

Identity and Hybridity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore identity and hybridity across two generations in two families in the multicultural suburb of Willesden in North West London in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. The characters are analyzed with regard to how processes of migration and assimilation and past and present spaces impact on their identity formation, and much of the discussion revolves around Laura Moss's stance on the normalization of hybrid identities. The analysis is conducted with the aid of secondary sources that are mainly provided by postcolonial scholars or scholars with an interest in issues of race, ethnicity or cultural identity.

The first-generation immigrants Samad, Alsana and Clara all develop some kind of hybrid identity due to their living 'in-between' two spaces; one in the past, one in the present, and each with a different set of cultural values. They show different ways of inhabiting Willesden and of reconciling the past with their current situation. Archie, the only 'white British' character in these two families, also has to form some kind of hybrid identity, living together with his Jamaican wife Clara and their child in multicultural Willesden.

The next generation, expected to be more attuned to hybridity and having a stronger connection to Britain than their immigrant parents, still feel the weight of living 'in-between'. They have to negotiate their sense of belonging between past and present spaces, as well as what it means to be 'British' when they do not look as if they are 'British'. The fact that hybrid identities are becoming the 'new normal' in Britain's big cities, as Moss claims, does not spare them of the complications inherent in such identities. The novel does, however, point to a future in which hybridity might become more prevalent, potentially making it into more of a non-issue.

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1. Introduction

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is a family saga following two main families, the Jones/Bowden family and the Iqbal/Begum family. The novel moves back and forth between different time periods, and stories of individual characters are woven together with a collection of historical events, creating a polyvocal novel in which the narratives "overlap and intermingle" (Pope 170). Few novels describe and interrogate immigration, assimilation and identity to the degree that Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* does. In the novel, characters across two generations negotiate their identities while inhabiting the city, taking part in "the great immigrant experiment" in "the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white" (326). This thesis will study how *White Teeth* deals with identity and hybridity, and how processes of migration and assimilation and the attachment to past and present spaces play a part in characters' identity formation.

Reviewers of the novel have been very preoccupied with how the novel handles multicultural issues and race (Gunning 127; McMann 618). However, as many scholars have noted, *White Teeth* addresses a variety of topics, meaning that it also handles "other crucial aspects that intervene in their processes of identity negotiation" (Fernández, "Representing Third Spaces" 157). The novel does, for example, satirize issues such as fundamentalism and certainty, historical determinism and essentialism (Bergholtz 542; Sell 27-29). Additionally, it also handles topics such as genetic manipulation and science, family and class (Gunning 126; McCallum 486; McMann 618; Siccardi 215; "Zadie Smith").

The writing style of *White Teeth* has been called "hysterical realism" by literary critic James Wood and "realism plus" by literary scholar Ged Pope (Wood; Pope 169). According to Pope, this style involves a character-driven, intricately detailed and plotted story with "wild coincidence (...), exaggeration, stereotypes, far-fetched humour (...), caricature, and grotesques" (169). Many of the aspects that Pope has pointed out, combine to produce comedy and satire, which is useful for any author exploring complex and contentious topics, as Zadie Smith does regarding the impact of immigration and assimilation. Comedy "calls itself in question" and satire is "more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers" according to literary scholars

Helga Ramsey-Kurz and Dustin Griffin, respectively (79; 1,5). The elements of humour and satire, along with narratorial remarks of various moods are all part of Smith's 'asking questions' about the human condition in multicultural London before and around the turn of the millennium (Fernández, "Exploring Hybridity" 143; Gunning 128; Tancke 32-33). And, like postcolonial scholar Julia Siccardi notes of Smith's novels in general; even if these works are fictional, they still "offer a critical analysis of the representations of alterity in contemporary society" (220).

1.1 Theoretical Perspectives and Research Questions

As Zadie Smith has set her novel in multicultural North West London, and her story revolves around first- and second- generation immigrants¹, postcolonial theory and postcolonial theoreticians seem to be useful, even if Smith deals with a range of issues. The thesis will rely mainly on a postcolonial framework as it refers to secondary sources that in the main are penned by postcolonial literary scholars, or scholars who focus on issues of race, ethnicity and cultural identity in their work.

Postcolonialism, broadly speaking, deals with the legacy of colonialism as in how colonized regions and people were constructed as inferior, and how this is represented in literary texts (Cuddon 551). However, a part of postcolonialism also centres its attention on identity formation, and it is this part that best aligns with the topic for this thesis. This aspect of postcolonialism hones in on "the problems of identity (...) that have resulted from the cultural disruptions initiated by colonialism," one of these disruptions being migration (Cuddon 551). Another helpful part of the postcolonial framework is how it involves reflection on the past, as the past proves to be important for some of the characters' identity in the novel. According to postcolonial scholar Sara Ahmed, postcolonial theory is "about the complexity of the relationship between the past and present," involving a link "between the histories of European colonisation and contemporary forms of globalisation" (11).

This thesis will be relying upon many literary scholars, most of whom deal with identity in Smith's novel in some way in their works. Some of these may be

¹ The term 'second generation immigrants' is misleading: People of this generation are not, strictly speaking, immigrants, as they are born in the new country. I will, however use it here for the sake of simplicity.

characterized as postcolonial, such as Isabel Carrera Suárez (2012), Irene Pérez Fernández (2009, 2017), Dave Gunning (2011), Mindi McMann (2012), Laura Moss (2003) and Julia Siccardi (2015). Other literary scholars have also been useful for the discussion of various aspects of identity, the past and space in Smith's novel, among these Michele Braun (2013), Elaine Childs (2006), Joanna O'Leary (2013), Ged Pope (2015), Katina Rogers (2008), Jonathan Sell (2006) and Ulrike Tancke (2013). In addition, the thesis draws on works by the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) and the postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha (1994) for their perspectives on identity and hybridity, and the geographer Doreen Massey (1994) and the philosopher Michel Foucault (1984/2006) for their perspectives on space.

Equipped with the theoretical perspectives of the scholars listed, this thesis will perform a close reading of the characters in *White Teeth*. Many have studied identity and hybridity in this novel, but there are not many who have done so in combination with a focus on the past and on spaces, as this thesis tries to do. However, all the works of the scholars mentioned, and many more, have provided crucial insights that my thesis has benefitted from. Laura Moss's work deserves particular mention in this regard, as it is her stance on hybrid identities and their increasing 'ordinariness' that is the crux around which much of the discussion in the thesis revolves.

My main research question is: How is identity and hybridity constructed and negotiated in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*? My related sub research questions will involve the following: How do the personal and emotional dynamics of migration and assimilation, including the relationship with the past, impact on identity formation and transformation? Moreover, how do contemporary and historical spaces play a part in how these characters form their identity?

1.2 Understanding Identity, Hybridity and Space

Personal identity is the individual's sense of self. It is likely to depend on how we see ourselves, but also, to some extent, on how others regard us. Moreover, it probably consists of both inherent, genetically determined traits as well as constructed traits. The degree to which these two aspects are a part of our identity is debated. In an essentialist notion of the concept, identity is seen as "essentially

determined by birth” and the subject has “that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end” (Culler 106; Hall 1). In a constructivist notion, identity is seen as something that is continuously performed and shaped as the individual interacts with society. This thesis, which explores hybridity in identity, relies mostly on a constructivist notion of identity, which understands identity as open for transformation.

Literary narratives offer a “subtle exploration” into models of how identity is formed as they follow the “fortunes of characters as they define themselves and are defined by various combinations of their past, the choices they make, and the social forces that act upon them (Culler 106-107). The study of “the complex dynamic of identity and alterity” may be regarded as a crucial aspect of any narrative (Ribó 98).

The sociologist Anthony Giddens, who frames his writing on identity formation in a constructivist lens, states that the modern subject creates her self-identity in the context of “new forms of mediated experience” in ‘high modernity’, a time that is characterized by traditions losing their hold while new options and new risks come to the fore. In this late, modern phase, the process of identity formation is a self-reflexive and continuous endeavor that is connected to both ‘globalising influences’ and ‘personal dispositions’ (1, 3-5).

‘Becoming’ is a concept employed by postcolonial scholar Julia Siccardi. She uses the concept, adapted from geographer Doreen Massey, to describe the process of identity formation when studying characters in Zadie Smith’s novels. ‘Becoming’, Siccardi says, is a way of finding one’s place in society, which involves “the recovery of one’s territory, only with new modalities” (224). This process, we may assume, is likely to be of particular significance to people who are immigrants or descendants of immigrants.

Identity formation in ‘high modernity’ and ‘becoming’ as described by Giddens and Siccardi, respectively, fit well with postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s thoughts on hybrid identity. Bhabha places himself within the constructivist tradition, in which he sees people mixing, translating and reorganizing their personal identities in a “third space of enunciation” (37). The third space is always a “contradictory and ambivalent space,” most likely because “culture only emerges as a problem (...) at the point at which there is a loss of meaning in the contestation and articulation of everyday life, between classes, genders, races, nations” (37, 34).

The concept of hybridity as seen by Bhabha is reworked by postcolonial scholar Laura Moss, who does not view hybridity as a necessarily ambivalent 'in-between space', but rather as a new kind of 'normal'. She states that "Cultural and racial hybridities are becoming increasingly ordinary" following the increased pace of globalization and migration (12). This state of 'ordinariness' is something she regards as the next phase of postcolonial studies, with the possibility of hybridity eventually fading into a non-issue (12). However, she emphasizes that one has to pay attention to the different modalities of hybridity regarding their power structures: There are very different processes going on when we compare voluntary negotiations with forced assimilation in the creation of hybrid identities. Also, like many other scholars, she is interested in how cultural interaction is always a 'two-way street' which affects all parties involved, regardless of the power structures at play (12). Moss sees *White Teeth* as a "portrait of hybridity" and states that the novel at times "creates a peaceful and boring multiculturalism" even if may not represent "an outright celebration of hybridity" (11, 14).

The hybridity that arises in the 'third space' may take many forms. One form of hybridity is linguistic, as languages impact on one another, and another has to do with cultural practices. Yet another is racial, as in how children of parents with different racial backgrounds will be of mixed race (Cuddon 344). Most hybrid identities are constructed, as they take form in the process of an individual creating and recreating their identity. However, when it comes to children of mixed race, their hybridity also has to do with essentialist, or genetic parts, of identity.

When it comes to concepts of space, it is useful to start with a distinction between the terms 'space' and 'place': Space refers to a location, whereas place means that the location is given meaning and value by how people perceive it (Ribó 37). Doreen Massey, a Marxist geographer, views space as something dynamic that is continuously constructed. She sees space/place as inextricably linked to time and the social relations existing at that time. Consequently, these terms are connected to issues such as power, class and gender, meaning that the 'identities' of places will always be multiple, changeable and contested (2, 4-5). The most important takes from Massey are that the people who inhabit spaces have different ways of making them into places, and moreover, that the ways in which the 'identities' of spaces are changeable are dependent on the power structures at the time.

Spaces are significant as settings in a novel: Ignasi Ribó, literary scholar and writer of *Prose Fiction*, sees them as providing “meaningful entanglements of characters with their own world,” meaning that they play a role in the development of characters’ identities (34). Roberta Piazza, a scholar in sociolinguistics, has emphasized the importance of spaces in people’s identities. She argues that working out one’s relation to spaces is something people need to do to “satisfy the fundamental needs to belong, have a sense of their self and their role in life” (11).

Ribó has worked out a typology of settings, in which he sees the category of ‘functional settings’ as settings that give topographical support to the development of the story and its characters (5). The portrayal of North-West London in *White Teeth* seems to be such a setting: As Smith explores the identity formation of a multicultural cast of characters, she does so in a suburban area of London that has been multicultural for decades, following the influx of immigrants from former British colonies after the Second World War². Smith has, in addition, chosen some more urbanized and historically significant spaces in London for the climax of the novel to play out. These spaces are in central London, in Trafalgar Square and the nearby fictional ‘Perret Institute’.

For the study of some of the characters’ identity formation, and their belonging to spaces, the concept of ‘heterotopia’ might be relevant. The concept of heterotopia is developed by the philosopher Michel Foucault, and is useful for seeing how spaces are open or closed to different groups of people, and for understanding what ‘image’ of time that is conveyed in a space. Heterotopias are ‘other places’ that function as a contrast to “all the space that remains” by exposing them in some way (Foucault 100). Heterotopias may break with time, for example in how time is compressed and accumulated in museums. They are spaces or institutions to manage transitions or ‘otherness’ and have specific rules for opening and closing (96-99). The workings of these rules are not always obvious to the uninitiated, as one may be welcomed to the outskirts of a heterotopic site while in reality being excluded from its real centre (99).

² Willesden is in a Wikipedia entry described as a place known for immigrants, especially of Irish and Afro-Caribbean descent. “Willesden.” *Wikipedia*. Last edited on November 12, 2022. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willesden>, accessed on November 18, 2022. The Borough of Brent, which includes both Willesden, Harlesden and Kilburn, has a population of which around half is made up by ethnic minorities. These are mainly of South Asian, Africans and Afro-Caribbeans origin (2011-numbers). “Brent”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Last edited on May 13, 2013. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Brent>. See also Fernández for the “disruption of the traditional social order brought about by the Second World War” in Britain (“Exploring Hybridity” 144).

Postcolonial scholar Irene Pérez Fernández has analyzed contemporary spaces in the vicinity of Willesden of North West London in conjunction with identity formation in the characters of *White Teeth*. She has studied how these spaces make it possible “for new identity positions to emerge” (“Exploring Hybridity” 152). According to her, Zadie Smith uses this melting pot, this changeable place, to give “a dynamic representation of the city of London that allows the characters to negotiate and produce alternative spaces” as they ‘inscribe’ their “experiences in space” (“Exploring Hybridity” 150; “Representing Third Spaces” 144).

Another scholar, cultural theorist Ged Pope, sees the suburbs of a big city like London like spaces that are mouldable, potentially providing a space that is “aspirational; where people can have “some form of flexibility and control (...) over where to go, who to associate with, or precisely what kind of community to create” (5). Willesden is such a place, representing a “haphazard middleness” which enables diversity and makes the storytelling of the novel and the development of these hybrid characters possible (Pope 171). He thinks that suburban fiction, including Smith’s, may be regarded as a depiction of “*the individual struggles to make any lived place meaningful and habitable,*” which everyone needs to perform in order to create “a convincing life world” in cultural modernity (10).

In some cases, we see that characters’ belonging to their current spaces is contested by historical spaces. These are locations where significant events have played out for characters, or where they have their ‘roots’. There is a certain conflation when it comes to terms such as ‘historical space’, the ‘past’, ‘history’, or ‘roots’, as these terms are not always easily separated. The ‘roots’ that characters have in certain historical locations are likely to be of varying importance to the different characters studied in this thesis. One of these spaces, far removed from London in space and time, is continental Europe, especially Bulgaria, during the Second World War for Archie and Samad. Another is Bengal for Samad and Alsana and their sons Millat and Magid. The third is Jamaica for Clara and her daughter Irie.

1.3 Outline and Anticipation of Findings

This thesis will structure its discussion by devoting a chapter to each generation in *White Teeth*. Chapter two will focus on the older generation. This generation consists of 'white' and traditionally 'British/English' Archie, as well as his immigrant wife Clara and their immigrant friends, Samad and Alsana. The chapter studies how they deal with assimilation processes and negotiate their identities as they settle down in Willesden in North West London. They all develop some kind of hybrid identity, though not always consciously or willingly so. Their attachment to their contemporary space will differ and the same is true for their attachment to the 'past' and past spaces.

Chapter three will revolve around their offspring; Irie, Millat and Magid, who are all born in London. We find the same variation in attachment in the next generation: The young, who are supposed to be more at ease with hybridity and more assured in their belonging to Britain, do not, however, escape the struggle of identity that comes with a connection to both present and 'past' spaces as well as the 'interference' of the past in terms of family history.

These chapters will be followed by a separate chapter on the climax of the novel and its aftermath, in which everything comes together at Trafalgar Square and the Perret Institute in central London, and in which we get more insight into how the past, the present and the future play into the identity of some of these characters. This chapter will also involve some reflection on history and hybridity by way of some intertexts and the side story of a genetically engineered mouse, FutureMouse©.

2. Being 'Involved'³: Constructing Identity in the Older Generation - Archie, Samad, Clara and Alsana

In the 1970s, Archie and Clara and Samad and Alsana move into Willesden, and through them, we observe the emergence of multicultural Britain. Willesden, this suburban part of the metropolis, functions as “the backdrop that channels social interaction” and provides a space where these characters can find ways to belong, claims Fernández (“Exploring Hybridity” 144). Though Clara, Samad and Alsana are all first-generation immigrants, the focus of the novel is not on their arrival, but on their settled status in Willesden and how they create and negotiate their hybrid identities in this space as the years pass (Fernández, “Exploring Hybridity” 144; Trimm 148).

