory points out the importance of “re-analysis” of the colonized identity which was misrepresented and exposed by the colonizer. Postcolonial theory examines the ways of establishing a national and cultural identity free from the influence of the earlier colonizer.

The postcolonial theories, which have given great importance to the appreciation of cultural or ethnic differences in literary studies and to the writers of those works, have opened the way of postcolonial literature and contributed to its rise in the twentieth century. Meanwhile, the postcolonial theorists and writers have lighted the way for further multicultural or postcolonial literary studies. In the twentieth century English Literature, many writers began to write on postcolonial issues, and among those writers new generation postcolonial or multicultural writers were holding a great place. In this sense Zadie Smith (1975), who has contributed to the explosion of the multicultural and postcolonial issues, became an important name in postcolonial and migrant literature at the beginning of the new century. As Sunita Sinha mentions, “Smith’s brilliance is in her vibrant depiction of the multicultural society that is now London”.<sup>1</sup> Smith, the daughter of a multi-ethnic family (a Jamaican mother and a British father) can be named as a British-born postcolonial woman writer. After the publication of her first novel *White Teeth* in 2000, she was included on *Granta’s* list of 20 best young authors in 2003, her novel *White Teeth* was included in *Time* magazine’s *TIME 100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005* list and she won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2006 with her third book *On Beauty*. Zadie Smith has been accepted as being a member of an exciting group of young writers giving voice to the new multi-ethnic, multicultural Great Britain and as a promising voice of post-colonial Britain who represents the minority groups and multicultural persona. Her novel *White Teeth* has been described as “a landmark novel for multicultural Britain” (Whitbread judges) and as “a generic mix that reflects the transcultural state of present-day Britain”.<sup>2</sup>

Definitely, the reason why *White Teeth* is accepted as a multicultural novel lies in its context. In the novel, Smith gives a picture of a totally multicultural structure of Britain:

Her characters include Brits of Bengali, Jamaican, Polish, German, Saudi Arabian, Barbadian, and plain old English descent; Muslims, Hindus, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Secular Jews; closeted gay men and out lesbians; adolescents, mid-lifers, and octogenarians who may be fat or skinny, drop-dead gorgeous or genetically cheated.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sunita Sinha, *Post-Colonial Women Writers: New Perspectives*, Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi 2008, p. 232.

<sup>2</sup> Eva Ulrike Pirker, “Britain”, *English Literatures Across the Globe: A Companion*, (Ed. Lars Eckstein), Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn 2007, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Dohra Ahmad, “Brushing Up on Multiculturalism A Review of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*”, *Samar*, 14: Fall/ Winter, 2001, *Samar Magazine Online*, Retrieved from <<http://www.samarmagazine.org/archive/article.php?id=69>>

Different people coming from different backgrounds reflect the cultural and ethnic mosaic of British society. While in general, the novel depicts that mosaic, in particular *White Teeth*, set in contemporary North London, depicts the struggles of two immigrant and/or multi-ethnic families and two men –Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi, and Archie Jones, an English– who met in 1945 as the soldiers of a tank crew in the final days of World War II and then became lifelong friends. The novel examines the conflicts of their interlinked immigrant families living in multi-ethnic and multicultural Britain. Their friendship continues on their return to England after the war and during the time period in which they marry and have children. While Archie Jones marries much younger Clara, a Jamaican girl, and has a hybrid daughter, Irie; Samad Iqbal marries Alsana, a Bangladeshi girl, who is also much younger than him, by a traditional arranged marriage and has twin boys, Magid and Millat. By the initiation of Archie's and Samad's children, who experience the dilemma of not belonging to an exact place and want to discover who they are, the conflicts of those second generation children of multi-racial or immigrant parents come on the surface. In the novel, Iqbal family thinking about solving those conflicts sends one of the twins, Millat, back to Bangladesh. They expect, at least one of the twins, to be raised up according to traditional Islamic values. The other twin brother, Magid, grows up in London. Unfortunately, the plans collapse ironically and Millat, who grows up in Bangladesh turns back to London as an atheist, and their English-educated son Magid becomes a radical Islamic supporter in London. Besides Iqbals' twin sons, Archie's hybrid daughter Irie has also some similar identity conflicts in her life as a hybrid daughter of a multi-ethnic family.