Moss, who has drawn the attention to the increasing ‘ordinariness’ of hybridity, also recognizes that there is some tension in characters in embracing this hybridity, perhaps especially when it comes to the hybridity in their children (12, 14). Childs terms this tension ‘hybridity anxiety’ (8). Carrera Suárez has looked at the meaning of the metaphor of ‘blood’ for these characters’ identity, and has found that Samad is the one who most closely regards ‘blood’ as important in his identity (182). O’Leary has focused on important aspects of Samad’s and Alsana’s relationship, as well as their identities. Rogers, who writes about cultural identity and the link to history in *White Teeth*, has identified how Samad’s obsession with the past has to do with his need to restore dignity (54).

As these four characters navigate the assimilation process, and construct their potentially hybrid identities, they show different degrees of flexibility and attachments to their current and past spaces. Not surprisingly, Samad is the one who struggles the most in coming to terms with hybridity and living ‘in-between’, as ‘blood’, the past and past spaces interfere with his belonging in the London suburb. However, also Alsana and Clara experience some friction related to living ‘in-between’. The situation is different for Archie, the only ‘white’, traditionally British/English character, who nevertheless forms his identity in close association with these three characters and inhabits the multicultural space that Willesden is.

³ Being *involved* is how Alsana sees all relations, including multicultural ones (439).

2.1 Archie

Archie Jones is an English, middle-aged, white man of the working class at the point of his life when we first meet him. He is an ordinary man in many ways, but his introduction into the novel is anything but: In his car, parked on Cricklewood Broadway on the morning of a New Year's Day, he is attempting suicide. The spot he has chosen for the event "was not a place a man came to die. It was a place a man came in order to go to other places via the A41" (3). However, as his attempt is interrupted by the owner of a Muslim butcher shop, he sees that "Life wanted Archie" This is a new Archie who looks to the future, and the future brings good things to him (O'Leary 48). When he crashes a still ongoing New Year's party, he runs into his bride-to-be, Clara (19, 23). This means that his life turns around twice in less than 24 hours by random events that both 'save' him and are crucial to his identity. In the first incident on this particular day, he feels chosen by 'Life' for "for the first time since his birth" (7). In the second, he resets his life in a way that will make him into a rather happily married family man who settles down in Willesden, a place where he can belong. His meeting with Clara "led to the transformation of Archie Jones in every particular that a man can be transformed (...) by means of the entirely random, adventitious collision of one person with another" (23).

Archie's marriage to the much younger, stunningly beautiful and black Clara attracts a lot of attention (23-24): When they are to marry, the registrar, "who had seen it all (...) raised an eyebrow at this most unnatural of unions as they approached his desk. Cat and dog" (49-50). Most of his family and friends do not attend the reception. Except for his friend Samad and his wife Alsana, "All other relatives and friends had declined the wedding invitation; some tersely, some horrified; others, thinking silence the best option, had spent the past week studiously stepping over the mail and avoiding the phone" (51). At Archie's workplace, reactions to the marriage are not much better. In a rather awkward conversation, his boss tries to explain that Archie and his new wife are not welcomed at office parties (69-73). From this time on, office parties are places of restricted or no access to Archie.

To alleviate the guilt, Archie's boss gives him free luncheon vouchers, which provide Archie and his best friend, Samad with free food at their regular pub, O'Connell's. And if Archie's connection to office parties is severed, his belonging to

the pub is, ironically, secured by the very vouchers he receives from his boss (Fernández, “Exploring Hybridity” 150). O’Connell’s is where the two friends spend countless hours, stretching from 1974 until the millennium (244-247, 541). Archie’s vouchers are even integrated into pub history as the proprietor Mickey keeps referring to them by saying that “The golden days of Luncheon Vouchers is over,” representing the type of shared history that connects Archie to the place (192, 250).

In O’Connell’s, the passing of time is to some extent irrelevant: “It could be 1989 outside, or 1999, or 2009, and you could still be sitting at the counter in the V-neck you wore to your wedding in 1975, 1945, 1935” (244). Also, in O’Connell’s, “Everything was remembered, nothing was lost. History was never revised or reinterpreted, adapted or whitewashed. It was as solid and as simple as the encrusted egg on the clock” (192). The type of history that is ‘encrusted’ in O’Connell’s is one devoid of a specific purpose or meaning, “it simply is as it is,” claims Rogers (52). O’Connell’s, therefore, appears to be a heterotopic space where history is fixed and time seems to stand still.

Most aspects of Archie’s life make him into a man that does not stand out, except for the ethnicity of his closest family and friends. He is “A man whose greatest pleasures were English breakfasts and DIY. A dull man. An old man. And yet... good,” as Clara observes (48). He does not have a particularly good job, and he is a rather short, chubby middle-aged man in a badly tailored suit” (82, 45). Moreover, he has a ‘funny leg’ from the war (81). But, as nobody else seems to dwell on the limitations his leg may place on him, nobody else seems to care, either (O’Leary 48).

He is a decent man who gets along with people, does not like to create a fuss and would rather diffuse fights than start them (10, 240-241). He is also notoriously indecisive. In Archie’s decision-making, the random is truly king (Sell 29). “Archie (...) was a huge fan of second opinions. That’s why he never went anywhere without a ten pence coin” (25). The flip of a coin helps Archie make most of his major life decisions, with the occasional help from the letters of his long-distance friend Ibelgauft or from the proprietor at O’Connell’s, or being led to some extent by his friend Samad (191-192, 195, 121).

Archie’s links to the past are not strong, as he ‘unhooked’ himself from his former life after his suicide attempt, especially regarding his first wife (18). Also, there seems to be no references to a wider family and older friends after his wedding with

Clara. Of his family background, he simply says that “‘We’re nobody’” (99). Bulgaria - or any other space during the war - does not seem to hold any specific significance to Archie’s identity, either, including the leg injury it gave him (O’Leary 48). The war, is however, important as it gave him a friend. Additionally, the war represents these two friends’ common history. Another type of history that is significant to Archie is “the Growth of O’Connell’s Pool House”, which both connects him to his friend and secures his place in the pub (245).

The unlikely friendship between Archie and his Bengali best friend, Samad Iqbal, reflects that new relationships were being made possible by the “disruption of the traditional social order brought about by the Second World War” and the larger trend of Britain’s emergence as a multicultural society in the post war years, as Fernández asserts (“Exploring Hybridity” 144). Their friendship also indicates that these two characters must possess some flexibility as they have crossed the colour line at a time when it was not commonly done. Archie is surrounded by different ethnicities in his daily life, both at the pub, in the neighbourhood and in his home with his own, mixed nuclear family. His comments on ethnicity, that are very rare, reveal that ethnicity is not something he reflects on much. The Iqbals, for example, are not “‘those kinds of Indians’” (54). When Samad despairs over what is happening to his children in Britain, Archie just cannot feel it: “He liked people to get on with things, Archie. He kind of felt people should just live together, you know, in peace or harmony or something” (190).

Archie seems to be happy in his own skin, not questioning his own identity or what to do about the past. It might help him that he knows he is from “Good honest English stock” (99). Maybe his assuredness of being ‘English’ also helps explain why he never tries to control his daughter in the way Samad attempts to control his sons (O’Leary 49). Either way, Archie is in a different position compared to other characters, especially Samad, who spends time dwelling on his background.

When it comes to hybrid identities, Archie’s identity is clearly not one of them if we consider his ethnicity and culture. However, if we take his marriage into account, it may seem that he is, to some degree, excluded from the ‘white’ English category, being labelled with some kind of mixed identity by his colleagues and other family and friends (69-73; Fernández, “Exploring Hybridity” 150). In fact, the situations involving Archie and his exclusion, are some of the very few situations in which

racism is directly referenced in the novel with regard to the central characters. Archie's way may represent a less-than-perfect approach to hybridity as he does not reflect on the complexities that multiculturalism and hybridity bring along, especially for those who are 'different' (Rogers 53, 57). However, the way he embraces people that are different is a prerequisite for hybrid identities to become normalized in the way Moss suggest they increasingly do (12). Carrera Suárez would seem to agree, asserting that Archie's colour blindness shows a necessary negotiation of hybridity in a multicultural society (183).

The contrast between Archie's 'Englishness' and the others' 'otherness' is something that Archie himself would never draw any attention to. It is his indifference to 'blood' and ethnicity that makes the union with Clara and their biracial daughter Irie possible (Carrera Suárez 176). His indifference to ethnicity also enables him to enjoy a lifelong friendship with Samad. Archie just gets on with his life, and lets other people live theirs (Carrera Suárez 183). He never entertains fundamentalist ideas, is almost always uncertain about what is the right course of action, and his character represents a critique of "the blinkered shortcomings of linear self-definition" (MacLeod 165). His common decency make him "a *modest witness* to the century, by breaking with the mandates of masculine and genetic metaphors [as] he goes with his daughter (...) beyond gender and beyond the colour line," as Carrera Suárez notes (183). His approach to diversity shows a way forward, as his daughter also will do, in some other way.

2.2 Samad

Samad is Bengali/Bangladeshi and he is Archie's old friend from the Second World War, in which they served in the 'Bugged Battalion' and ended up in a Bulgarian village. Samad has an essentialist notion of identity related to his focus on 'blood' (Carrera Suárez 176; Sell 31). This, and his strong connection to the past and Bengal as a space, complicates his settling down in Britain. He regards 'blood' and genetics as crucial, and says that traditions are "in our cultures, my friend. (...) Maybe deeper. Maybe in our bones" (96). According to Carrera Suárez, 'blood' takes on many meanings to Samad. To him, it is related to notions of "war/nation/history," "kinship/genealogy" and "mutiny/violence/masculinity" (175-176). He thinks of Bengali

warriors as “those with the good blood” (88). His heroic forefather, Mangal Pande, “the great hero of the Indian Mutiny!,” according to Samad, is a great source of pride to him (Fernández, “Exploring Hybridity” 150; Rogers 57). Samad also carries this ‘blood’, descending from Bengali warriors and Pande, which with all its notions will eventually be ‘inherited’ by Samad’s son Millat (Carrera Suárez 176).

Wartime Bulgaria holds some importance to Samad, as this is where his and Archie’s friendship is formed. They share memories from this time, including the incident where Samad seemingly talks Archie into executing a French Nazi by the name of Dr Perret (120-122). The war, though not in Bulgaria, is also pivotal because it marks Samad’s body. This is made known to us retrospectively as he shares with Archie how he was shot through the wrist by a fellow soldier at the beginning of the war (89). When he suffers a breakdown in Bulgaria, fuelled by the morphine that he gets hold of in an old church building that has served as a makeshift hospital, his crippled hand is very much part of it: He “*longed* for the East”, and in his melancholy, he compares his present circumstances with those he enjoyed in the past in Bengal: “He looked down at his useless hand with its five useless appendages; at his skin, burnt to a chocolate-brown by the sun (...) and longed for the man he once was: erudite, handsome, light-skinned Samad Miah; so precious his mother kept him in from the sun’s rays (...)” (111).

He goes on to tell Archie “I am very much the worse for wear” and “I’m a cripple, Jones,” after which he threatens to kill himself (112, 114). This scene possibly shows the beginning of Samad’s preoccupation with the past. O’Leary writes that this ‘erudite’ and ‘light-skinned’ version of Samad “exists only as aspiration and nostalgic ideal” (40). She sees his wartime injury as contributing to giving him bleak prospects for the future, and that “Samad’s only option for life is the past, an uncomplicated place where he is a heterosexual good Muslim with two hands, light skin and no shame” (42). Rogers claims that “Only in highlighting his past can Samad restore his dignity (...)” (54). And that past, as depicted above, signifies a time when he enjoyed a certain status and had a fully functioning body.

Samad’s connection with the past, as in Bengal, and often represented by Pande, is reinforced with his insistence on the importance of ‘blood’. In one of his wartime conversations with Archie, he tells of how “(...) the Muslim men of Bengal can fight like any Sikh. Better! Stronger! And are the best educated and are those

with the good blood, we who are truly of Officer Material” (88). Likewise, when talking of his future wife, he claims that she will be from “The very best people. Extremely good blood ...” (97). When wanting to share “what was holy to him” with Archie, he returns to ‘blood’ yet again, this time linked to Pande: “(...) there was no stronger evocation of the blood that ran through him, and the ground which that blood had stained over the centuries, than the story of his great-grandfather,” as the narrator comments (99). Another narratorial remark states, in relation to one of Samad’s moments of thinking of Pande, that “When a man has nothing but his blood to commend him, each drop of it matters, matters terribly; it must be jealously defended” (255).

Samad’s reliance on the past - the historical space of Bengal with its culture, and Pande, both aspects available to him through ‘blood’, may, in addition to the wartime injury, also be explained by Samad’s displacement, argues Rogers. As he feels that “much of his identity has been swept away,” this leaves intact “only his cultural heritage, which he consequently guards preciously,” she explains (57). In London, he is only able to get a low-status job, which contributes to his problems of identity. In this context, Pande is “the star of his recurring narrative of origins, his source of pride against the demeaning life as waiter in London,” adds Carrera Suárez (175). His dream that he and Archie would become “big-bellied men sitting on our money-mountains” as he told Archie during the war, has failed to come true (104).

The fact that Samad refers to ‘blood’ and a historical figure like Pande is a sign that it is not the contemporary Bengal/Bangladesh that holds importance to Samad in his identity. Another indication is that he, during all his years in Britain, appears to be indifferent to the political unrest or natural disasters like earthquakes and cyclones that take place in Bangladesh⁴. It is always Alsana who worries about the situation in there (198, 211). Samad’s lack of worry is also evident in how he sends one of his sons to Bangladesh during turbulent times (203). These examples suggest that Samad constructs this fictional image of Bengal as a historical space because he needs a solid, unchangeable basis for his identity when living in the midst of diversity

⁴ “Bangladesh.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 11, 2021.

<https://academic.oup.com/levels/collegiate/article/Bangladesh/109737>.

“Bangladesh. Information on Disaster Risk Reduction of the Member Countries.” *Asian Disaster Reduction Center (ADRC)*. <https://www.adrc.asia/nationinformation.php?NationCode=50&Lang=en>, accessed February 3, 2023.

and change in another country. The same is most likely true for his faith in religion, which might be interpreted as something he holds on to preserve his culture “in the midst of increasing pluralism” or to cope with “traumatic immigrant experience” (Childs 7; Maczynska 128).

To Samad, “a hybrid identity is unattainable”, says Jonathan Sell (31). Moreover, Samad does not accept any break in the cultural bond between parents and children. Talking of the teenagers in Alsana’s wider family to Archie, he says that “People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!” (190). In a conversation with Alsana, he rejects her talk of ‘second generation’ by telling her “And don’t speak to me of second generation! One generation! Indivisible! Eternal!” (289). He also rejects her stance on compromise, saying that “It is not a matter of letting others live. It is a matter of protecting one’s culture, shielding one’s religion from abuse” (235). Not only does his view on compromise differ from Alsana’s, it also differs from his best friend’s readiness to embrace difference of any kind.

The narrator comments on Samad’s view of tradition that “Roots were what saved, the ropes one throws out to rescue drowning men, to Save their Souls” (193). Childs terms Samad’s fears over his sons losing the Bengali culture as ‘hybridity anxiety’ (8). To preserve the ‘roots’, Samad sends one of his sons – as he can only afford the one – ‘back’ to Bangladesh (209). He may not enjoy great success in his own life, and is riddled with his own inner conflicts, and maybe therefore, he steers his energy toward trying to control his family, and especially his children (O’Leary 42, 48). However, Samad’s grand plan does not bring about the expected outcomes. Ironically, Millat, the Londoner, turns out a fundamentalist Muslim, whereas Magid, who was sent ‘home’ for his cultural education, embraces Britishness, the law and scientific rationality while he rejects the Muslim faith (McMann 627-628). Samad says of both his sons, but Magid especially, who wants to practise law, that “He wants to enforce the laws of man rather than the laws of God. (...) he is nothing but a disappointment to me. More English than the English. (...) They have both lost their way. (...) You try to plan everything and nothing happens in the way that you expected ...” (406-407).

The failure of Samad’s plans leads Sell to conclude that “So much for cultural determinism” in Zadie Smith’s novel (30). Even Samad himself seems to question determinism: “Suddenly this thing, *belonging*, it seems like some long, dirty lie... and

I begin to believe birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an *accident*. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?" (407).

Even if Samad detests hybrid identities, at times he also recognizes part of his own hybridity, but when he does, it has negative connotations of unbelonging to him: "These days, it feels like a devil's pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in (...) but you mean to go back! (...) and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere" (407). This is reminiscent of something he has felt before, during the war: "Go back to Bengal? Or to Delhi? Who would have such an Englishman there? To England? Who would have such an Indian" (112)? Even if Samad is worried about hybridity, partly because it makes him 'unreturnable', and perhaps 'unrecognizable' like his children, he never considers going back to Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the issue of hybridity is important to how he understands and questions his own identity. To him, hybridity is less about gaining something than losing something: "As he sees it, the symbiotic relationship of multiple cultures reduces the purity and autonomy of one culture; disrupting his culture also disrupts his sense of self" (Childs 8).

Samad's worries about hybridity are not groundless, because to all intents and purposes, he is a somewhat Anglicized Bengali. When he criticizes Alsana's eclectic and multicultural dress sense, she fires right back at him "And that is a beautiful lungi you have on, Samad Miah,' she said bitterly, nodding in the direction of his blue-towelling jogging suit topped off with Poppy's LA Raiders baseball cap" (199). His language, too, is impacted on by his having lived in Britain, as when he speaks, he is "betraying the English inflections of twenty years in the country" (407). He has also taken to watching *the Antiques Roadshow* on TV, which indicates that he is buying into at least some of his second country's culture as broadcasted by the BBC (437). In addition, he has had recurrent inner conflicts about what kind of person he wants to be. He enjoys "many a frothy Guinness" together with Archie, in spite of his religion's ban on alcohol (139). He also has an affair, against his marital vows and his religion. His affair with Poppy Burt-Jones also goes to prove that he is very attracted to a "pretty red-headed" English woman, despite his belief in the value of everything Bengali (131).

Another fact is that Samad and Archie spend "years of devoted fucking around" in an institution that traditionally is seen as a typical British space, the pub

(183). Archie and Samad 'inhabit' the space and make it into a place, spending the time needed to acquire 'competence' on it (Fernández, "Exploring Hybridity" 151). O'Connell's, their regular pub, represents a 'home away from home' and a space that Samad and Archie can 'inhabit'. The pub is "no place for strangers" and as such, it takes on an almost heterotopic quality with its 'rules' about who are welcomed or not (183). The space is open to Samad and Archie, though, which may be especially important to Samad: It represents an 'anchor' to his living in Britain, and eventually, he even succeeds in having a portrait of Pande hung on the wall (249-250). This fact shows how he has truly been let into the pub's centre and has made it into a place where he can belong, unlike many other spaces.

O'Connell's is a very hybrid kind of space as it has a multicultural clientele as well as a multicultural décor (183-184, 249). The fact that it is run by Arabs may even be interpreted as a subversion of the traditional English/British social space that the institution of the pub represents (Fernández, "Exploring Hybridity" 150). The way the 'identity' of the pub has been changed by the people who run it and frequent it, is an example of how spaces are constructed by the people who inhabit them, as geographer Massey would see it (2, 4). Immigrants are taking part in the changing of spaces in this multicultural suburb, and O'Connell's is such a space, "a new space of opportunity" (Fernández, "Exploring Hybridity" 150). Moreover, the hybridity of O'Connell's makes it into a space where no specific identity is acknowledged, claims Fernández, who understands the pub as a space where divergent traditions are normalized.

Even if the pub has gone through changes earlier, with new proprietors and a new clientele, O'Connell's does not seem to be frequently open to change. During the years that Samad and Archie have frequented the pub, "a woman had never been known to venture inside" (184). Sometimes, however, it does change. One example is how Magid is allowed to order a bacon sandwich, even if bacon has not been served there for a long time, and another is how Alsana and Clara, at the cusp of the millennium, are welcomed into the pub on that "historic night when Abdul-Mickey finally opened his door to women" (450, 541).

Samad has many struggles with staying truly 'Bengali' and Muslim the way he thinks is right. He believes in the purity of culture, but the purity is hard to maintain (Carrera Suárez 175-176). In his mind, he seems to become "more Muslim and

Bengali and less British,” as Mindi McMann observes (625). She sees Samad as a character who is unwilling to really inhabit the ‘third space’ that multicultural North West London represents, and this refusal contributes to his discontent in London (625). Carrera Suárez seems to agree that his ideas of a pure culture and his living in the past hinder him from embracing his life in London (175-176). His struggles with identity and of pinning down ‘a convincing life world’, in the words of Pope, is one that he feels more keenly and approaches differently compared to his family and friends (10). Most of his family and friends and acquaintances mock him and simply live their lives differently, with Millat, to some extent, representing an exception (Carrera Suárez 175-176).

Samad, as so many other immigrants have done, carries the “ever present burden of the past” (Huggan 760). This ‘burden’ complicates his life in London and demonstrates some of the difficulties of assimilation processes, even as hybridity becomes more normalized (Moss 12). Yet his story is not straightforward. He finds his place in O’Connell’s, which is a ‘place of possibility’ and thus may be interpreted as a ‘third space’ in miniature (Fernández, “Exploring Hybridity” 150). He also belongs with Archie, a man who is his “soulmate and philosophical adversary” (Sell 30). Their bond is completely without blood connections, yet Archie is perhaps the person Samad interacts with most of all (Carrera Suárez 176). Samad does not want the English culture, but he wants his English best friend. And, in order to maintain this special friendship, he shows a remarkable willingness to cross boundaries; those of ethnicity, culture, religious faith and personality.

2.3 Clara

Clara is young woman of nineteen when she meets Archie at a New Year's party, compared to Archie's forty-seven. She is "magnificently tall, black as ebony and crushed sable" and "beautiful in all senses, except maybe, by virtue of being black, the classical" (23). Clara came to Britain as a 17-year-old from Jamaica with her mother Hortense (31). She represents a first-generation immigrant, but one who has spent parts of her adolescence in her new country. She seems to regard London as her home, for, as the narrator informs us, "Clara was *from* somewhere. She had *roots*. More specifically, she was from Lambeth (via Jamaica) (...)" (27). Due to her grandmother Ambrosia's history, who was exploited by an Englishman in colonial Jamaica, Clara's mother Hortense is of mixed ethnicity. This means that Clara is of both English and Jamaican origin, even if she is as "black as yer boot" (29).

Clara's mother is deeply religious, being a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses⁵ with a strong belief in an impending apocalypse (31-32). The religion is an important part of Clara's background, but it does not have much to do with Jamaica, other than that it was introduced to her grandmother Ambrosia in Jamaica. This happened at a stage when Ambrosia was at her most vulnerable, alone and pregnant. Though both Ambrosia and her daughter Hortense become deeply religious, Clara steps away from the faith at the age of 19. This is a crucial decision in Clara's life, and one which sets her up for other life-changing decisions (Maczynska 129).

On the following New Year's Eve, which is supposed to be the 'End', following the predictions of the Jehovah's Witnesses, there is, instead, a new beginning for Clara. In the midst of a party, at around midnight, she finds herself lost in thought over her loss of religion: "(...) ridding oneself of faith is like boiling sea-water to retrieve the salt – something is gained but something is lost. (...) Yet a residue, left over from the evaporation of Clara's faith, remained. She still wished for a saviour" (45). This is her state of mind when she meets Archie, explains the narrator, telling us that "Perhaps it is not so inexplicable then, that when Clara Bowden met Archie

⁵ An Adventist denomination that developed in the USA in the mid-1800s. Melton, J. Gordon. "Jehovah's Witness". *Encyclopædia Britannica*, March 21, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jehovahs-Witnesses>.

Jones at the bottom of the stairs the next morning she saw more in him than simply a rather short, rather chubby middle-aged white man in a badly tailored suit” (45). The ‘residue’ of religion informs her choice of a partner, and the influence of her mother, which is still felt, propels her into marrying him: “Clara still felt that deep down her mother would prefer her to marry an unsuitable man rather than live with him in sin, so she did it on impulse and begged Archie to take her as far away from Lambeth as a man of his means could manage (...)” (46). Their marriage, just a few weeks into their acquaintance, makes her both a ‘girl-wife’ of just 19 as well as “A Jones like no other that had come before her” (66, 50). Despite Clara and Archie being mismatched concerning age, looks and ethnicity, they seem to be a good match in terms of personality, both being calm and laid-back.

Rather newly wedded, Clara and Archie settle down in their marriage and in their house in Willesden. As they both come from very temporary living arrangements, this represents a new start and a ‘reterritorialisation’ for them both (Siccardi 220). Willesden is quite a nice area, Clara finds. They move into a house “somewhere between the trees and the shit, and Clara had felt a tide of gratitude roll over her. It was *nice*, not as nice as she had hoped but not as bad as she had feared (...)” (47). She soon puts down new ‘roots’. She and Alsana, Samad’s wife, though they are off to an awkward start, soon bond in their daily suburban life as they start meeting up in Kilburn nearby (73). The fact that they are both pregnant and that their husbands are on such good terms, contribute to their friendship. “They have resigned themselves to their husbands’ mutual appreciation society and the free time this leaves is not altogether unpleasant; there is time for picnics and outings, for discussion and personal study (...)” (74).

When it comes to Clara being black, she does not experience any of the problems that her daughter is later to encounter. Clara seems more assured and proud of her skin colour, and we do not hear of her being discriminated against directly. There are only a few hints that skin colour is a problem, one them being Archie’s colleagues finding it awkward that he has chosen a black woman (72). Another sign is that when she first meets Alsana on her own wedding day, Alsana comes across as skeptical: “And then there was his wife, Alsana, who was tiny and tight-lipped and seemed to disapprove of Clara somehow (though she could only be a few years older) (...)” (51). There is not very much about Clara that indicates that

she questions her own identity much. She appears to have embraced a hybrid identity, being settled in Willesden and in her mixed marriage.

One of the reasons Clara seems to have adjusted to Britain quite easily, might have to do with the fact that she arrived already in her teens, with no prior status. Another might be that she is married to a white Englishman, and that she generally seems content with her lot. Though seemingly assimilated, Clara is, however, not entirely without concern about the aspect of identity that comes from heritage and ethnicity. The fact that she has chosen a name for her daughter in Jamaican patois might be one indicator. Another is that Clara quietly despairs over her daughter's social circle, which is very much 'English' and 'white':

(...) Clara knew she was not in a position to preach. Still, she made no attempt to disguise her disappointment or the aching sadness. From Irie's bedroom shrine of green-eyed Hollywood idols to the gaggle of white friends who regularly trooped in and out of her bedroom, Clara saw an ocean of pink skins surrounding her daughter and she feared the tide that would take her away (328).

Even if she has some worries and at times experiences what Elaine Childs terms 'hybridity anxiety', Clara is usually at ease in Britain (8). In addition to the possible reasons pointed to above, some of the cause may lie in the fact that she seems to have broken loose from her past, including her family's religion. This makes her into a contrasting character to Samad: Whereas he is working hard at including religion in his identity, Clara invests a lot of effort in avoiding any hint of religion in hers. She avoids it anxiously, "hold[ing] her breath when passing churches the same way adolescent vegetarians scurry by butchers" and "avoid[ing] Kilburn on a Saturday for fear of streetside preachers on their upturned apple crates" (395). Her opposition to religion may also help explain why she has refused Hortense any contact with her daughter Irie when she was little. When adolescent Irie stays for a few months with her grandmother due to a conflict with her parents, Clara tells her mother off about religion: "Hortense, I don't want you filling her head with a whole load of nonsense. You hear me? Your mother was fool to it, and then you were fool to it, but the buck stopped with me and it ain't going no further" (394). Passages such as these might reveal more than an opposition to her mother's religion. They

may also point to a vulnerability in Clara that might stem from a general lack of reflection on the past and how it affects her.

Unlike Samad, who is preoccupied with stories of Bengal and Mangal Pande, Clara seems heavily invested in the present. She does not discuss Jamaica or her background much with Irie, and does not spend time reflecting on her 'roots'. Clara embraces hybridity, while Samad stubbornly refuses it as best as he can. Clara's version of a hybrid identity, however, appears to come from her actively moving away from her Jamaican roots. She willingly lets go of her vernacular, "filling in all her consonants" when she and Archie move into their new home as newlyweds (65). The narrator remarks that "She was already some way to losing her accent and she liked to work on it at every opportunity," though "she always dropped into the vernacular when she was excited or pleased about something" (65- 66). She substitutes her Jamaican patois with more standard English in her eagerness to fit in, which might imply that she is not at ease with her background, or that she reacts to the signals sent to her by the majority population.

Another indication of her being not completely at ease in the 'black' and Jamaican part of her identity materializes later, when she meets middle class and 'white' Joyce Chalfen around the time when Irie spends a lot of time in the Chalfen home. Here, Clara lets herself down by suggesting that it is the English on her side that has made Irie so intelligent: "(...) it was probably Captain Charlie Durham. He taught my grandmother all she knew. A good English education. Lord knows, I can't think who else it could be" (355). Joyce Chalfen thinks in terms of essentialist identity traits and 'blood' when she asks Clara the question, and Clara, on her part, answers by applying the same way of thinking. Clara also readily chooses the English side of her ancestry to explain Irie's intelligence. The whole incident fills her with frustration afterwards, as she has said it against her better judgement: "Why had she said Captain Charlie Durham? That was a downright lie. (...) Captain Charlie Durham was a no-good djam fool bwoy" (355).

Clara's reactions may indicate she easily reverts to essentialist notions of identity when she is under pressure, and also that she has internalized that what is English, 'genetically', is better than anything Jamaican. She has accepted this way of thinking despite the fact that she and her daughter defy traditional, or 'pure', essentialist notions of what 'Jamaican' or 'English' mean, and despite the fact that in

the case of her grandfather, his 'Englishness' did not make him superior to Jamaicans.

On the whole, though, Clara is content, living her life peacefully. Her cutting ties with the past and religion makes it both desirable as well as possible for her to assimilate, making her situation very different from Samad's. Furthermore, a juxtaposition of Clara's construction of identity with that of Irie's more troubled one demonstrates that there is no predestined path in assimilation processes: There is, for example, no guarantee that the process will run more smoothly for the second generation. In the case of Clara and Irie, there is also a notable physical difference between them that most likely contributes to their diverging experiences, a point that will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

Even if much of Clara's life is without friction, it is noteworthy that some of Clara's moments of unease stem from the fact that she has an unresolved connection to the past. This is illustrated in her almost non-existing relationship with Hortense and her unsettled feelings on religion. Her disconnection to her own family history might also be regarded as the cause behind her ill-considered remarks on Captain Durham in the conversation with Joyce Chalfen; remarks that instantly make her fret. These glimpses of discomfort may represent, perhaps, a warning about what Rogers refers to as 'the imposing presence of history': Her interpretation is that the novel in some cases demonstrates that history, "it appears, cannot be denied, or it will force itself on those attempting to ignore it" (52). Moreover, even if Clara does not reflect on it herself, the conscious decision to change her vernacular means that she has chosen to remove an important piece of herself in order to construct her hybrid identity. Whether this is good or bad, necessary or unnecessary, are questions that are left unanswered in the novel.

2.4 Alsana

Alsana comes to Britain with her middle-aged husband Samad as a twenty-year old woman in the early 1970s (12). She is physically slight and represents a 'girl-wife' in terms of her years (51, 61, 66). Her point of departure is not the best in terms of power. She is an 'other', like her husband, being a Muslim immigrant from

Bangladesh, but additionally, she is meant to be inferior to her husband. She is younger than him, and was promised to him even before she was born as part of old, patriarchal traditions in her mother country (98).

Despite of Alsana's size, age and situation, she soon reveals herself to be a strong-willed character with 'shrewd eyes' (12). Samad, who had expected his wife to be young and impressionable, with a body – and a certain body, with “enormous melons” – for him to control, gets nothing of the kind (97; O'Leary 47). At one stage, when he fails to secure a pay rise, he reflects that his wife “was not as meek as he had assumed when they married” (60). Contemplating how she will take the news, he worries about how she “was prone to moments, even fits – yes, fits was not too strong a word – of rage” (61). In the following row, before she leaves the house, there are arguments, ended by her smashing dinner plates on the floor, and punching him “full square in the stomach” (61-62).

Alsana quickly assumes control over her own body: After having become pregnant, she denies Samad access to her body in at least one, peculiar way, as he is not allowed to attend ultrasound check-ups with her. To Clara, she says that “He didn't see anything. He wasn't there. A woman has to have the private things - a husband needn't be involved in body-business, in a lady's ... *parts*” (75). By doing so, she is empowered: It gives her “a material means of leveraging power in a relationship that is culturally predisposed to be patriarchal,” O'Leary argues (47). When it comes to her unborn children, she is also in control of names, despite advising Clara that husbands should have a say. Alsana wants “Meena and Malānā, if they are girls. If boys: Magid and Millat. Ems are good. Ems are strong” (75). Alsana also gradually puts on a lot of weight, to which Samad reacts negatively: “Look at you, look at the state of you! Look how *fat* you are!” and first grabbing a piece of her, then releasing it “as if it would infect him” (198). This passage suggests that Samad wants to control the body of his wife, though he does not succeed, argues O'Leary (48).

Alsana also surprises Samad with her assertiveness in the aftermath of him, without consulting her, having sent one of their sons, Magid, to Bangladesh. She carries out “a passive action of protest” that lasts for eight years (424-425; Fernández, “Exploring Hybridity 149). During those years of “*exquisite revenge*”, she typically gives him answers like “Maybe, Samad Miah, maybe not,” or “possibly,

Samad Miah,” continuing until “she was paid in full with the return of her number-one-son-eldest-by-two-minutes (...)” (213-214). Alsana’s perseverance in standing her ground for eight years must mean she has turned out very differently from what Samad once expected.