Simon Hattenstone describes *White Teeth* in *The Guardian* in December 11, 2000 as:

(...) a book about modern London, a city in which %40 of children are born to at least one black parent, a city in which the terms black and white becomes less and less relevant as we gradually meld into different shades of brown.<sup>4</sup>

When the problems of multi-ethnic and multicultural London are dealt with in a book such as *White Teeth*, it is inevitable to mention the conflicts of immigrant or multi-ethnic families and their second generation children. Definitely, being "brown" for hybrid children of multi-ethnic families creates a problematic situation in the first place. It is true that "[w]hiteness nowhere features as an explicit condition of being British, but it is widely understood that Englishness, and therefore by extension Britishness, is racially coded".<sup>5</sup> In fact, this problem is mainly a result of societal attitudes and outer forces against post-colonial or immigrant families. Although

<sup>4</sup> Simon Hattenstone, "White Knuckle Ride", *The Guardian*, December 11, 2000, Retrieved from <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/dec/11/fiction.whitbreadbookawards2000>>

<sup>5</sup> Şebnem Toplu, "Home(land) or 'Motherland': Translational Identities in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*", *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, Spring 2005, *Anthurium Online*, Retrieved from <[http://anthurium.miami.edu/volume\\_3/issue\\_1/toplu-homeland.htm](http://anthurium.miami.edu/volume_3/issue_1/toplu-homeland.htm)>

earlier colonies have gained their independence, those nations and also the people of them are still considered as the ones under the dominance of England. They are still “patronized by the British, who view them as colonials rather than as genuine Europeans”.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, to gain self-actualization and an identity, the children of multi-ethnic families generally pass from a process in which they have many different identity crises of which whiteness or being seen as the other are only some.

In *White Teeth*, Smith presents individual and social conflicts in multicultural Britain in terms of first and second generation (even third generation) immigrants. Those people trying to be a part of the society which does not share their cultural norms and/or religion feel different and sometimes alienated. Although immigrant parents experience crucial difficulties or crises in a multicultural world, we can say that their children come through double entanglements. In this conflict and its solution process, Smith presents an important issue that is the matter of “**history and root in the life of multi-ethnic and immigrant families**”. The importance of history is so strictly mentioned in *White Teeth* that Zadie Smith begins her novel with the inscription of the statue named “The Future” in Washington museum: “What is past is prologue”. That inscription is inspired by Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* and in the novel it shows how “[h]istory and the past are formative and inescapable for the novel’s characters”.<sup>7</sup> In *White Teeth*, Smith handles the issue of history and root in two dimensions that are “racial history” and “personal history”. Although those two dimensions are interwoven, in *White Teeth*, the racial history is mainly reflected by first generation and their historical memoirs and the personal history is given by the second generation who is trying to create a personal history in their identity formation process.

The matter of history diffuses into the novel from the beginning. The narration of *White Teeth* begins with the story of Archie and Clara’s meeting day, 1 January 1975; meanwhile it begins with the personal history of Irie, their hybrid daughter. Later on, Chapter 5, titled “The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal, takes the reader back to the end of The Second World War in which Archie and Samad were fellow soldiers. By this flashback to the war years, Smith both tells the personal history of Samad and Archie and she introduces the problem of colonization which is a racial and national history. We learn that Samad was one of those soldiers who were coming from the colonized countries to fight a battle belonging to the colonizer England. The voice of the English colonizer echoes in the novel as follows: “Samad, we are going to confer on you a great honor. You will fight in mainland Europe –not starve and drink your own piss in Egypt or Malaya, no– you

<sup>6</sup> Laura Niesen De Abruna, “Twentieth Century Women Writers from the English Speaking Caribbean”, Selwyn R. Cudjoe (Ed.), *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, Calaloux Publications, Massachusetts 1990, p.90.

<sup>7</sup> Claire Squires, *Zadie Smith’s White Teeth*, The Continuum International Publishing, New York&London 2002, p. 44.

will fight the Hun where you find him" (Smith, 88).<sup>8</sup> However, contrary to the hopeful promise of the colonizer for a better life, Samad was shot in his wrist on the third day of his attendance to the war and his hand became disabled "to defend a country that wasn't his" (Smith, 95). By taking the reader back to the war experience of Archie and Samad, Smith intertwines racial-colonial history with personal history at the same time.