When it comes to Alsana’s approach to living in a multicultural neighbourhood and meeting other ethnicities, she at first appears rather sceptical. This is hinted at when Archie and Clara marry, and Alsana seems disapproving of Clara (51). When the two women accidentally meet another time, Alsana thinks to herself that “Black people are often friendly,” a thought that fits well with the observation from the narrator that she “liked to single out one specimen for spiritual forgiveness” from every minority (65). Eventually Alsana loosens up, however, and she and Clara become friends, helped by the fact that Alsana and Samad move into the same neighbourhood.

When Alsana and Samad move to “the wrong side of Willesden High Road,” it represents a step up from living “on the wrong side of Whitechapel” (55). Alsana is content with their move to Willesden:

(...) it was a nice area; she couldn’t deny it as she stormed towards the high road, avoiding trees, where previously, Whitechapel, she avoided flung-out mattresses and the homeless. It would be good for the child, she couldn’t deny it. Alsana had a deep-seated belief that living near green spaces was morally beneficially for the young, and there to her right was Gladstone Park, a sweeping horizon of green named after the Liberal Prime Minister (...), and in the Liberal tradition it was a park without fences, unlike the more affluent Queens Park (...). Willesden was not as pretty as Queens Park, but it was a nice area (62).

If she is happy with the middle-of-the road quality of Willesden, she does not find it any more open-minded than anywhere else. With reference to the racism and the riots she experienced while in Whitechapel in the aftermath of Enoch Powell’s *Rivers of Blood*-speech⁶, she seems to take a pragmatic stance on matters of difference in Willesden, thinking it all boils down to numbers (62-63):

⁶ "Enoch Powell". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. February 7, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Enoch-Powell>.

She was shrewd. She saw what this was. 'Liberal? Hosh-kosh nonsense!' No one was more liberal than anyone else anywhere anyway. It was only here, in Willesden, there was not just enough of any one thing to gang up against any other thing and send it running to the cellars where windows were smashed (63).

Alsana needs "a little bit of peace and quiet" while pregnant, and Willesden provides her with this. It is greener than Whitechapel, and there is less trouble than elsewhere, but not because the people of Willesden are more tolerant than people elsewhere, she finds. They "all looked at her strangely," here, too (63). Alsana's rational – or cynical – assessment of Willesden is that its people allow diversity because they have to, not necessarily because they want to.

Alsana finds her own way into multicultural Britain. As noticed by Samad, she becomes a rather hybrid character, and in ways that he does not approve of, accusing her of having 'swallowed' England whole (199). He is not mistaken if he thinks Alsana has turned out more hybrid than him, and maybe, she always was. From early on, it is obvious that she is more flexible, and one of the ways in which she differs from him, is that she does not try to adhere to religion. The narrator comments with a touch of humour that Alsana "liked to show people her respectability, and besides, she was really very traditional, very religious, lacking nothing except for faith" (64). During a heavy storm, when Samad suggests they pray, Alsana tells him off, saying to Clara that "please remind my husband that he is not Mr Manilow and he does not have the songs that make the whole world sing" (228). Moreover, Alsana is against any type of fundamentalism, on the grounds of which she dismisses Millat's membership in a Muslim and fundamentalist group as its members are "nothing but thugs in a gang roaming Kilburn like all the other lunatics" (442). Magdalena Maczynska takes this to mean that Alsana wants to lead a life guided by tradition, but not by religion (130). Alsana's indifference to religion is likely to be something that enhances her chances of integrating into a multicultural, British society.

Another fact that makes Alsana differ from Samad is that she does not believe in the purity of culture: When they quarrel over what represents the real Bengali culture, she looks it up in an encyclopedia, finding that there is no 'one' Bengali identity, and that it is all a mix of different ethnicities. She says that "It just goes to

show... you go back and back and back and it's still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy-tale!" (236). She also opposes Samad in matters of cultural and religious difference by saying that "I live. I let live" (235). This remark suggests that Alsana sees hybridity as something ever-present, and therefore, as something one simply has to find a way to deal with (Rogers 58). Another sign that she views hybridity in a matter-of-fact way, are her thoughts on what she terms as *involvement* in all relationships, including those of a multicultural society:

Involved happened over a long period of time, pulling you in like quicksand. *Involved* is what befell the moon-faced Alsana Begum and the handsome Samad Miah one week after they'd been pushed into a Delhi breakfast room together and informed they were to marry. (...) *Involved* swallowed up a girl called up a girl called Ambrosia and a boy called Charlie (yes, Clara had told her *that* sorry tale) (...). Involved is neither good, nor bad. It is just a consequence of living, a consequence of occupation and immigrants, of empires and expansion, of living in each other's pockets ... one becomes involved and it is a long trek back to being uninvolved. (...) The years pass, and the mess accumulates and here we are. (...) (439-440).

In line with some of her reflections on hybridity, Alsana, unlike Samad, realizes that the second generation will turn out differently from their parents, something she is trying to come to terms with. While pregnant with her sons, she tells Clara that the babies' "roots will always be tangled," but also that "roots get dug up" (80). In a quarrel with Samad over Magid, who does not chose the path Samad wants for him, Alsana tells him that "You say we have no control, yet you always try to control everything! Let go, Samad Miah. Let the boy go. He is second generation – he was born here – naturally he will do things differently. You can't plan everything" (289).

Yet, Alsana is not 'swallowing' Britain and the British whole, despite Samad's allegations. Even if Samad is the one who is worst afflicted with 'hybridity anxiety', Alsana is prone to it in moments, too (8). The narrator remarks on Alsana's anxiety that

(...) it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, *disappearance*.

Even the unflappable Alsana Iqbal would regularly wake up in a puddle of her own sweat after a night visited by visions of Millat (genetically BB; where B stands for Bengali-ness) marrying someone called Sarah (aa where 'a' stands for Aryan), resulting a child called Michael (Ba), who in turn marries somebody called Lucy (aa), leaving Alsana with a legacy of unrecognizable great-grandchildren (Aaaaaaa!), their Bengali-ness thoroughly diluted, genotype hidden by phenotype (327).

Moreover, Alsana worries over the fact that Millat spends so much time with the Chalfens, and that “they’re Englishifying him completely!” (345). Her opinion on British colonialism is that “The English are the only people (...) who want to teach you and steal from you at the same time,” the comment at the same time conveying her feelings for what the Chalfens are doing to her son (356). Alsana is uneasy about how “A little English education can be a dangerous thing,” which McMann interprets as showing how Alsana also has a fear of cultural hybridity in addition to the fear of genetic hybridity demonstrated in the longer quote above (356; McMann 627).

Alsana is a pragmatist, but living in a multicultural society has its challenges for Alsana, too. Though she generally does not adhere to essentialist views on identity, and tries to be open to change in the next generation, she cannot entirely avoid some ‘hybridity anxiety’ (Childs 8). However, being less rigid than Samad in terms of tradition, religion and ‘blood’, her life in Britain is an easier one than Samad’s.

Alsana is, like Clara and Archie, able to live with diversity. Alsana represents a contrast to the fundamentalists of the novel, as her “idiosyncratic, flexible and highly individualistic approach to religion represents the novel’s preference for heterodox solutions and identities” (Maczynska 130). However, where Clara does not seem to think much about it, and Archie just wants everyone to live together “in peace or harmony or something,” Alsana is much more realist and observant of what multiculturalism and hybridity entail (190). Furthermore, her views on these aspects may be seen as supporting the novel’s message about the inherent complexity in

hybridity, one that is “denying neither past or present, acknowledging the variety of influences that come into play and the mixed emotions concerning both mother country and adoptive country” as Rogers argues (58).

2.5 Concluding Remarks

The four characters who form the parent generation have various ways of settling down and approaching their identity and hybridity. They show us different ways to belong, of which Samad’s is the one that is most troubled.

Samad’s identity is rooted in a historical space that contests his sense of belonging to Britain. He fears that his children will have no sense of belonging to the ‘homeland’ and its culture, thereby severing one of the bonds between parents and children. In spite of all his ties to Bengal/Bangladesh, he maintains a strong friendship with Archie, even if there is no connection in terms of ‘blood’, ethnicity or culture. Their connection proves that it is possible to overcome such boundaries. Moreover, Samad may not feel at home in Britain, but he has settled down in one very important space, in O’Connell’s, with Archie.

Alsana has attained a hybrid identity with the help of her pragmatic stance in which she values some traditions of her culture, but without staying in the past or believing in essentialist notions of identity and the purity of culture. However, even for the ‘unflappable’ Alsana, her best efforts cannot alleviate the fears of the genetic and cultural hybridity that is in store for her descendants. Her more conscious reflections on ‘involvement’ seem to carry much of the novel’s message about hybridity and multiculturalism.

Clara takes the easy route to hybridity, choosing to leave her past behind. Eventually, her unresolved past comes back to bite her. The stories of Clara and Samad illustrate how Clara’s disconnection from history might be almost as problematic as Samad’s all-consuming connection to it.

Archie is hybrid in the sense that he is open to heterogeneity, providing the necessary acceptance for a multicultural society to work. He is flexible, lives in the present, and does not entertain any essentialist views on identity. His quiet acceptance of difference is part of what makes a multicultural society viable.

3. 'Retrieving Misdirected Mail', 'Neither One Thing Nor the Other' and 'More English than the English'⁷: Constructing Identity in the Younger Generation - Irie, Millat and Magid

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks (326).

As the narrator implies at the beginning of the passage above, for the kids growing up in Willesden and the surrounding areas, these suburbs represent "hybridized metropolitan sites that produce variety and surprise" and "joy in multitude" as Pope argues (171-172). This is particularly true for their outdoor, social spaces. Their growing up in Willesden is a depiction of hybridity as an established fact. It seems a simple enough task for Irie, Magid and Millat, therefore, to grow up and form their identity here, as the multicultural quality of Willesden opens the space up for adjustments, claims Fernández, much in line with Pope ("Representing Third Spaces" 153). Even so, as the narrator hints at in the last sentence, the background for this hybridity lies in the trauma of migration. Furthermore, at the end of the passage, not quoted above, there is also mention of the potential threat posed by violent racists; "the young white men" who "will roll out at closing time (...) with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist" (327).

The 'joy in multitude' is a part of growing up in Willesden, but so are the potential difficulties. Like their parents, Irie, Millat and Magid live 'in-between' two countries. The in-between situation of the young, however, differ from their parents' in how they are presumably more strongly attached to their current spaces. The young all wish for assimilation, and the tension between past and present spaces is likely to be less acute for them than for their parents (McMann 625; Rogers 59). Still, they have to navigate two spaces and two cultures in some way, a fact which most

⁷ 351, 400, 406.

likely produces some kind of hybrid identity in them. No matter how hybrid or assimilated they become, though, their ethnicity and skin colour will indicate to others that their family background is found elsewhere. On top of all these issues, they are plagued with the same problems of adolescence as their peers, as Rogers points out, which makes the situation fertile ground for problems of identity formation for the young (59).

Irie, Millat and Magid of the two families are of similar age and share the characteristic of being non-white. The similarity of their situation, with the exception of Magid spending his adolescence in Bangladesh, gives them a special role in the novel. This generation directs us “to the importance of individual agency in developing a relationship to history” as each of them acquire cultural values selectively in their search for “conceptual tools to master their current situation,” according to Gunning (135). Millat and Magid even have a further role to play: Their being identical twins, separated when young, makes them interesting examples in the nature vs nurture debate (423; Carrera Suárez 180; McMann 617; Maczynska 129; O’Leary 44).

The process of forming an identity with the tensions inherent in their situation of being ‘second generation’ will eventually work out differently for Irie, Millat and Magid. Carrera Suárez, McMann and Siccardi, as well as Tancke, have addressed how Irie’s problems are related to her racial, or biracial, identity and how she has to work hard to come to terms with her hybrid identity and find her place in the world. Gunning and McMann, as well as Tancke, have discussed Millat’s problems in coming to terms with hybridity and finding somewhere to belong, and how this is lived out in a “particularly destructive fashion,” as Tancke notes (33).

3.1 Irie

Irie appears fleetingly in the novel as a child, but her identity is explored in more detail as she reaches adolescence. When she is introduced as a teenager, she is depicted as “hunched over her notepad, writing her diary obsessively in the manner of thirteen-year-olds” (224). She appears a precocious girl, who is not afraid of talking back to her elders, causing Alsana to remark that Irie has “Swallowed an

encyclopedia and a gutter at the same time” (241). Her name means “everything *OK, cool, peaceful*” in Jamaican patois, according to her mother, but Irie’s teenage years are anything but calm (75).

Irie grows up in Willesden and relates to the spaces she uses there, but she also identifies with Britain at large, and especially with its beauty standards. The issue of racial difference and how it impacts on the body is most clearly demonstrated through Irie’s biracial, but still black body (McMann 631). Irie is hybrid, not only culturally, like Millat and Magid, but also genetically. Irie’s difficulties as young are closely related to her physical appearance (Rogers 59). She is a big girl and is connected to her foreign ancestry through her looks, with her Afro hair and her “Jamaican hourglass heavy” (266). When she regards herself, she sees that “There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land” (266). Whereas Millat and Magid seem to be somewhat free in constructing their identities through their clothing and their speech, with Millat additionally being depicted as beautiful, Irie’s situation appears to be worse (McMann 626; Carrera Suárez 183).

Irie believes herself to be ugly, to be “all *wrong*” (268). Her issues might have to do with her being partly black, but also with her being a woman, as McMann observes: Advertisements impose standards on women’s bodies, and “the images of white European standards that surround Irie affect wider perceptions and understandings of race” (626). What Irie really wants, is the look of the ‘English Rose’, and her feeling of being ‘all wrong’ propels her into an Afro hair salon (268, 272). The hair salon is a crucial setting as this is where we witness Irie’s struggles with the genetic part of her identity. She enters it “intent upon transformation, intent upon fighting her genes,” and she wants “Straight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakeable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair. With a fringe” (273). Her attempts at assimilation and incorporating European beauty standards involves taking active steps to change an essential characteristic based on a cultural construct, namely that some aspects of ‘white’ looks are better.

Irie’s ‘wrongness’ is contextualised in the narrator’s commentary on the hair salon, where the experience of getting one’s hair done differs wildly between the men and the women: “The male section was all laughter, all talk, all play” (275). For the women, however, the hair salon “was a deathly thing” in which a daily battle was

fought; “here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damndest to beat each curly hair into submission” (275). Doing their hair costs these women time, pain and money. The assimilation process, therefore, seems to affect many women differently compared to men in that it is a very tangible thing, involving their bodies. For Irie, the problems might be worsened by the fact that she is biracial, as she has no image of what her “hybrid and racialized body might be – other than not white,” which makes her rely on the images of white beauty, as McMann points out (629). Irie’s situation illustrates in a very obvious manner how identity is affected by the disruptions caused by colonialism and migration, in line with postcolonial discourse.

Irie’s struggles seem to be harder than her mother’s. Why this is so, we do not know, but Clara is beautiful, she is more definitively ‘black’, and she has probably had other expectations to life than her daughter. The cases of Clara and Irie might illustrate that living in a diverse and changing society, but one which is still predominantly ‘white’, may produce different outcomes for the people involved (McMann 629). Moreover, Irie’s looks are also important in another way that complicates the matter. She wants to look good for her love interest Millat, but ultimately, looking good for him will have something to do with ethnicity and class, as he typically chooses middle-class, white, English girls (269, 286). This is a factor that does not affect Irie’s mother as she does not aspire to any middle-class values or aesthetics.

Another important setting for Irie in the vicinity of Willesden is Glenard Oak Comprehensive. The school is a space where Irie spends her teenage years and observes Millat’s popularity with white, middle-class girls, an observation which has impact on how she regards her own looks. The school serves as a sort of geographical microcosm as Rogers observes (51). It consists of two buildings for which

a bridge was not enough to make the two places one, or to slow down the student body’s determination to splinter and factionalize. The school had learnt to its cost that you cannot unite a thousand children under one Latin tag (school code: Laborare est Orare, To Labour is to Pray); kids are like pissing cats (...) marking off land within land (290).

The school is marked by difference, both in terms of ethnicities and class, but also in how kids settle in different parts of the grounds according to their interests. However, there is also unity in the fact that the young ‘inhabit’ this shared location during school hours. Moreover, there is unity represented by cigarettes: “And everybody, everybody smoking fags, fags, fags, (...) celebrating their power to bring people together across cultures and faiths, but mostly just smoking them (...)” (292). As elsewhere in the novel, people may differ, and they may ‘factionalize’, but yet they are brought together in this “haphazard middleness” that Willesden and the surrounding areas represent, and often by random events or traits, as in this case, the craving of fags (Pope 171).

The school is connected to colonialism as well as to Irie’s family through its founder, Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, who tried to bring cultures together in an effort marked by good will, but also by condescending colonialist ideas (304-305). The same Sir Glenard is also described to have sexually assaulted Irie’s great-grandmother during an earthquake which led to his death moments later in Kingston in 1907 (306, 361). The school is tainted by its colonial legacy, and as such it brings in postcolonial discourse by reminding us of the disruption and the oppression colonialism brought with it. It also provides a small insight into how the past informs the present by highlighting how Britain’s diversity is connected to the history of colonialism.

Glenard Oaks plays a role in putting Irie in touch with the Chalfen family, an event which has a significant impact on Irie’s identity formation. It is the school’s head teacher who strikes a deal with the Chalfens: Irie and Millat are to go their house after school regularly as it represents a “stable environment,” an idea which is reminiscent of Sir Glenard’s condescending colonialist ideas (303). The head teacher presents this as “people helping people (...) very much in the history, the spirit, the whole ethos of Glenard Oak, ever since Sir Glenard himself” (303).

When Irie – and Millat – start spending time with the Chalfens, it gives Irie an opportunity to compare her family situation with that of another family. She quickly realizes that “She just wanted to, well, kind of *merge* with them. She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfishness. The *purity* of it” (328). When she is offered a job by the father of the family, the scientist Marcus Chalfen, she takes it willingly, knowing that the job will connect her more closely to the family: “(...) she *wanted* (...) to be of

one flesh; separated from the chaotic, random flesh of her own family and transgenically fused with another. A unique animal. A new breed” (342). Irie wants more than just being connected to the Chalfens, she wants to ‘merge’ with them, thinking in terms of vocabulary both borrowed from the Bible related to marriage and from modern genetical engineering. Her desire to be ‘transgenically fused’ with the Chalfens hints to Marcus Chalfen’s creation of something ‘new’ and potentially promising, his genetically engineered FutureMouse©. The creation of the mouse, understood as a positive development by Marcus and his wife, must have positive connotations to Irie, too. Perhaps, as everything else in her life seems so chaotic, the connotations of control inherent in the creation of the mouse is what draws her in (Braun 224).

Again, a part of Irie’s issues – her desire to ‘merge’ or be ‘transgenically fused’ with the Chalfens - have to do with a yearning for something that transcends her genetic traits and her ethnicity. Again, it cannot be done, and in this case, she must know that it cannot. Yet, this time around, it is really about the culture that she observes in the Chalfens: She wants their perceived Englishness, their sophistication, assuredness and class. With the Chalfens, she is brought into the realm of the middle class for the first time, and she is very keen to embrace it: She observes “this strange and beautiful thing, the middle class, and experienced the kind of embarrassment that is actually intrigue, fascination” (321). The fact that the Chalfen clan were immigrants in Britain a few generations back is therefore perhaps of less importance to her. An alternative explanation, of course, is that they do not seem to be descendants of immigrants, as they are of European descent and are able to blend in, as opposed to Irie (McMann 623).

History and roots are complicated things for Irie (Rogers 59-60). Though she reacts to ‘the quagmire of the past’ in her own family, she also wants some roots. When she looks at the family tree of the Chalfens, she sees that they “actually *knew* who they were in 1675” (337). Her own family is a different story. “Archie Jones could give no longer record of his family than his father’s own haphazard appearance on the planet (...) circa 1895. (...) Clara knew a little about her grandmother (...). The rest was rumour, folk-tale and myth” (337-338). Irie, therefore has no proper access to her past as in her ancestors, a problem that is accentuated by her having little contact with her grandmother. This lack of contact might have left a void in Irie’s

identity, and especially so as it has left her without many 'black referents' to "value the significance of her hybrid identity," as Fernández sees it ("Exploring Hybridity" 149). Being a second-generation immigrant, Irie has 'unclear roots' and needs to consider her identity and find her place (Siccardi 224).

While Irie looks for a way to settle, she spends a lot of time in the Chalfen household, and it is the father, Marcus, who spends time with her and helps her learn (335). He undoubtedly has a large impact on her identity, as he educates her, employs her and points her toward a future career. Therefore, it is no surprise that his office holds some significance to her: "(...Marcus's study at the very top of the house (...) [was], by far her favourite room (...)" 335. His office serves as a contrast to her family home, as "It had no communal utility, no other purpose in the house apart from being Marcus's room (...). It wasn't like Clara's attic space, a Xanadu of crap (...). It wasn't like the spare room of immigrants, packed to the rafters with all that they have ever possessed (...)" (335-336).

The office is a space that contrasts with other spaces of the house, and its existence in a family home makes the whole house stand out, especially when compared to houses and flats of the working class and/or immigrants. It also has a sense of restricted access, it being Marcus's office and being placed at the top of the house. We may therefore, at least to some extent, regard it as a heterotopic space. Irie works there, but Magid becomes Marcus's wunderkind and thereby is the one who achieves real access (426). Marcus's choice of Magid as his protégéé might have to do with patriarchal ideas, as Carrera Suárez suggests, or it might have to do with Magid being especially talented, but this is not properly established in the novel (180). Either way, even if Irie stays on, she does not enjoy the same privileges as Magid. Her attempt to 'anchor' herself to the Chalfen home, to Marcus and his office, therefore, falls through.

One of the places Irie goes to in search of identity, is to her grandmother's flat in Lambeth after a fallout with her family. This is where she investigates her roots in Jamaica (402). By finding trinkets from Jamaica and reading in her grandmother's books,

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 (...) 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 (400).

Jamaica becomes a fictional construct in Irie's mind. It represents "the particular magic of homeland," and "its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginningest of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after the apocalypse. A blank page" (402). Her wish for Jamaica to represent a clean slate and a space free from history, may represent her wish for freedom "to forge her own unique identity," as Braun argues (229). Jamaica as a clean slate may also represent some kind of opposition to the focus on the past that permeates her father's and Samad's discussions. In a conversation she tells off both the families as she compares them to other types of families who are less concerned with the past:

'What a peaceful existence. What a *joy* their lives must be. They open a door and all they've got behind it is a bathroom or a lounge. Just neutral spaces. (...) I will put twenty quid down *now* that Samad is the only person in here who knows the inside bloody leg measurement of his great-grandfather. And do you know why they don't know? Because *it doesn't fucking matter*. As far as they're concerned, it's the *past*. (...) Lucky motherfuckers' (514-515).

Though Irie distances herself from the past in the quote above, and shows her yearning for neutral spaces, her story does not turn out to be completely in line with these sentiments. In the end, she does create some connections to the past, but in her own way. Irie's relation to a 'past' space might be compared to Samad's. Both of them construct a fictional image of a 'homeland' to support their identity formation. Samad seems to attach himself more and more to his fictional image of Bengal while staying on in London. Irie, however, eventually moves away from her dreamlike image of Jamaica by going to the real Jamaica. Irie and Samad also share another trait. They are both are very concerned about their bodies in a way that impacts on their identity, though Samad's issues are not expanded on in the same manner as Irie's.

Irie's development as a young woman has started with a period where she struggles with her body and her looks to the extent that it seems like self-alienation,

especially as these are traits that cannot be changed (Tancke 35). After the worst of this phase is over, she finds a temporary place among the Chalfens, who show her another way to live and think, and help her with her education. In that sense, they help her attain a more hybrid identity culturally, specifically in terms of gaining some of the cultural capital of the middle class (McMann 627). However, she is not 'really' a Chalfen and is, ultimately, a hired help. In addition – perhaps because she is a girl – she is written off in favour of Magid, who is the 'special' one (Carrera Suárez 180). The Chalfens, though important, are not a true part of Irie's 'becoming': She needs to go elsewhere and do other things, eventually, to find her place.

Irie grows to realize that she wants some access to her roots. This is something that she finds a version of in her grandmother's flat – even if it is a fictionalized history and image of Jamaica that is constructed there. Compared to the situation with her body and her looks earlier, as well as her place in the Chalfen household, Irie, in this new situation, seems to have agency and get what she needs. Not only has she left her parents' house in protest, she proceeds to actively 'lay claim to the past', in a language that signifies mastery and possession, as Tancke points out (36). This shows that she has come a long way from being 'all *wrong*'. Even if her image of Jamaica and the past is constructed, it is constructed by her, and as such, it helps her create an identity that is assertive.

The fact that Irie becomes more authoritative, is also illustrated by her involvement with Millat and Magid. She makes love with them both on the same night; first feverishly with Millat, then more aggressively with Magid (461-463). Crucially, the affair involving the two brothers will eventually make her a mother. The situation of Irie and her daughter directs us to new possibilities, and in a glimpse of the future, we see that Irie seems to 'become' herself in Jamaica: After being rootless, she eventually 'reinvents' herself and is well on her way to constructing some kind of identity that she can live with (Siccardi 224; McMann 631). The glimpse of Irie and her daughter 'seven years hence', and what it may represent, will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.

3.2 Millat

Millat and his twin brother Magid are Samad's and Alsana's sons. The two brothers are not alike, neither in terms of how they dress, nor of how they behave, with Millat being more outspoken and having more of a temper (134, 148, 163, 173). As the novel proceeds, we get more intimately acquainted with Millat's struggles than Magid's, as Magid is observed from far away, being sent away to Bangladesh by his father during his adolescence (McMann 628).

It is mainly through Millat's character that we witness the impact of racist discourse, often in an inner dialogue⁸. Millat's anger shows up in different stages of the novel, in which we do not necessarily know of the exact circumstances, only that racist discourse and a sense of exclusion seem to fuel his feelings of frustration (Gunning 131). These feelings are important for how Millat becomes part of the Raggistani subculture roaming the streets in Willesden, and later, a member of KEVIN, a fundamentalist Muslim group (Gunning 131).

Millat is streetwise and a leader type, and he is therefore no downtrodden victim, neither concerning exclusionist tendencies in society, nor concerning his father's dismissal of him as he refers to him as "*The Trouble with Millat*" (217). Millat knows that he is no 'follower', he is "a rudeboy, a badman (...) leading kids up hills to play football, (...) out of schools, into video shops" (217). He looks for danger and trouble in Willesden, and is "the BIGGEST and the BADDEST, living his young life in CAPITALS (...)" (218). He is also 'in the know' about what is cool, and he has a compilation of 'treasures' from Western pop culture, ranging from the *Born to Run* – album by Springsteen, a De Niro - poster from *Taxi Driver* and a pair of black converse baseball shoes (222).

His Raggastanis is a "hybrid thing," combining languages in the group's slang with a philosophy including Allah "as a hard-as-fuck geezer," Kung Fu, and "a smattering of Black Power" (231). One of the ways the Raggistanis show that they will not be 'fucked with' is by heading to Bradford to take part in a protest; the burning of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Millat tells his Raggistani crew that the

⁸ There are also other characters who experience racism, like Mo, the butcher, but he is not a central character. Alsana also refers to the riots following Enoch Powell's speech, 'Rivers of Blood', in the late 1960s, but the incident does not seem to do much to impact on her identity.

book is “a fucking insult!” and that “we’ve taken it too long in this country. And now we’re getting it from our own, man” (233). Through this incident, we learn more about Millat’s sense of exclusion: He does not know the book, really, but “He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he (...) took other people’s jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; (...) that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep (...)” (233-234).

Even if the Raggastanis have been formed as a reaction to racist ideas, the group itself represents a very hybrid and fluid type of identity as opposed to any “pure or monolithic signifiers of race and ethnicity” (McMann 628). The fluidity that is found in the Raggistani ‘brand’ is in line with the fluidity that characterizes Millat’s identity, having grown up in a London suburb (McMann 628). As Millat grows, his success increases. He is a “social chameleon” who “had to please all of the people all of the time” (239). He has “tribes throughout the school, throughout North London,” being “so big in Cricklewood, in Willesden, in West Hampstead, the summer of 1990, that nothing he did later in life could top it” (269).

Part of his success is based on his fluidity and his ability to socialize with all kinds of people among his peers. Another part of it has to do with his looks: In Millat, there was “(...) beauty parodying itself; (...) chocolate eyes with a reflective green sheen (...); irresistible smile (...)” (269). In terms of attracting the other sex, Millat is seemingly not restricted by race or ethnicity: “In Glenard Oak Comprehensive, black, Pakistani, Greek, Irish – these were races. But those with sex appeal (...) were a species all of their own” (269). However, the narrator comments that he represents a “dark prince” for the middle-class girls who lust after him and that he is “Everybody’s bit of rough” (269-270). These aspects, which might refer to his behaviour or his ethnicity, or both, are also part of what makes him attractive. The same goes for the vulnerability in him, probably caused by him living in-between, which makes the girls love him even more: “And underneath it all, there remained an ever present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere” (269).

Millat’s good looks and success with the girls probably make Millat more at ease with his skin colour compared to Irie (McMann 626). His looks do not, however, release him from the pain of not truly belonging, as it seems he will remain a ‘Paki’ in the eyes of just enough people in society. His sense of exclusion does not seem to

stem from his experiences in the neighbourhoods of North West London, because in these spaces, he is king. It seems likely, therefore, that some of it originates from experiences elsewhere or from the public discourse and its stereotypical representation of certain immigrant groups (Bergholtz 548; Tancke 34).

Spurred by the same uneasy feeling of not truly belonging that made him part of the Raggistanis, Millat later joins KEVIN, a fundamentalist Muslim group with a peculiar anglicized or 'white' name (Bergholtz 548). When Millat first hears of KEVIN from a former friend, he reacts positively by saying that "So: there's a fucking spiritual war going on – that's fucking crazy! About time - we need to make our mark in this bloody country" (295). He is also taken in by his former friend's clothes that are 'gangster style'. This reference to Millat's favourite kind of films about mafia gangsters indicate that there are also other aspects than exclusion at play in his joining KEVIN (294). "For Millat, Islam is an über-Mafia," claims Childs (10). The fact that he later thinks about how he joined KEVIN "because he loved clans (and the outfit and the bow tie), and he loved clans at war," appears to strengthen Child's interpretation of the reasons behind his attachment to the group (442).

Some of the reasons that made Millat a member of the Raggistanis are valid for his joining KEVIN, too. In addition to the clothes and the style, both groups represent a reaction against something rather than being for something. As Bergholtz claims, for many of KEVIN's members, the reaction against racism seems to hold more importance for the members than adherence to religion per se (546). Maczynska, too, leaning on Esra Mirze's discussion of the novel, argues that for Millat, religion is used for a non-devotional purpose, as a means of "forging new modes of belonging", a view that Childs supports (Maczynska 128; Childs 8). Childs sees Millat's religion as 'diluted', as his commitment to KEVIN is not really a commitment to Islam, she claims, basing her argument partly on the following passage in which he thinks of his 'religion':

Worst of all was the anger inside him. Not the righteous anger of a man of God, but the seething, violent anger of a gangster (...) determined to beat the rest. And if the game was God, if the game was a fight against the West (...), he was determined to win it. (...) It pissed him off that these were not pious thoughts. But they were in the right ball park, weren't they (447)?

Though some of the reasons for joining the Raggistanis also apply to KEVIN, KEVIN represents something different than the Raggistanis as well. KEVIN's Islam has to do with the past as it is linked to the historical space of Bengal and Millat's family background, if not in way that Millat's father appreciates. KEVIN's outlook also connect to the past as its members goes back to old texts and old ideas to "justify their absolutist views," much in the same way that racial purists go to old ideas for theirs (Bergholtz 549). Religion is one of the oldest types of storytelling there is and has clear prescriptions for human behaviour. Even if KEVIN 'is made in the West', it wants to rid itself of the bad and modern influences of the West. The fundamentalist interpretation of the word of the Qur'an that KEVIN dictates is very much at odds with Millat's lifestyle. He has been a hybrid character, but now, "the group demands that he change who he is and deny the kind of fluidity that defined him earlier" (McMann 628).

Millat is well aware of the troubles involved in him being part of KEVIN. For even if he is good at his role for KEVIN - as good as Brando, Pacino and Liotta in their gangster roles, as he sees it - he understands that "therein lay the problem. (...) Purging oneself of the West" (445). Whatever he seems to be doing, the opening line of *Goodfellas* often runs through his head. The only thing he manages to do about this sad fact, is that he tries to substitute 'Muslim' for 'gangster': "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a Muslim" (446). 'Purging oneself of the West' is no easy feat for Millat. Western culture, as exemplified by these films, is ingrained him. Despite his best efforts, he is not able to stay away from sex either. This is shown with heavy use of irony as his issue with sex is solved by paying "occasional visits to one Tanya Chapman (...) who understood the delicate nature of his dilemma and would give him a thorough blow job without requiring Millat to touch her at all" (444).

KEVIN illustrates the impossibility of Millat's situation, being both past and present, one foot in the West, one foot in the East, being true to the word of the Qur'an, yet being tempted by sex and Western cultural influences. With KEVIN, he can 'go back' in an attempt to find more solid ground for his identity, but his hybridity and the life he has lived until the present, always interferes. Millat seems to have wanted to assimilate, being very preoccupied with Western culture, and by formerly being able to balance being Asian and being British (McMann 625, 627-628).

However, perhaps because he is labelled 'Paki' and becomes aware of racist discourse and stereotypes, he is forced to reflect on essentialist identity markers and his heritage, aspects which contribute to bringing him into the arms of KEVIN.