When Smith initiates the colonial history in the novel, she constructs another story which links the characters' past to their future. We learn that Archie and Samad arrested a Nazi doctor in the last days of the war and Samad persuaded Archie to kill that doctor to actualize them as "real" soldiers. Although Samad and the reader think that Archie killed that doctor, at the end of the novel we understand Archie had lied to his best friend and pretended to have killed him. In the same chapter of the novel, in addition to this personal history of those two friends, another important reference to the racial history is given by turning to the "racial root canals" of Samad. The story of Mangal Pande, the great-grandfather of Samad and a historical character in the novel, reserves an important place to construct the historical roots of colonization in general and of Iqbal family in particular.

As Matthew Paproth mentions, "In *White Teeth*, Smith demonstrates the important but fractured relationship between past and present, as her characters approach their relationship with history from various perspectives".<sup>9</sup> In this process, the perspective of first generation immigrants, here of Samad Iqbal, is given depending on their racial history. The story of Mangal Pande introduced in the fifth chapter is handled in detail in the tenth chapter titled "The Root Canals of Mangal Pande". We learn that Mangal Pande is a rebel who shot the first bullet of the Great Mutiny of 1857" (Smith, 99). In the novel, this colonial story and/or history is summarized as follows:

"[D]uring the spring of 1857 in a factory in Dum-Dum, a new kind of British bullet went into production. Designed to be used in English guns by Indian soldiers (...) There seemed nothing exceptional about them, until it was discovered by some canny factory worker that they were covered in a grease –a grease made from the fat of pigs, monstrous to Muslims, and the fat of cows, sacred to Hindus. It was an innocent mistake –as far as anything is innocent on stolen land (...) Under the specious pretext of new weaponry, the English were intending to destroy their caste, their honour, their standing in the eyes of Gods and men (...) A rumour like this could not be kept secret (...) [It] reached the large unsightly

<sup>8</sup> Referrals to the novel will be given by page numbers in parenthesis in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Paproth, "The Flipping Coin: The Modernist and Postmodernist Zadie Smith", (Ed. Tracey Lorraine Walters), *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*, PeterLang Publishing, New York 2008, p. 15.

ears of Mangal Pande, an unknown sepoy in the small town of Barrackpore, who swaggered into his parade ground -29 March 1857- stepping forward from the throng to make a certain kind of history". (Smith, 253)

It is significant that, in the novel, the story of Mangal Pande, is reflected from two points of view, both of the colonizer and of the colonized. Whenever Samad talks about his heroic ancestor Pande, Archie reads loudly the story's colonizer version to Samad which was written by a contemporary historian named Fittchett. According to that story, Pande, who was "half drunk with bhang, and wholly drunk with religious fanaticism" (Smith, 254) when he shot the bullet, "stood trial and was found guilty" (Smith, 255) and finally was executed. Although Samad does not believe this "anti-Pande propaganda", "the story still clung, like a gigantic misquote, to the Iqbal reputation" (Smith, 256). Against the colonizer's version of the story, Samad defends that "Mangal Pande sacrificed his life in the name of justice for India, not because he was intoxicated or insane" (Smith, 256). This defense is supported by Samad's nephew Rajnu's discovery of a book in Cambridge College in 1981. This book tells the story of Mangal Pande as a "history of bravery". When Samad goes to the library with his nephew to see the only surviving copy by the writer named Misra, he stresses enthusiastically: "A great day for our family, Rajnu, a great day for the *truth*" (Smith, 257). On that book, what they read about Pande is given as follows:

"Mangal Pande fired the first bullet of the 1857 movement. His self-sacrifice gave the siren to the nation to take up arms against an alien ruler, culminating in a mass-uprising with no parallel in world history. Though the effort failed in its immediate consequences, it succeeded in laying the foundations of the Independence to be won in 1947. For his patriotism he paid with his life. But until his last breath he refused to disclose the names of those who were preparing for, and instigating, the great uprising". (Smith, 259)