Millat might be said to live in an "in-between space of self-definition", states Fernández ("Exploring Hybridity" 148). He is not able to resolve his identity in a way that enables him to settle and belong. "Millat was neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian, Englishman or Bengali; he lived for the in-between, he lived up to his middle name, *Zulfikar*, the clashing of two swords," as the narrator remarks (351).

In addition to being a second-generation immigrant and facing racist discourse in society, Millat has also experienced at the trauma of being separated from his twin brother at a young age. This fact may have compounded his feeling of unbelonging and living in-between. "(...) Millat didn't need to go back home; he stood schizophrenic, one foot in Bengal and one in Willesden. In his mind he was as much there as he was here. He did not require a passport to live in two places at once, he needed no visa to live his brother's life and his own (he was a twin after all)" (219). After the separation, things seem to become more troubled, at least for Millat, who is the one we observe more closely (Childs 10). We do not know, but the years of separation are likely to have affected the brothers' construction of identities in their formative teenage years, and also the way they relate to each other as young adults. They do not get along, one part of it being how they have chosen opposing 'ideologies' during their years apart; Millat religion, and Magid scientific rationalism and the law.

Millat is somewhat alienated from his family. Like Irie, he spends a lot of time at the Chalfens, and though it does not seem to have the same impact on him as on Irie, it might have driven him further away from his own family. This is, at least, how Alsana sees it (441). Samad rejects Millat, not even appreciating the fact that Millat becomes Muslim (407). Interestingly, though, some of Millat's internal conflicts resemble his father's. Their adherence to versions of the same religion, with some of the same penchant for going back to the past, make them more alike than either of them would like to admit. While Samad does not approve of Millat's ways, Millat does, in fact, fulfil many of Samad's desires to succeed, for example by being a

leading figure among his peers and by being very attractive without the restrictions of a 'buggered hand' like Samad (O'Leary 45).

Millat is a hybrid character, but the problems he struggles with, highlights some of the difficulties involved in living in-between like he does. The way he constructed his identity as younger, partly through being part of the Raggistanis, was not so problematic, but it becomes more so in his involvement with KEVIN. His membership in the group means that he is turning to fundamentalist ideas and the past to construct a solid identity. This he does in a manner that is at odds with society and his family, and also with himself and who he has become after having lived his whole life in western society, which makes his strategy reactionary (Childs 10). The tendency in him to live out his sense of 'unbelonging' in a "particularly destructive fashion," as Tancke observes, only becomes stronger towards the climax of the novel (33). Millat's part of the events that play out just before and during the climax of novel, and how it connects him to the past, will be discussed in chapter four.

3.3 Magid

Like the two other kids of the same generation, we do not hear much about Magid as a young child. Magid also stays out of the picture for much of his teenage years, spending them in Bangladesh to get the 'right' upbringing, which means that we do not build the same familiarity with Magid's character as with the others (McMann 628). Before this happens, though, we learn that at the age of nine, Magid and Millat have already parted ways in terms of style. Whereas Millat is fashionable in Nike-apparel, Magid is "in grey pullover, grey shirt and black tie with his shiny black shoes and NHS specs perched upon his nose, like some dwarf librarian," wearing his "thick black hair slicked into an unappealing middle-parting (134, 149). He is also more of an 'academic' than his brother, as is observed by his mother and his teacher alike, and to which the narrator comments that he is "A strange child with a cold intellect" (134-135).

Magid also goes through a phase at the same age when he calls himself 'Mark Smith' (151). The name is a bland name with no identity except for it being Anglicized (McMann 625). It is an ineffective attempt at assimilation, since a name alone cannot

make Magid blend in (McMann 628). Nevertheless, it shows the strength of Magid's impulse to be something different than what he is:

Magid really wanted to be in some other family. He wanted to own cats and not cockroaches, he wanted his mother to make the music of the cello, not the sound of the sewing machine; (...) he wanted to go on biking holidays to France, not day-trips to Blackpool to visit aunties; (...) he wanted his father to be a doctor, not a one-handed waiter (...) (151).

As the quote demonstrates, Magid does not only want to escape his immigrant background, he also wants to join the ranks of the middle class. Magid's wishes may, in fact, be more about social mobility than they are about race (McMann 627). In any case, he is on his way to join the middle class later on, by way of his choice of studies as well as becoming the protégé of the scientist Marcus Chalfen.

Magid's identity seems to follow the trajectory that is established in the depiction of him as a young boy. As we get a sense of in his childhood, with his peculiar dress sense and his wish to be called 'Mark Smith', Magid is thoroughly English, and an old-school one at that. His parents' friends and family have observed it, too, seeing that the Iqbals have a son who speaks "like the Prince of Wales" (212). On Magid's arrival at the airport when he returns to Britain, Marcus Chalfen notes that his clothes are "entirely white" and of "good materials, well made and soft" (423). As McMann notes, this makes him look "more like Joseph Conrad's head accountant than the prodigal Bengali son returning to England" (627). The assimilation process, which he started in Britain as little, seems to have continued from afar during his years in Bangladesh.

Alsana, when commenting on her newly arrived son to Clara, tells of his "stiff upper lip," of how "One hardly likes to touch him" and of how it "is like sitting down to breakfast with David Niven" (424). Samad wants nothing to do with this young man "with his bow-ties and his Adam Smith and his E. M. bloody Forster and his atheism" (424)! Samad is upset by Magid choosing science over faith and English over Bangladeshi culture. To Irie, he complains of how the boy has turned out "More English than the English" and has come home a "pukka Englishman, white-suited, silly wig lawyer" (406-407). Magid has deviated from Samad's plan entirely. Samad, who criticizes Magid for failing to understand that "essentially we are weak, that we

are not in control,” cannot see the irony of failing to adhere to the principle himself when he tries to control Magid (288; O’Leary 45). The outcome of the whole debacle seems to be that Samad has been substituted by Marcus Chalfen as father figure for Magid (O’Leary 50).

Magid does not only dismay his parents, he annoys Irie, too. She observes that “He turned the other cheek. (...) He had an absolute empathy for everybody, Magid. And it was an unbelievable pain in the arse” (429). She also finds that he has a touch of the same characteristic as some of the mad people walking the streets of Willesden: He had “*Prophecy*. And Magid had it in his face. He wanted to tell you and tell you and tell you” (430).

Where Magid does get some praise though, except for in the Chalfen household, is at O’Connell’s. When the proprietor, Mickey sees him, he comments that “Speaks fuckin’ nice, don’t he? Sounds like a right fuckin’ Olivier. Queen’s fucking English and no mistake” (449). Even the Caribbean clientele comment on him: “Dat’s a lovely suit you gat dere,’ murmured Denzel, stroking the white linen wistfully. ‘Dat’s what de Englishmen use ta wear back home in Jamaica (...)’” (450). Their praise of him has very much to do with his appearance and speech, all harking back to mannerisms and styles of colonial Britain and its upper class.

With the exception of a very few people, then, Magid seems to upset or puzzle just about everyone. Much of this might seem to relate to the ways in which he constructs his identity, which he, according to McMann, does by channeling ‘the ideal colonial citizen’ through signifiers such as clothing and speech (626, 628). He may be regarded as partaking in what the post-colonial theorist Bhabha refers to as ‘mimicry’. This is a process in which a colonial subject, in this case a post-colonial subject, takes on the habits and other cultural traits of the colonizers (qtd. in Cuddon 345). The effect is, according to Bhabha, that the authority of the colonizer is disturbed through the “displacing gaze” of the colonial subject, as the mimicry is “is at once resemblance and menace” (86).

If the British do it - or rather did it - Magid does it ‘better’. The effect of Magid’s mimicry – of another ethnic group, and of another time and place, when Britain ruled the world - is that he is out of tune with the people around him. His mimicry is not observed as disturbing any traditional British characters, but rather other characters of immigrant background, like his mother who dislikes having breakfast with ‘David

Niven'. However, we never observe him taking their worries to heart. He is so little bothered by what others think of him that he orders a bacon sandwich at O'Connell's – a type of food that has not been served there for a long time – and sits down to eat it in the presence of his father (456).

Even if Magid is not preoccupied with his odd behavior himself, his mimicry invites reflection on the identity of a young, in-between character like Magid in another way than Irie and Millat. Irie and Millat have so often seem conflicted in their construction of a hybrid identity, and their anxiety have partly been caused by issues of skin colour and racism, related to discourses in society. There are no such discourses to be observed in relation to Magid's construction of identity. Instead, he constructs a persona that is bound to stand out in society. Why he does so, is not revealed to us. It might be due to some hidden conflict in him, caused by his living in-between and the trauma of the separation from his brother and family, or it might be him making a statement in some way.

Where Magid seems to feel most at home, is with the Chalfens, where rationality and science is at centre stage. Being with them has also brought him into the realm of the middle class, which he yearned for as a young child (McMann 627). As Irie, he is drawn to the stability and the cultural capital of the middle class. After having established a relationship with Marcus Chalfen via correspondence, and later becoming mentored by him, he becomes a fixture in the Chalfen home. While assisting Marcus, he finds ways to best spread the word about Marcus's project FutureMouse©. This is perhaps the most contemporary part of Magid's identity; the fact that he has a certain understanding of how to engage a wider audience in Marcus's work: "People wanted Marcus and his mouse, and Magid knew how to give it to them. (...) If *Channel 4 News* wanted an interview, Magid explained how to sit, how to move one's hands, how to incline one's head" (426).

When Magid and Millat are to meet near the end of the novel to try to resolve some of their differences in some kind of 'neutral space', they find, as the narrator comments, that "their genes, those prophets of the future, have reached different conclusions" (463). This seems to be somewhat true regarding their looks and dress style, but also their outlooks. Smith's exploration of the nature/nurture debate produces very different outcomes, an 'ideal colonial citizen' in Magid, and at times, an 'Islamic extremist' in Millat (McMann 617, 628).

Magid and Millat do not resolve their differences in the room they meet up in, instead they “cover the room with history – past, present and future history (...) They cover this neutral room in themselves” (464). Moreover, “they left that neutral room as they had entered it: weighed down, burdened, unable to waver from their course or in any way change their separate, dangerous trajectories” (465). The brothers carry the history with them, seems to be Smith’s message – but it cannot be controlled, as Samad tried to. Again, as with some of the characters from the parent generation, “the imposing presence of history (...) cannot be denied”, argues Rogers (52). The impact of history and past spaces is illustrated in the following remark, made by the narrator:

(...) the brothers will race towards the future only to find they more and more eloquently express their past, that place where they have *just been*. Because this is the other thing about immigrants (‘fugees, émigrés, travellers): they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow (466).

3.4 Concluding Remarks

Summing up, these three teenagers, or young adults, share some characteristics. They are all born and brought up in London, though only two of them have spent their adolescence in the city. They are all connected to their contemporary space – London and Britain, but it is not a connection without friction. They all have at least one immigrant parent and their ethnicity is visibly different from ‘white’ Londoners or Britons.

Irie at one stage is very much in conflict with her own essential identity markers, relating to hair, body and skin colour. She does not seem to settle and spends her time going between her parents’ and the Chalfen house, and for a while she also lives with her grandmother. In London, she seems to be restless and lacking of something, perhaps a connection with her roots. Millat, maybe the one who knows the London streets the best, a ‘social chameleon’ who everybody wants to hang out with, still feels that he does not belong anywhere and uses religion and KEVIN to make him feel connected. Magid, the one who is sent away for years, is perhaps the

one who seems to be the most content, even if almost everybody else finds him strange. His strategy of 'mimicry', does imply, however, that he needs to apply strong measures to overcome, perhaps, some kind of unease.

All these characters might be said to be displaced in some way and need to negotiate their identities and what they mean in relation to both Britain and the homeland of their parents (Fernández, "Representing Third Spaces" 154, 156). They live in London, yet they have connections to spaces elsewhere. "They remain in-between two notions of home," as Moss phrases it (14). For Irie and Millat especially, perhaps because they have not visited the 'homeland', they have to "imaginarily cross continents in an attempt to trace their roots back and negotiate their present identity status in Britain" (Fernández, "Representing Third Spaces" 156). The increasing 'ordinariness' of hybrid identities does not, therefore, relieve these characters of the inherent complications of such identities.

4. Identity, Present, Past and the Future: Millat, Archie and Irie at Trafalgar Square, The Perret Institute and in a Glimpse ‘Seven Years Hence’

Trafalgar Square and the nearby area with its Perret Institute are the spaces where the build-up to and the climax of the novel take place. As the multiple cast of characters make their way to and arrive at the Institute, or during the event itself, everything comes together. The gathering at the Perret Institute is made up mainly of Willesden characters who come to see the exhibition of Marcus Chalfen’s FutureMouse©. This genetically programmed mouse is the centre for a “conflict of epic proportions” as Smith ties up her various themes of “fundamentalism, humanism, accident, human kindness, and cultural diversity” (Moss 15; Childs 12).

The conflict that plays out, has more to do with different ideologies than ethnicities: As the thoughts and actions of the various groups who are attending the event are laid out, Smith’s storytelling is infused with elements of comedy and satire. There is the “great affection for tautology” in the leader of Millat’s KEVIN, combined with the story of how he as “The Loony in the Lock-Up” spent five years in a garage under the sponsorship of his Mormon aunt (468-469). There is the “mono-intelligence” of Ryan Topps, Hortense’s fellow church member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who secretly loves *Star Wars* because of “The Good! The Evil! The Force! So *simple*. So *true*” (509). And there is Hortense, being part of an unstoppable choir, a “choral Frankenstein’s monster,” “banging away at their percussion as if they wish to beat out something more substantial than rhythm” (529). Chalfen’s son Joshua and his animal rights’ group FATE are there, and Marcus Chalfen, who has ‘developed’ the mouse, is naturally also there.

Chalfen, along with his mentor, Dr Perret, the Nazi whom Archie ostensibly executed during the war, represent a type of ideology that is just as strong and ‘mono-intelligent’ as the others’, and which is being contested by the diverse groups of attendees at the event. Chalfen believes the technological significance of his mouse to be on par with “this century’s discoveries in the field of physics: relativity, quantum mechanics” and is not able to understand why anyone would oppose his scientific work (527, 419).

When “The Time is at Hand – Rev. 1:3”, as Hortense’s banner shows, nothing goes according to plan, and it all ends with a bang. Millat, who initially wanted to shoot Chalfen, goes for Chalfen’s mentor Dr Perret instead. He ends up shooting Archie in the thighbone, and Archie’s fall leads to the release of the mouse from its cage and its predetermined destiny (529, 540). There are “Shards of glass all over the gaff. What a performance. If it were TV you would hear the saxophone around now; the credits would be rolling” (540).

By bringing all these different, yet one-sided voices together, showing their rationalities and irrationalities, and ending it all with chaos, Smith might be said to use comedy and satire to ‘ask questions’ about identity and the human condition (Ramsey-Kurz 79; Griffin 1, 5). The gathering at the Perret Institute and the run-up to it, brings the family history of Millat to the fore, and for Irie, there are indications of future prospects. Archie’s part of the chapter is more about the present, as he becomes the man of the hour due to the dramatic events of the day. The quest for identity, and how it links to the present, the past and the future, is made complex by the genetic discourses and the genetic determinism that FutureMouse© represent (Braun 221).

Before ending this chapter with some comments on history, hybrid identity and FutureMouse©, Millat, Archie and Irie will be discussed, as important parts of their identity are revealed in the run-up to, in, and in the aftermath of the climax of the novel.

4.1 Millat and Identity: The Past and the Present at Trafalgar Square and the Perret Institute

Trafalgar Square is an imposing public square in central London, named after a great British victory in the Napoleonic Wars, and with tributes to important figures of Britain at the time of the Empire, among them Lord Nelson and Sir Havelock. The square and its monuments are imbued with Britain’s past as a “naval and colonial superpower”⁹. Just as the British Empire and its legacy is visible on Trafalgar

⁹ “Trafalgar Square.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. June 10, 2016. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Trafalgar-Square>

Square, it is also evident in the multicultural cast of characters from Willesden, of whom most have background from one of its former colonies.

Millat makes a detour to Trafalgar Square on his way to the Perret Institute. He is in a state of intoxication with many things on his mind, and decides to confront the past by seeking out two sites. He first goes to sit on a bench related to Samad's experience at Trafalgar Square as a newly arrived immigrant. On one of the legs of the bench, Millat finds the inscription 'Iqbal', which Samad had written all those years ago. Seeing his father as someone who had "made no more mark than this," Millat wants to do better (506). Turning to the statue of Havelock, who was Pande's executioner after Pande's act of colonial resistance a long time ago, Millat sees how Pande "was no one and Havelock was someone" (506). Promising himself that he will be not left out of the history books, Millat wants to finish what Pande started. "Ding, ding," said Millat out loud, tapping Havelock's foot (...). 'Round two'" (507).

Millat has a plan for what is going to happen at the Perret Institute, and by seeking out Trafalgar Square, he "relate[s] to history in order to find impetus for action in the present" (Gunning 134). However, he also finds material in his gangster films for the action needed, as he thinks of how "Pacino (...) no matter how long you replay the doubt that seems to cross his face, he never does anything else but what he was always going to do" (526-527).