After reading those sentences, Samad's pride and enthusiasm rise so much that he sits down on the bottom rung of the stepladder and weeps. In fact, the two conflicting views of both the colonizer and the colonized about Pande's story are given from a neutral point of view in the novel. That's why; the reader cannot be totally sure which one tells the *exact* truth. In deep, we can say that Smith seems like questioning the historical truth by this way. Moreover, this story has mainly two functions in the novel. First of all, the story of Mangal Pande functions as a part of racial and colonial history. Secondly, in the novel, Samad, being one of "the characters, who have come to England from various postcolonial countries and are in

search of their identities"<sup>10</sup> takes heed of the story of Mangal Pande because he has to construct a personal and familial history on the base of a racial one. As mentioned before, by this way Smith intertwines racial and personal histories and examines their place and significance in the identity searching process. In the novel, Samad feels that he has to construct a glorious racial and familial history by which he can actualize himself and provide a more enlightened historical, racial, personal and familial consciousness for his sons. The problem of how much he succeeds is controversial; however, the effect of his search is inevitably staggering at least for himself. We see that based on the stories mentioned above, the plot of the novel is structured on historical data that has two dimensions: racial-colonial and personal-familial.

As Claire Squires points out "Smith plays with notions of how history is constructed in *White Teeth*, with the ongoing argument about the place of Mangal Pande in Indian history".<sup>11</sup> In addition to this story, the pattern of colonial-racial history related to the personal-familial one is given by examining the root of Bowden family (the familial history of Archie's wife Clara). In this respect, Chapter 13 titled "The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden" takes the reader back to another racial-colonial and personal-familial history. This story goes back to Ambrosia Bowden (the great grandmother of Irie) who is the mother of Hortense who is the mother of Clara Bowden who is the mother of Irie. According to the story which includes secrets and which "comes out like wisdom teeth when the time is right" (Smith, 306), Ambrosia Bowden, a Jamaican girl, had an intercourse with Captain Charlie Durham, an English man, and Durham impregnated her. This story is reflected as "a family memory; an unforgotten trace of bad blood in the Bowdens" (Smith, 356). By this story, Smith again presents criticism towards colonial dominance of England on colonized countries and their people. In the novel, it is stated that "He [Captain Durham] was not satisfied with simply taking her maidenhood. He had to *teach* her something as well" (Smith, 356). Of course, that teaching sounds ironic as it is the teaching of the colonizer. When Captain Durham leaves Ambrosia "for a business" with a five-months unborn child inside her, he "entrusts the continued education of Ambrosia Bowden to his good friend Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, who was, like Durham, of the opinion that the natives required instruction, Christian faith and moral guidance" (Smith, 358). However, when Glenard realizes Ambrosia's pregnancy, he sends her to a Jehovah's Witness named Mrs. Brenton. On the day of the 1907 earthquake, Glenard tries to *touch* Ambrosia in a Spanish church where he takes her to *teach* something. At that moment, the earthquake hits, a pillar falls down on Glenard and he dies, and Ambrosia gives birth to Hortense Bowden, Irie's grandmother. In this story, especially the place of Sir Glenard is significant to reflect a racial and post-colonial consciousness. We learn that Sir Glenard who is "a successful

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Black, Leonard Conolly, Kate Flint, (Eds.), *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Twentieth Century and Beyond From 1945 to the Twenty-First Century*, Broadview Press, Toronto 2008, p. 1065.

<sup>11</sup> Squires, p. 91.



colonial" having made "a pretty sum in Jamaica farming tobacco" (Smith, 304) ships three hundred Jamaicans to North London "after hastily promising them streets of gold" (Smith, 306). However, when the business goes under, many of those Jamaicans die of hunger or are jailed "for the petty crimes hunger prompts" or "creep awkwardly into the East End and the English working class" (Smith 307). As a representative of the colonizer, the influence of Sir Glenar is reflected as evil in the novel:

"Glenard's influence turned out to be personal, not professional or educational: it ran through three generations of immigrants who could feel both abandoned and hungry even when in the bosom of their families in front of a mighty feast; and it even ran through Irie Jones of Jamaica's Bowden clan, though she didn't know it". (Smith, 307)

It is meaningful that as a representative of the colonizer, Sir Glenard's influence plays an important role in the novel. Sir Glenard's story, a history of colonization, connects the past to the present. The second generation children of Iqbal and Jones families, Irie, Magid and Millat, go to "Glenard Oak School" which had been founded by Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard. Although Irie is unaware of her familial history which includes Sir Glenard, Smith connects the reader to the colonial and familial roots of Irie. By this way, she weaves a two-dimensional narration that includes a racial history related to a familial one.

It can be said that in *White Teeth* while the racial history is mainly reflected by the stories of colonized generation and their historical memoirs, the personal history is given by the second or third generation who is trying to create a personal history in their identity formation process. In this respect, "set in polyglot and multiracial London", the novel can be accepted as "a comedic charge through the Post-Colonial theory camp"<sup>12</sup> and the stories of Pande or Ambrose are mainly given as tools to understand the racial and colonial history in the narration. However, those stories are mainly unknown to the second generation children of multi-ethnic and/or immigrant families. That's why, the second generation having many identity conflicts, experience the problem of '*rootlessness or the lack of history*'. So, it is significant to refer to the problem of lacking root and history in the life of second generation and/or hybrid children.

The second generation children who are born and brought up in a different country know almost nothing about their familial country, nation, culture and history. The history and historical memory are significant as someone cannot have a healthy identity without knowing about her/his familial roots. The historical consciousness is very important "for history is to the nation rather as memory is to the individual and

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen O'Grady, "The Empire Strikes Back *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith", *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Oct., 2000), Published by: Old City Publishing, p. 19, Retrieved from <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4023519>>

an individual deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going".<sup>13</sup> Hence, the family history and the family root which would help to create a personal history appear as significant issues both on the formation process of one's identity and to cope with the conflicts of hybrid identities in immigrant or multiracial families. In Smith's novel, the second generation children of Iqbals and Jones are frustrated for not having any familial history which could help them to belong to an origin or root. In this respect, Archie's hybrid daughter Irie sees her parents as hypocrites because they do not enlighten her with their familial history:

"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. (...) These parents were full of information you wanted to know but too scared to hear. (...) She was sick of never getting the whole truth". (Smith, 379)

Irie wants to know all things about the stories, information, secret events of her family background. However, she is aware of the fact that many things stay untold and covered. She knows that the gap between her and her parents is the lack of a historical bridge which could connect them. In the novel, especially Irie and Millat suffer from the big gap in their historical memory which causes conflicts both in their families and their inner selves. To illustrate, once Irie has a discussion with her mother Clara, she exhibits her anger saying that for other people "every single fucking day is not this huge battle between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be" (Smith, 515). Irie is aware of the fact that her dilemma is mostly resulted from the lack of personal history. In this manner, "[h]alf-Jamaican, half- Anglo Irie Jones searches for something 'real' - eventually developing an interest in her Jamaican grandmother, and her roots"<sup>14</sup>. So, she decides to go to the house of her Jamaican grandmother, Hortense, and stay there for some time.

"So, she hurried back to No. 28 Lindaker Road, Lambeth, relieved to be back in the darkness, for it was like hibernating or being cocooned, and she was as curious as everyone else to see what kind of Irie would emerge. (...) 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. She found pictures of her great-grandmother Ambrosia, (...) and one of Charlie 'Whitey'

<sup>13</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, JR., *The Disuniting of America*, London: W.W. Norton Company, 1992, p.45-46.

<sup>14</sup> Sara Nichols, "Biting off More than You Can Chew: Review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*", *New Labor Forum*, No. 9 (Fall - Winter, 2001), Published by Joseph S. Murphy Institute, City University of New York, p. 64, Retrieved from <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40342313>>

Durham. (...) She found photo-booth snaps of Clara in school uniform (...)" (Smith, 399)

This attempt is a beginning to enlighten the familial history of Irie. By grubbing her familial past and learning about her origin, she enters into a significant process.

"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. X marks the spot, and Irie put an X on everything she found, collecting bits and bobs (birth certificates, maps, army reports, news articles) and 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". (Smith, 400)

In this way, Irie, laying claim to the past, enters into the conflict-solving process by turning to her roots. So she decides to go to the homeland, Jamaica, with her grandmother.