What seems to drive Millat's anger, is his encounter with racism (Gunning 132; Tancke 34). He also wants, like his father had during the war, to make a mark on the world. Where Samad had wanted to get a Nazi who represented eugenics killed, based on his Muslim faith, Millat now wants to kill Chalfen on the basis of his genetic engineering. As he actually aims for Dr Perret instead, it turns out he wants to kill the the same man Samad once had wanted to get killed. As Samad was, and maybe Pande, too, Millat is intoxicated, making history repeat itself in more ways than one within the same family as they carry out these acts of violence (Gunning 134).

In addition to history and gangster films, Millat also appears to link his actions to 'blood'. When Millat draws his gun, he is acting on "an imperative secreted in the genes and the cold steel in his inside pocket is the answer to a claim made on him long ago. He's a Pandy deep down. And there's mutiny in his blood" (525-526). By focusing on the importance of 'blood' and history, and by the use of violence, Millat adopts Samad's emphasis on essentialism and history in identity formation, as well

as the role of violence in masculinity (Carrera Suárez 175-176). Obviously, Millat's single-mindedness resembles that of Chalfen's and Perret's, as does his belief in what is 'secreted in the genes'.

The narrator of *White Teeth* has foreshadowed how Millat will go on to repeat the ideas or actions of his father: "There's no proper term for it – *original sin* seems too harsh; maybe *original trauma* is better. A trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all, and this is the tragedy for the Iqbals – that they can't help but re-enact the dash they once made from one land to another (...)" (161-162). Whatever it is, trauma, or family history, Millat, like Samad, is not able to free himself from the past. Also, Millat is, like Samad, a conflicted character, and at this stage in his life, unable to construct a hybrid identity that works in Britain. For Millat, the struggle is just as hard as his father's, maybe sometimes even harder. It is not easy to reconcile the 'Western' part of him that, among other things includes 'gangster fantasies' on repeat, with the ideals of fundamentalist Islam (McMann 627).

4.2 Archie and Identity: The Present, the Past, Decision and Indecision at The Perret Institute

What greets the characters from Willesden as they enter the exhibition room of the Perret Institute, is a foreign type of space. It seems like a heterotopia, as an 'other space', removed from their daily lives and described as this "corporate place, a clean slate; white/chrome/pure/plain" which represents "an emptiness, an uncontaminated cavity; the logical endpoint of a thousand years of spaces too crowded and bloody" (517-518). Yet the characters from Willesden take some ownership as they come en masse and populate the space, and this is especially true of Archie. He starts out as a spectator, thinking that "It's just like on TV!" but ends up becoming crucial in the course of events in the next (520).

The Perret Institute is the space for some dramatic show-down, all of which involve Archie in some way. The first one has to do with Dr Perret. When Samad and Archie both spot Dr Perret at the exhibition, Samad realizes that "there is far, far more to Archibald Jones than he had ever realized," and that this incident will "*keep us two old boys going for the next forty years*" (532, 533). The next incident at the Perret Institute involves Archie in an even more dramatic way. When Archie sees

movement in the audience, and realizes Millat is reaching for a gun, Archie becomes the hero, stopping the bullet from reaching its target: “So as the gun sees the light, he is *there*, he is there with no coin to help him, he is there before Samad can stop him (...)” (533). Archie saves Dr Perret from the bullet, and by doing so, he also saves Millat from the harsh punishment his crime would have led to if unprevented (Childs 11).

Where there once was indecision behind the saving of Dr Perret’s life – the decision made with the flipping of a coin - there is no indecisiveness and no coin the second time around. When Archie takes the bullet in the thigh and the weight of his fall shatters the mouse’s glass box, it also makes him a part of the third event (540). As the mouse is freed from its imprisonment, Archie, who from the onset has felt great sympathy for the mouse, is only too happy to see it get away, thinking “*Go on my son*” (521, 542; Childs 11).

Archie has in his life left much to chance, and his ‘random’ universe is very different to the worldview of Marcus Chalfen and Dr Perret who believe they can control life with their science. As earlier, part of Archie’s identity changes by way of random events. But, Archie seems to take more ownership of these final events, as it is his decision to stand in the trajectory of the bullet. Carrera Suárez claims, therefore, that Archie is one of the characters who has most clearly ‘become’ himself (181).

Yet Archie is also profoundly consistent, being the conflict-avoiding, friendly man who is oblivious to difference and avoids certainty. Even if his life has been guided by random events, it must have been a conscious decision at some point to marry Clara and to have a baby with her, and to have Samad for a best friend. According to MacCleod, Archie ends up becoming the unlikely hero of the novel, but the fact may not be so surprising when noting how he represents a contrast to the other characters, who arrive at the Institute “armed with their truth-seeking certainties,” as Carrera Suárez observes (MacLeod 165; Carrera Suárez 181-182). Archie represents a common human decency, a decency which he also extends to the mouse, demonstrated in how he sympathizes with it in the thoughts that close the whole novel.

4.3 Irie and Identity: The Past and 'Seven Years Hence' in Jamaica

As Irie is on her way to the Perret Institute with the Bowden/Jones- and the Iqbal/Begum-families, Irie is well aware of the fact that she is pregnant (515). Irie has so far in her young life spent a lot of energy trying to break with the essentialist parts of her identity by rejecting her natural hair and her body type (273). She has also wanted to be of 'one flesh' with the Chalfen family (342). Lastly, she has also desperately been "collecting bits and bobs" from her Jamaican heritage in her grandmother's flat, trying to imagine "the magic of homeland" (400, 402). Now, however, with a baby on the way, she thinks differently of background. She has "asked her unborn child to offer some kind of a sign, but nothing" (527). Her baby has "no real coordinates," but yet it makes her 'involved' with the Iqbal/Begum family (516). Her baby is a new beginning, and in a sneak peak of the future, we get a glimpse of Irie, Hortense, Joshua and her child,

seven years hence (...) sitting by a Caribbean sea (for Irie and Joshua become lovers in the end; you can only avoid your fate for so long) while Irie's fatherless little girl writes affectionate postcards to Bad Uncle Millat and Good Ungle Magid and feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings? (541).

This very scene closes the circle in many ways, connecting Irie to her roots in Jamaica, and at the same time, finally 'merging' her with the Chalfens through her newfound, romantic relationship with Joshua. Instead of being 'pure' or neutral, it is a picture of different generations of women who are all of mixed race, back in some kind of homeland, but a picture that also includes Irie's lover. He represents another class and another ethnicity, and is a Chalfen, but not the same type of Chalfen as his parents. The history of Irie's daughter both resembles and differs from the history of her foremothers. Irie's little girl is, and always will be, disconnected from her one, biological father, yet she stays in touch with both of her potential fathers, as well as having a father figure right beside her.

Irie is, like many of the other characters of the novel, not buying into the blood-trope of Samad who values being of 'good' blood and perhaps also of 'pure' blood. It is true that she in her teenage years desires 'Englishness', being very unhappy and conflicted about her looks. It is also true that she is looking for her roots, following the

matrilineal line, but she is not preoccupied with being of just the 'right' blood (Carrera Suárez 178). Even if Irie is born and bred in Britain, she does not easily find her place there, and lacks a sense of belonging (Siccardi 218). First-generation immigrants Hortense and Clara have worked hard at putting down roots in their new country; Hortense in religion and in her Lambeth flat, and Clara in her settling down in marriage and in Willesden. Irie, however, needs to negotiate her identity in new ways, bringing in the past and the present, the local and the global, as in Giddens' understanding of high modernity. She is more concerned with the past and her roots than Hortense and Clara, but not in the way of Samad, who has an essentialist view of identity.

Irie cannot be established as the sole protagonist of *White Teeth*, as it is a polyvocal novel in which many of the characters are significant in their own way. Nevertheless, she is the device that points us towards the future: Irie has helped create quite her own hybrid identity, based on her mixed heritage, but also through her reflections and her actions.

Importantly, the hybridity of Irie's child has come about through both voluntary and involuntary modes of 'involvement' when generations of Bowden women are taken into account (Moss 13). Irie's great-grandmother was exploited by an Englishman in a relationship that signifies asymmetry in almost every way, in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and amplified by the context of colonialism. Irie's grandmother participated in the sexual act voluntarily vis-à-vis her husband, but acted on God's word, "[submitting] to her least favourite activity in order to conceive the child He had asked for" (34). Like Hortense, her daughter Clara chose herself who to have a baby with, yet she was influenced by some crucial external aspects: She was very young, and her marriage to a much older man took place at a conflicted time for her.

In comparison to the other women, no one makes independent choices in quite the same way as Irie. She gets Millat, whom she has lusted after for such a long time. When the aftermath shows that it is not a reciprocal act of love, she turns directly to his brother, whom she makes love to in a rather aggressive way (463). Whatever it is, it is different from what her foremothers did, and especially in the fact that it brings in two potential fathers for her child.

So, from Hortense and onwards – and most likely, also from earlier times - there is hybridity in the Bowden clan, a hybridity that sparks various reactions. Whereas the great-grandmother Ambrosia accepted hybridity, Hortense actively sought out a black man to go back to ‘black’. When Clara, her daughter, marries a white man, Hortense despairs: “Hortense hadn’t put all that effort into marrying black, into dragging her genes back from the brink, just so her daughter could bring yet more high-coloured children into the world” (327). Clara does not pay any attention to hybridity in her own relationship to Archie, nevertheless she worries about all the ‘white’ friends that young Irie brings into the house (328). Irie has no angst over ethnicity in her sexual affairs with Millat and Magid, resulting in her very ‘mixed’ baby.

Through the individual histories across these generations in the Bowden family, then, we follow the ‘big history’ of colonialism, migration, multiculturalism and women’s empowerment as in the freedom of their choices. The novel does, by following these generations of women in the same family, pay attention to how the remnants of the past are carried into the present, a common postcolonial concern. Moreover, the novel also participates in both postcolonial as well as feminist discourse by highlighting the sexual oppression of black women during colonial times and juxtaposing these with Irie’s wider range of choices in various aspects of her life. Irie’s baby may also well be a symbol of the importance of women: The child will have an established matrilineal line, but the patrimony will forever be blurred. Not even with modern science or technology will it ever be possible to ascertain exactly who the father is.

Irie has, in one of the last scenes of the novel, ‘become’ herself, having emerged more autonomous from her struggles, asserts Carrera Suárez (181). She looks to a future with her ‘unmappable child’, a future in which “roots will be irrelevant” (Carrera Suárez 182). It is true that Irie desperately longs for such a future: “In a vision, Irie has seen a time (...) where roots won’t matter any more because they can’t because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too tortuous and they’re just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it” (527). However, this is a wish on Irie’s part, and it might not be what she needs or gets.

At the end, Irie does not really avoid the past, but combines certain parts of the past with the ‘future’ as represented by her daughter: She follows her own matrilineal line, and gives her daughter access to the same matrilineal past in

Jamaica with her grandmother. However, Irie might be interpreted as having refused the “mandates of genetic taxonomy and knowledge,” the obsession of ‘blood’ of Samad’s and the hybridity anxiety’ of Hortense, Samad and Alsana when it comes to her daughter (Carrera Suárez 182, 177; Childs 8). The picture painted of Irie, her daughter, Joshua and Hortense “sitting by the Caribbean sea” is in many ways a peaceful and rosy picture of hybridity and one in which everyone seems to belong (541). It represents a ‘present moment’ as, Ryan Trimm argues, that seems “hospitable and laden with opportunity,” as determinisms of the past are left behind (166).

4.4 History, Hybridity and ‘The Mouseness of the Mouse’¹⁰

As Smith has done previously in the novel, she continues to explore the role of history in characters’ identity in the final chapters. History in Smith’s novel does not appear to be some necessarily minor part of an identity which can “be taken or left,” as Sell has argued in a much-quoted article on *White Teeth* (32). His statement has been contested by other scholars, among them Rogers and Gunning. Rogers sees Smith’s novel as advocating “a full recognition of complexity, denying neither past nor present, acknowledging the variety of influences that come into play and the mixed emotions concerning both mother country and adoptive country” (58). History, for some of the novel’s characters, is “something of pain and oppression, yet also a source of pride; it is absent from their everyday interactions and yet inescapable in their blood,” the way Rogers sees it (50).

Likewise, for Gunning, Smith in the novel seems “concerned with questioning whether enough attention is paid to the intricacies of history within current liberal-multicultural models of national, and importantly, ethnic identities” (127). History is “like a blush,” as the narrator of the novel states, and it will strike “embarrassingly, without warning” (79). This resembles Ahmed’s stance on postcolonialism; that it deals with the “complexity of the relationship between the past and the present,” a fact which seems to apply to Smith’s novel (11).

¹⁰ Marcus Chalfen’s reflects that “The mousiness of the mouse seemed inescapable” (419).

History is also brought into the final chapters of the novel by the way of their titles, which bring in some interesting intertexts, as Gunning has stressed (128). Most notably, *White Teeth's* chapter called "The End of History versus the Last Man," plays on the title of Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Fukuyama, a political theorist, has claimed that Western liberal democracies represent a sort of "last ideological stage in the progression of human history"¹¹. Whatever the reason, Smith does not seem to be entirely on board with Fukuyama's hypotheses. In the novel, the narrator comments on how the 'resourceful' immigrants arrive in western, liberal democracies that the narrator satirically names 'this greenandpleasentlibertarianlandofthefree' or 'Happy Multicultural Land'. But even if we "have been told of the resourcefulness," and how immigrants "merg[e] with this oneness," "Magid and Millat couldn't manage it," states the narrator, and claims that they cannot escape their history (465-466).

Remarks such as these, combined with the reference to Fukuyama's book, may have to do with how liberal democracies, that Fukuyama sees as 'the End of History', are not truly able to embrace all its (new) citizens, even if they appear to do so, extending rights to nearly all in society (Gunning 131). Additionally, these remarks may imply a criticism of the conservative and neoconservative economic policies Fukuyama has been associated with¹². There is also a possibility that the remarks point to the fact that it is not so easy for immigrants to 'merge with this oneness' that the 'Happy Multicultural Land' represents. Lastly, and perhaps most of all, they may indicate that Smith does not believe that the development of history can be determined to take on one particular form, thus rejecting Fukuyama's universalizing arguments of human development and history (Gunning 128).

Another intertext that Smith brings in, as she titles a chapter "Of Mice and Memory," is John Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937)¹³. The reference to this famous book title helps bring attention to Chalfen's FutureMouse©, which is at centre stage in the last part of Smith's novel. The inspiration for the mouse in the novel is likely to be OncoMouse, which was patented by Harvard University in

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. March 25, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francis-Fukuyama>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Of Mice and Men". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 3, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Of-Mice-and-Men-by-Steinbeck>.

1988¹⁴. The mouse was engineered to “have a predisposition for cancer” and sparked debate about issues such as patenting life forms and science for profit¹⁵. In the novel, Smith lets a random girl at the airport who reads Chalfen’s book extrapolate on the consequences of genetical engineering. She tells Chalfen that the potential outcomes are “pretty fucking scary,” and that “You’ve got to be seriously naïve if you don’t think the West intend to use this shit in the East, on the Arabs” (417). Chalfen, however, is surprised by how the mouse has “prompted such a hysterical reaction.” He does not comprehend why people are “unable to think of the animal as a site,” and resignedly concludes that “The mouseness of the mouse seemed inescapable” (419).

The mouse represents another version of hybridity in the novel, but this version of hybridity is instrumental and controlled. The mouse is viewed by Chalfen as “a utilitarian site for experimentation,” and it has been commodified, demonstrated in part by how it has been copyrighted (Braun 233; Huggan 762). The mouse is being advertised simply as medical progress. However, it is revealed to us that the scientific collaborative work that has led to the ‘development’ of this mouse involves Dr Perret, creating a definite link from the eugenics of the 1940s to Chalfen’s genetic engineering (McMann 619). This means that it is Chalfen who is unable to ‘see’, as he has a “reductionist view of the mouse,” according to Braun. Moreover, he has no eye to the cultural and social implications of the experiments concerning the mouse (Braun 233).

The mouse seems to make the reading of identity, hybridity and multiculturalism in Smith’s novel more complex (Braun 222). The mouse certainly problematizes the ‘purity-seeking’ and controlled views of reproduction that Chalfen and Dr Perret hold in the novel (MacLeod 163). Chalfen wants a future where “we are not victims of the random but instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate,” and Dr Perret thinks it “A terrible thing not to have perfection, human perfection, when it is so readily available” (433, 538). Their concept of both reproduction and hybridity, demonstrated in the mouse, is in the novel juxtaposed with the ‘random’ nature of reproduction and genetic hybridity elsewhere in the novel, states MacLeod (163).

¹⁴ “The Mouse that Changed Science.” *Science History Institute*, November 16, 2018.