"Jamaica appeared to Irie as if it were newly made. Like Columbus himself, just by discovering it she had brought it into existence. (...) No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs –this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity* that have now passed into the language. And the particular magic of homeland, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginnings of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page". (Smith, 402)

While Irie opens a "blank page", not all of the 'problematic' identities are able to direct towards that solution as she did. In fact, in *White Teeth*, "[c]haracters constantly attempt to control their interaction with history"<sup>15</sup>, but how much they obtain this interaction is problematic. For instance, Millat has no information about his familial history, either. That's why; he feels troubled and uncertain about where he belongs to. Millat, like most of the other second generation children of immigrant parents living in a society without any history of their origins, hungers for the knowledge of a family root. However, he has no knowledge about his origin in Bangladesh and in this respect the lack of historical consciousness and historical memory becomes an important reason of his conflicts. It should be emphasized again that history has a crucial importance for "the hybrids of multicultural societies"; and "it is impossible to make a new beginning without the past recollection because then

<sup>15</sup> Paproth, p. 15.

the beginning has nothing to hold on to".<sup>16</sup> The situation in which Millat is included is an example of this lack. As he does not have a healthy bond with his familial or national history, he tries to find another feeling of belonging and attends a radical Islamic group called KEVIN.

In *White Teeth*, contrary to Iqbal and Jones families, Chalfens (the English family of Joshua, who is a friend of Irie and Millat) has a different attitude towards their familial history. The difference between them is, as Irie mentions:

"Chalfens actually knew who they were in 1675". However, his father "Archie Jones could give no longer record of his family than his father's own haphazard appearance on the planet in the back-room of a Bromley public house circa 1895 or 1896 or quite possibly 1897". (...) Her mother "Clara Bowden knew a little about her grandmother, and half believed the story that her famed and prolific Uncle P. had thirty-four children, but could only state definitively that her own mother was born at 2.45 p.m. 14 January 1907, in a Catholic church in the middle of the Kingston earthquake. The rest was rumour, folk-tale and myth". (Smith, 337-8)

For Irie, it is natural to feel the necessity of wondering the history of her family, especially when she meets a family whose genealogy is distinctive. According to Claire Squires, in the novel, the difference between Bowdens and Chalfens functions in two ways: "In the juxtaposition of 'Chalfenism versus Bowdenism', as a chapter heading has it, there is not just a clash of ideologies, but also a concern with different ways of telling history and of determining truth".<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, "telling history" and related to that "acquiring a truth about familial history" are given as positive attitudes to gain familial consciousness. Although Chalfens are able to get it, Bowdens and also Iqbals aren't and this gap creates a distinctive conflict in the identities of the children of immigrant families. As Irie feels, to know something about one's history and root has a significant importance for the formation of identity. Therefore, the lack of knowledge about one's family history or root brings out significant conflicts and dilemmas both in the family and in the individual's own self.

As exemplified above, "*White Teeth* traverses the complex genealogy of each family and foretells the impact this cultural and familial history will have on their London-born children".<sup>18</sup> We see that the more the children learn about their racial, national or familial history, the less they experience identity crises. However, the

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<sup>16</sup> Şebnem Toplu, " 'Where are you from, originally?': Race and Gender in Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara*", *InterCulture*, Vol.1, Florida State University, Florida, December 2004, Retrieved from <<http://www.fsu.edu/~proghum/interculture/Race%20and%20Gender%20in%20Bernardine%20Evaristo's%20Lara.htm>>

<sup>17</sup> Squires, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> O'Grady, p. 19.

cultural and familial history cannot be achieved by all of the characters in the novel. In this respect, the problems resulted from the lack of knowledge about racial-familial history of these characters coordinate with '*the degeneration of the original culture in multiracial or immigrant families*'. In multicultural societies, to live only according to one's own original culture or beliefs and to be alienated from other cultures are almost impossible. Especially for the second and further generations of these families, an isolated lifestyle that is totally related to the original culture cannot be adopted so easily. As a rich and delicious multicultural salad is waiting for them, they tend to taste every piece of it. Surely, the diversity of cultures adds richness to one's identity; however if a person takes an opposite way to her/his original culture, the conflicts and dilemmas are more possible to occur. In this respect, the degeneration of the original culture in those families is generally observed in hybrid or second generation children who experience the process of identity formation. In *White Teeth*, the 'degeneration' concept is characterized by the metaphor of 'white teeth'. One of the most premier characteristics of black or blackish people is their 'white teeth'. However, in the novel, the cigarette addiction of the second generation children makes white teeth turn into yellow. While the colour of 'white' reminds us purity and innocence, its transformation into yellow represents the degeneration of those wisdoms. In the novel, the concept of degeneration is very apparent in the immigrant families, especially in Iqbals. Samad Iqbal is a traditional Muslim Bangladeshi and desires to see his sons as real Muslim Bangladeshis. However, the degeneration of their original culture shows itself in the lifestyles of his sons from their early childhood. To Samad, the main problem is having no sense of tradition and morality for the new generation; according to him there was a big:

"trouble with Millat, mutinous Millat aged thirteen, who farted in mosque, chased blondes and smelt of tobacco, and not just Millat but all the children. Mujib (fourteen, criminal record for joyriding), Khandakar (sixteen, white girlfriend, wore mascara in the evenings), Dipesh (fifteen, marijuana), Kurshed (marijuana and very baggy trousers), Khaleda (seventeen, sex before marriage with Chinese boy), Bimal (nineteen, doing a diploma in Drama)". (Smith, 218)

To Samad, those children are mostly growing up according to the English way of life and contrary to Muslim morality and tradition. According to him, all those deeds are totally antithetic to their truths and traditions, but that generation is marching on those wrong deeds. Like Samad, the other parents cannot understand "what had gone wrong with these first descendants of the great ocean-crossing experiment" (Smith, 218), but they are aware of the fact that the degeneration process is going to somewhere that is more hazardous for their families. Samad Iqbal as the voice of those parents who are really worried about the degeneration of their original culture thinks that "those children are nothing but trouble, they do not go to mosque, do not pray, speak strangely, dress strangely, eat all kinds of rubbish, have

intercourse with God knows who" and he bewails saying that "no respect for tradition, people call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!" (Smith, 190) As Samad mentions, those children have little relation to their original culture, history and roots. When Millat's music teacher asks him what he listens to at home and she waits for an answer mentioning some ethnic songs or singers from the "East", Millat gives the answer of Bruce Springsteen and Michael Jackson. It is apparent that there is almost nothing from their original culture. Although the appearance of those children (their clothes which carry the brand of *Nike*), their hobbies and other deeds can be accepted as an adaptation to the existing lifestyle of other young people, this approach is seen as a degeneration period by their parents because of the conflicted attitudes of those deeds with their original culture. When Samad makes a self criticism about the misdeeds of their children, he points out an ironic situation. He asks:

"Didn't they have everything they could want? Was there not a substantial garden area, regular meals, clean clothes from Marks 'n' Sparks, A-class top-notch education? Hadn't the elders done their best? Hadn't they all come to this island for a reason? To be safe. Weren't they safe?" (Smith, 219)

Samad remarks that the parents have done the best for their children and made life easy for them. According to him, there should not be anything to complain about, but he cannot understand why the children are still unsatisfied. In fact, there is a secret answer within those questions. All those immigrant parents had come to England by the expectation of a better life for their children; however, when the time passed, what they faced was frustration for them. Their children had turned out to be totally different from what they had expected. It was true; they were not safe anymore because they had been degenerated when looked from the parents' point of view. Nevertheless, that degeneration process is sometimes met as natural and not horrific by some other adults in the novel. For instance, in *White Teeth*, Alsana's niece Neena thinks that to be different is natural for the second generation and it should not be accepted as appalling. When her aunt Alsana expresses her concerns about Millat, Neena says: "he is running from himself and he is looking for something as far away from the Iqbals as possible. What are you afraid of Alsi? He's second generation –you need to let them go their own way" (Smith, 346). It is apparent that Neena sees the deeds of Millat very natural as a second generation boy; however, his mother Alsana is anxious that she has 'lost her family'. In fact, in the novel, Smith gives the idea that trying to understand the second generation could solve the conflicts more easily; at the same time, the parents should judge themselves for the faults of their children. However, the parents disregard the fact that they do not have enough communication with their children and they do not give cultural and historical consciousness to the children from the early childhood. The parents are not appropriate examples for their children. The children being innocent and open to everything attractive feel trapped and inferior when they face with the dominant culture and they want to become one

of the members of that society. The parents do not make self-criticism and they do not see that reality.