<https://www.sciencehistory.org/distillations/podcast/the-mouse-that-changed-science>. Accessed April 8, 2023.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Like Braun and MacLeod, Moss also reads the story of the mouse as a commentary on hybridity in the novel, and additionally, as a commentary on 'otherness'. The mouse represents some sort of warning, as it is a "self-destructive hybridity," programmed to die within a certain timeframe (15). Furthermore, the mouse is also created as an object, an 'other', meant to be "on display in a manner that is reminiscent of the nineteenth century displays of Native Canadians and the Inuit in England", argues Moss (15). The creation of the mouse, then, with all its different notions – of hybridity, of instrumentality, of being commodified, of being 'othered', and of being planned, programmed and 'produced' in such a way as to be self-destructive - represents something that cannot be desirable. However, for the mouse itself, there is compassion. Due to the events of the day and Archie's heroism, the mouse scurries to freedom while Archie looks at it with empathy. The mouse gets a lucky escape – at least for now - unlike the characters of John Steinbeck's *Mice and Men*.

Different types of hybridity are not 'equal'. In *White Teeth*, hybridity is, in general, 'messy'. When it comes to genetic hybridity, Irie and her baby both represent a 'messy' type of hybridity, but one that has come about by voluntary modes, in sharp contrast to the 'production' of the mouse. Their messy hybridity, representing life, seems to be contrasted with the programmed and destructive hybridity of the mouse.

5. Conclusion

In Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, each of the characters have some connection to the "great immigrant experiment" "in the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white" (326). The novel "accommodates conflicting voices" of the members of the two main multicultural families and thereby avoids reducing the discourse on multiculturalism to a homogenous concept (Fernández, "Exploring Hybridity" 150). Smith herself has stated about her novel that "I wasn't trying to write about race. I was trying to write about the country I live in" (qtd. in Jones). She writes about the daily and 'ordinary' lives of these diverse types of characters, and in that sense it is true that she does not write specifically about race, or ethnicity. Nevertheless, it is an inescapable fact that almost all of them have an immigrant background, and this part of their identity is one that they need to deal with in some way or other.

One way in which *White Teeth* can be categorized, is as postcolonial writing. *White Teeth* certainly deals with issues central to postcolonialism; those of figuring out individual identities in the midst of cultural disruptions and how to reconcile the present with the past (Cuddon 551; Ahmed 11). Finding a way to handle these aspects are crucial in order to settle down in a place and to truly belong, in what Pope refers to as "creating a convincing life world" and Siccardi calls 'Becoming', the process of finding one's place in society by "the recovery of one's territory, only with new modalities" (Pope 10; Siccardi 224). Smith's variety of characters enables her to play around with different attitudes and dynamics between characters, making this a novel that studies the human condition, also outside the frame of the postcolonial.

Some of the issues that the characters struggle with, are also relevant for others, caught as we all are in between 'globalising influences' and 'personal dispositions' in times of rapid change, as Giddens have argued (1, 3-5). There are, of course, no simple paths to constructing one's identity in 'high modernity' and in the modern, multicultural metropolis. According to Gunning, Smith acknowledges this in the way she avoids any tendencies towards a "simplistic account of human nature" (128). Furthermore, everyone has to work out their connection to spaces, both past and present, in order to find their identity and to "satisfy the fundamental needs to belong, have a sense of their self and their role in life" (Piazza 11).

Both for persons with immigrant background, but also for those without, the meeting of cultures means that hybrid forms of identity and culture are produced in the 'third space of enunciation', according to Bhabha. Though the 'third space' might be argued to be an ambivalent space, as Bhabha does, hybrid identities are nevertheless becoming normalized and increasingly seen as "part of the practice of everyday life," the way Moss sees it (Bhabha 37, 34; Moss 12, 11). Fernández would seem to agree with Moss, as she thinks that *White Teeth*, by depicting the storylines of immigrants and their children in London, "normalise the experiences of ethnically diverse people (...) and contribute to a hybrid view of British society" ("Third Spaces" 155). Pope might be understood to concur with Moss's view, too, in how he states that "There is little cultural or ethnic certainty to be found in the novel" (171). Moreover, he emphasizes the setting in the North West London suburbs as "the hybridised metropolitan sites that produce variety and surprise" (171).

The 'third space' following the Second World War as Britain becomes multicultural is what makes Archie's and Samad's continued friendship possible and what creates the relationships the novel centers around. Moreover, this 'third space' is what we witness in the setting of multicultural North West London and its various social spaces, most importantly Glenard Oak Comprehensive and O'Connell's, as well as some outdoor spaces. All these settings are what Ribó call 'functional settings': They lay out "space as a multidimensional stage for the development of the plot," so it provides topographical support for "the development of characters or the unfolding of events" (Ribó 39-40). The novel does not focus on any character's arrival in Britain¹⁶, rather on their settled status, which allows the novel to centre its attention on how the characters develop their identities in their everyday lives in Willesden (Trimm 148).

The portrayal of North West London as a dynamic space, ever-changing and multicultural, allows characters to negotiate their identities and inhabit spaces as their storylines and tensions play out (Fernández, "Exploring Hybridity" 150, Rogers 51). The social spaces of Willesden, such as O'Connell's, demonstrate how spaces are changeable, as they are continuously constructed by the people who inhabit them, as geographer Doreen Massey would assert (2-4). Furthermore, O'Connell's appears to be a heterotopia as philosopher Michel Foucault would see it (96-100). It is a place

¹⁶ One exception is Magid's return. However, he is a British citizen who has spent his childhood in Britain.

which has 'rules' for opening up to people and is a place in which time seems to stand still for decades. Samad and Archie have, with their 'place-making' and acquired 'competence' after "years of devoted fucking around," made it into a 'home away from home' (183). O'Connell's is one of the places Samad can belong, most likely in contrast to other British spaces at the time. However, the modern metropolis has been changed, and is continually changing, due to the influx of immigrants and their 'place-making'. Some of the ways immigrants have done so, and struggled to do so, are depicted in the fictional portrayal of the characters of *White Teeth*.

Issues of identity and space might be argued to take on special importance to immigrants and descendants of immigrants due to their dual or multiple connections to different spaces and cultural values. However, there is variation, as Smith shows us by making some of the characters' identity formation more troubled than others'. Additionally, Smith also connects some spaces to their colonial histories specifically, and thus she highlights the connection between the present and the past in other ways than in characters' identities. This fact draws the attention to the colonial and postcolonial aspects that inform this novel. Colonial history is very much present in her treatment of Trafalgar Square, and the same is true for Glenard Oaks Comprehensive.

In the same way that we can see an immigrant like Samad as one who carries the "ever-present burden of the past", we might see the novel as doing it, too, in the way it explores this theme (Huggan 760). Smith engages with this theme of the "persistence of history" in a way that allows for unpredictability, "craft[ing] the novel in order (...) to insist on the necessary acknowledgement of confusion and uncertainty in human activity," argues Gunning (128). Most of the time, the novel seems to emphasize uncertainty over predictability in its interpretation of history, and this is, in all likelihood, one of the ways in which she does not subscribe to Francis Fukuyama's universalizing arguments in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) (Gunning 128).

All the central characters of *White Teeth* develop some kind of hybridity, intentionally or unintentionally. They live in London, but they have connections to spaces elsewhere and they are "trying to find their own spaces within their families and within society" (Fernández, "Representing Third Spaces" 154). This is a struggle that does not end with the first generation, but one that revisits members of the

second generation as they have to “imaginarily cross continents in an attempt to trace their roots back and negotiate their present identity status in Britain” (Fernández, “Representing Third Spaces” 156). Moreover, even more traditionally ‘British’ or ‘English’ characters cannot avoid the difference, the ambivalence, but also the ordinariness of the ‘third space’. This is the new context for almost everyone in a modern city like London, and a basis for hybrid identity formation. The characters of *White Teeth* are, in the main, ‘in-betweens’ that “resist definition,” as Caryl Phillips, writer and reviewer of the novel in *The Guardian*, pointed out when the novel was published. Furthermore, he asserted that the novel’s characters “present Britain with problems of categorisation,” exemplified by “working-class white men like Archie, who marry Jamaican women 20 years their junior,” “non-believing ‘Muslims’ such as Millat” or “these ‘white birds’ who go weak at the knees” for people like Millat (Phillips).

The hybridity that the novel portrays is ‘messy’ and unpredictable, much like the novel’s treatment of history (Gunning 128). Views that oppose the ‘messiness’ of cultural hybridity are in the novel relayed through the narratives of ‘purity’ that is pursued by some of the novel’s characters, those who rely on an ideology, a ‘truth’ or the idea of a ‘pure’ culture. These views and these characters are satirized in the climax of *White Teeth*. As Pope notes, there is a “comedic overturning of any drives toward certainty and purity” in the novel (171). The exception here seems to be Samad, who at the end seems to be regarded with some sympathy, even if his views have been satirized earlier (Rogers 54).

Moreover, the cultural hybridity that is depicted in the plot and which seems to be endorsed, is one that comes about through more voluntary negotiations in a multicultural society. These negotiations are difficult, and do perhaps not always reflect processes in which the different parties have an equal standing, but they are, at least, not entirely enforced. This type of hybridity is juxtaposed with the depiction of some spaces and their related ‘histories’ of enforced assimilation and/or hybridity in the colonial age. Spaces that are depicted along with this type of history are colonial Jamaica/Clara’s grandmother Ambrosia, Glenard Oak Comprehensive/Sir Glenard/Ambrosia and, lastly, Trafalgar Square/Sir Havelock/Mangal Pande.

When it comes to genetic hybridity, it appears to be the ‘messy’, but voluntary hybridity that results in Irie and later on, her daughter, that is applauded in *White*

Teeth. This 'benign' type of hybridity is contrasted with two other variants, the first of which is the involuntary modes of genetic hybridity that characterized colonialism, exemplified in Ambrosia's daughter Hortense. The second is the 'orderliness' or the 'programmability' that Chalfen and Dr Perret wish for in their genetically engineered mouse: This is a mouse which is created by scientific methods, to be used instrumentally, for other purposes than those of 'life' itself.

There is a certain optimism in Smith's novel that celebrates and normalizes the hybrid as people with different ethnic backgrounds negotiate their identities in spaces in North West London (Fernández, "Representing Third Spaces" 153, 155). These suburbs "produce variety and surprise," and there is connectivity in "this unplanned lucky accident" that Willesden is (Pope 170-171). Yet the novel is not straightforward in its optimism – there is "no revolution," as Childs phrases it (12). Childs argues that fundamentalism and xenophobia need to be rejected "in favour of faith and loving kindness" for hybridity to "become an everyday practice" (12). Some of these characters are not yet ready to reject fundamentalism, and neither they, nor society at large, are yet ready to fully reject xenophobia. The characters of the novel do not always feel at ease, and even the young characters of the novel struggle with their identity. The fact that the narrative draws on both elements of history and essential/genetic characteristics of a character's identity, and questions the sense of belonging in the second generation, born in Britain, means that the novel is not *solely* a joyful tale of multiculturalism, hybridity and constructed identities (Carrera Suárez 183; Moss 14; Rogers 59-60; Tancke 37).

The members of the older generation show us the troubles of settling in a new country and finding a way to reconcile the connection to historical spaces and contemporary spaces in the construction of a hybrid identity. Samad and Alsana forge different paths. She is able to find her place in Britain and accept that something will be different for her second-generation children – even if she fears that her descendants will be unrecognizable to her. Her approach to hybridity is very matter-of-fact: It just means being 'involved', and it is "neither good, nor bad. It is just a consequence of living (...)" (439). Samad, unable to really settle and to consciously accept any Britishness, has created a relationship to the past – past spaces and historical figures - that hinders him from creating a hybrid identity that will benefit his

present life in London. Still, even Samad finds a place to belong – in O’Connell’s, and with Archie.

Clara, who goes about her everyday life without many issues, does not seem to look back to her past or her former identity much. This is evident in, for example, how she leaves her Jamaican patois behind as quickly as she can. Nevertheless, she is not completely without doubts over the number of ‘white’ friends her teenage daughter seems to be in company of, nor about how she handles her own family history in a conversation with middle-class, ‘white’ Joyce Chalfen.

Archie, the only non-immigrant among them, is the one who most clearly embraces people of other ethnicities, simply by not thinking or questioning the process too much: “He liked people to get on with things, Archie” (190). Archie *is* something of a hero, as MacLeod suggests (165). This is not only because he takes a bullet at the end of the novel, in a situation in which he emerges as more autonomous than earlier (Carrera Suárez 181). It is also because he has shown a great deal of autonomy all the way in his choice of spouse and close friends, even if he met these people because of random events. For him – in contrast to his colleagues and former friends - issues of ethnicity and hybridity very early on become non-issues. This kind of acceptance, or even indifference, that Moss anticipated will be our future, has already taken place in Archie, and he has a daughter to show for it, too (Moss 12). Additionally, his identity also lacks the “self-certitude” of the “novel’s overzealous purity seekers” (MacLeod 165). This fact draws the attention to his importance in the novel as a character that stands for acceptance, hybridity and compromise in so many ways. Nevertheless, all these characters of the older generation are in some way ‘heroes’, as they are able to overcome difference in how they build close relationships to people of other ethnicities and personalities, and this observation includes Samad, too.

The issues of the second generation, demonstrated most clearly in Irie and Millat, but also, in part, in the ambivalent ‘mimicry’ of Magid, illustrate the inherent tension in assimilation processes. *White Teeth’s* portrayal of these young characters’ struggles is a reminder that issues of identity might be just as hard to work out for them as it is for the first generation. They are born in Britain, but have a link with a past space and a history that is not directly or easily accessible to them. In addition, the values of this ‘history’ and this past space may not mix well with the values of the

modern metropolis, which is likely to be more ingrained in them, compared to their parents.

Magid is the least preoccupied with the past as connection to a historical space, historical events and cultural values from his parents' homeland. His connection to Britain and its values was not broken by being sent 'home'. Interestingly, his old-fashioned sense of dress and speech make him an "ideal colonial citizen," but perhaps not one that seems to belong in contemporary Britain (McMann 628). He does, however, also connect with Britain in other ways; through law, science and via the mentorship of Marcus Chalfen.

Millat is, initially, a hybrid and popular character among his peers, but he is increasingly struggling with issues of identity and belonging. His destructive tendencies do not dissipate as the years pass, as they do with Irie, rather they seem to grow in force. His way of connecting with a past and a value system based on a fundamentalist religious outlook makes it difficult for him to build a hybrid identity that also include the 'Western' and more 'modern' outlook that he has grown up with in London.

Irie struggles, too. She seems to have a harder time of figuring out her identity than her immigrant mother, Clara. Irie at first despises her genetic identity traits, her hair and her "Jamaican hourglass heavy," but eventually tries to connect to her 'roots' as she investigates, but mostly, creates, a fictional image of her Jamaican heritage (266, 400).

Irie might not be able to get rid of 'roots' altogether, as she once longed for (527). She is, however, able to bring her grandmother, her new lover and her child to Jamaica. Here, it seems that she has found a healthier way of approaching the past and the present by bringing her 'future' – in terms of her girl, and her lover - to her 'roots' in Jamaica. She wanted to be a "new breed" and 'merge' with the Chalfens as young (342). Her baby is indeed a 'new breed', and as for herself, she is in a way merged with the Chalfens through her lover Joshua, though not in the way she might have intended. In the end, she seems to have become herself, as Carrera Suárez claims and Siccardi indicates (Carrera Suárez 181; Siccardi 225).

However, even this ending does not paint a completely rosy picture. It is, after all, not in London, she 'finds herself' or 'becomes', but in Jamaica. This fact may

signify that issues of hybridity and multiculturalism are so difficult to deal with that they prompt an escape. However, an argument against such an interpretation of Irie's situation is that the potential ambivalence of the 'third space' most likely would arise at some point in Jamaica, too. The 'third space', therefore, cannot be escaped. Irie's going to Jamaica *means* something, but whether she settles there, and exactly what her going there implies, are questions that remain unanswered.

The implications for the future that we see in the situation of Irie and her baby might most of all signify what Alsana has been thinking all along: Relationships, on a smaller or a bigger scale, including that of co-existing with others in a multicultural society, are all about 'involvement'. This is, in itself, "neither good or bad," as Alsana sees it (439). 'Involvement' might be bad, as some of the worries and struggles of the characters in the novel show, but beautiful too, as demonstrated in Archie's and Samad's friendship, the friendship between the two families, Irie herself, and most of all, Irie's baby.

Irie's little girl brings it all together, going beyond most concepts of hybridity presented earlier in the novel, and is, perhaps of precisely this reason, such a "perfectly plotted thing" (516). 'Involvement' represents, perhaps, the normative ethos of the whole novel: The 'ordinariness' of hybrid identity, as identified by Moss, is, in this way, established in *White Teeth*. It simply, matter-of-factly just *is*, and it cannot be avoided or backtracked. In the words of Alsana, "The years pass, and the mess accumulates and here we are" (440). 'Involvement' might not even represent something ambivalently 'in-between', in the end, and rather become what Moss has called a 'non-issue' (12-13). As Irie reflects on her unborn baby, what she sees is 'involvement': "(...) *whatever*, you know? *Whatever*. It was always going to turn out like this, not precisely like this, but involved like this" (516).

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