However, the immigrant parents apply to a different way apart from those mentioned above for the solution of the conflicts experienced between them and their second generation children. In *White Teeth*, the solution that is very common among the immigrants is depicted very well. That solution is "*turning back to roots*" in other words "*going back to homeland*". In fact, the idea of going back to the homeland after earning enough amount of money is an earlier plan for the immigrants because they have not accepted the country they immigrated as "home". Most of the immigrants have come to work as temporary workers and so they have always had that idea in their minds. However, when the immigrants have established their life in another county, it is not very easy to change it and go back to their own country, mostly because of financial problems. In fact, they have no choice apart from continuing their life in the countries they immigrated since most of them have settled in other countries because of the unemployment in their own country and have not been able to earn enough money to turn back. Nevertheless, when their second generation children grow and they begin to experience some conflicts or do "undesired" deeds, the idea of "going back home" rises to the surface once more and those parents wish to send, at least, their children back to the homeland. That solution seems as a salvation for their children who are in danger of corruption. In *White Teeth*, Samad "concentrates on saving his sons" and thinks that sending them back to home is a choice of morality and a solution to the problems of his children. "To Samad, (...) tradition was culture, and culture led to roots" (Smith, 193). That's why; he has to send the twins to homeland. 'Turning to roots' becomes the solution according to Samad: "Roots were what saved, the ropes one throws out to rescue drowning men, to Save Their Souls. (...) the more determined he became to create for his boys roots on shore, deep roots that no storm or gale could displace" (Smith, 193). In a way, he wants to create a history for his sons, he wants to connect his sons to a racial-familial history. When Samad realizes that the country is giving harm to the twins and they are going towards a direction that is different from what he wanted, he decides to send them back to their homeland Bangladesh where they could be brought up like real Bangladeshis. However, because of financial difficulties, Samad can send only one son, Magid, who is more intelligent and promising than the other one. Ironically, Samad's plan was concluded totally different from what he expected. Magid, who is sent to Bangladesh to grow as a good Muslim, returns to England as typical English ('more English' than real English) and an atheist. Matthew Paproth comments that "Magid is essentially uprooted from his family and from his history, and he tries to construct an identity entirely separate from it".<sup>19</sup> In fact, when Samad sends his 'precious child' Magid to Bangladesh expecting him to grow up according to his own cultural doctrines, he does not take into account that Bangladesh is still a cultural colony of England in the modern time and the English lifestyle and even the English

<sup>19</sup> Paproth, p. 15.

points of view have significant impressions on Bangladeshi people. In this sense, the twin brothers go through opposite ways of life in the novel. Magid's

"willingness to defend genetic engineering -established somewhat archly as the millennial symbol of Western culture-locates him within a four-square secular Englishness, and brings him into direct conflict with his brother Millat, whose adolescent fascination with clans, especially 'clans at war', draws him into a militant Islamic group".<sup>20</sup>

It is contradictory that the children take decisions which do not correspond to the wishes of their father. Unlike what Samad plans, neither home nor England is better than the other for his sons. As the second generation children haven't had a real connection with "homeland" since they were born, the problems become too difficult to be solved. Nevertheless, the first generation immigrants have almost always seen "turning to roots" or "sending their children back home" as the solution of the conflicts they experience in their families.

As Claire Squires expresses "[t]he reader of *White Teeth* will find no easier escape from history than its characters, as references to the past, to origins, and to roots permeate every chapter of the novel".<sup>21</sup> In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith deals with the issues of "history" and "root" relating them to the national, racial, familial and personal dimensions. By handling the memoirs of the first generation immigrants, she pictures the colonial history of colonized countries. The post-colonial consciousness she creates in the narration is significant in this respect. The colonial history which is hidden and covered is enlightened and appears as a salvation for some characters such as Samad Iqbal. Besides deciphering the racial history, by turning to the racial roots of the multi-ethnic or post-colonial families, the bond of the second or later generation children to familial history is also depicted in the novel. *White Teeth* as a novel which "demonstrates the impossibility of escaping history or living entirely outside of its influence"<sup>22</sup> presents the lack of historical consciousness as a negative position for hybrid (Irie) or second generation (Millat) children of multi-ethnic or immigrant families. However, Smith presents turning to roots and learning about racial and familial history as liberator and positive factors for their identity construction. In this respect, she attributes a significant status to history and root in the narration. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that she doesn't advocate a total adaptation to the racial history nor she appreciates the clash of cultures in multicultural England. As Kathleen O'Grady emphasizes "*White Teeth* capers through this minefield of 'origins', satirizing equally the most earnest efforts of those who seek

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<sup>20</sup> Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction 1950-2000*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2002, p.184.

<sup>21</sup> Squires, p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> Paproth, p. 15.



a return to their roots and those desperate for Western homogenization, but with deep sympathy and understanding".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> O'Grady, p. 20.

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