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Root Canals

Identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts*

Shakespeare

As You Like It, Act 2, scene 7

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Introduction

When Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* appeared in 2000 it was hailed by many as a 'multicultural novel for the millennium'. Smith herself came to be seen as a representative for this 'new' Britain, with her Jamaican mother and English father. The focus on the writer herself started as early as 1997, when the 21-year-old student landed a lucrative book contract with Penguin based on eighty pages of *White Teeth*. A great deal of hype surrounded the signing of the contract. Newspapers reported the publishing rights to have been bought for a figure as high as £250,000, and Smith became the centre of much media attention.

The critical reception of the novel was highly favourable. According to a review by Caryl Phillips, Smith 'recognizes and celebrates' the 'helpless heterogeneity' of post-colonial Britain (Caryl Phillips 2000, *The Observer*), and Salman Rushdie found her 'astonishingly assured.' However, there were some exceptions. Notably James Wood, in *The New Republic* (Wood 2001), criticized her, alongside writers such as Don DeLillo and Rushdie, for what he called 'hysterical realism': 'The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked.' Smith herself, in a response to Wood's article, described herself as writing 'like a script editor for the Simpsons who'd briefly joined a religious cult and then discovered Foucault.' (Smith 2001) Smith, in fact, seemed to be her own sharpest critic¹.

Whatever shortcomings some critics may have found in the novel, the general public loved it, much because of its warmth and humour. The novel went on to be translated into a number of languages, and to sell millions of copies worldwide. *White Teeth* was also awarded a number of prizes: the *Whitbread First Novel Award 2000*, the *Guardian First Book Award*, the *Commonwealth Writers First Book Prize*, the *Betty Trask Award* and the *James Tait Black*

¹ She also wrote a review of her own book for the magazine *Butterfly*, describing her own writing as 'the literary equivalent of a hyperactive ginger-haired tap dancing ten year old; all the writing is ornamental in the extreme' (Maria Russo 2000)

Memorial Prize for Fiction. A television film adaptation of the novel was made in 2002 for Channel 4. Smith has since published *The Autograph Man* (2002) and *On Beauty* (2005).

White Teeth is undoubtedly 'multicultural' in that its characters stem from very different cultural and racial backgrounds, yet all manage to live together in something approximating harmony in the same small area of London. Surrounding the main characters is a multitude of people of all ages, religions and colour, many of them, like the central character Irie, of mixed origins.

Some critics have received the novel as a portrait, and even celebration, of a kind of cosmopolitan hybridity. This view seems to distinguish between multiculturalism as a diversity of cultures and ethnicity living side by side, and hybridity as 'the joining of two entities to create a third entity.' (Laura Moss 2003). This certainly seems to play a part in *White Teeth*. At times it portrays a modern, urban world where the mix of races and religions is an ordinary every-day affair.

However, the change towards such hybridity is not totally unproblematic. The resistance comes not just from the British nationalist 'scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation' (Smith 2001, p.327), but equally from the minority cultures themselves:

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 in a child called Michael (*Ba*), who in turn marries somebody called Lucy (aa), leaving Alsana with a legacy of unrecognizable great-grandchildren (Aaaaaaa!), their Bengali-ness thoroughly diluted, genotype hidden by phenotype (Smith 2001, p.327).

The question of identity is central to Smith's multicultural characters, and Zadie Smith explores various models of identity in *White Teeth*. The main character Irie is half Jamaican,

half English, and dreams of a day when ‘roots won’t matter anymore’, where one’s identity, perhaps, is rooted in a different soil than that composed of history, race or genetics, and she finds a certain comfort in the fact that her child will never know exactly who its father is. Other characters, such as Millat or Joshua, struggle with the conflict between a sense of identity grounded in the values of their family or those of the outside world.

A central question in *White Teeth* is how important the past is for one’s sense of identity. Is it crucial to Smith’s characters, or does the issue of multiculturalism and hybridity require a different model? Does a person’s identity depend on the past, on determining factors such as history or DNA, or is Irie’s vision of a ‘tabula rasa’ a possibility? Do the individuals in Smith’s universe have any possibility of influencing and changing their identity, or is it totally determined by factors outside of their control? Is identity pre-plotted, or is there an element of the random? *White Teeth* is fundamentally about the attempt to escape the past and to base one’s sense of identity on other factors.

Identity may be seen as something imposed upon us, by society or history or genetics or even destiny, which is beyond our control. Rather, it controls us, limiting what we can be or wish to be. Connected to this outlook is a sense of predetermination. Throughout the novel history repeatedly plays an important part, showing that Irie’s dream perhaps is still that, just a dream. A central question in the novel is how to deal with the past, in terms of both personal and cultural history. England is a multicultural country because of its history as a colonial power. As much as Britain affected its colonies, the colonies have had an impact on Britain in return. There are long historical, and genetic, links between England and the former colonies.

Does the past inevitably dictate the future, and is our identity ‘always already’ predetermined? The characters deal with this issue in various ways. FutureMouse© becomes a powerful symbol, with its entire life pre-plotted, promising “a new phase in human history where we are not victims of the random but instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate”

(Smith 2001, p. 433). The random, however, is not that easily removed, as the little ‘brown rebel mouse’ escapes from its cage into the unknown.

We cannot totally escape predetermining factors such as history or DNA, but random factors also play a part. Both predetermination and randomness, however, are aspects beyond human control:

‘And then you begin to give up the *very idea* of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long dirty lie...and I begin to believe that 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?’ As Samad described this dystopia with a look of horror, Irie was ashamed to find that the land of accidents sounded like *paradise* to her. Sounded like freedom (Smith 2001, pp. 407-408).

Samad experiences the randomness of life as loss of agency, whilst to Irie this is exactly the opposite; escape from the limiting factor of roots, and a possibility for creating a new identity.

Many of the characters carry with them a sort of rewritten past, an imaginary homeland. Irie paints a picture of Jamaica as a mythical and beautiful land, and Samad has an idea of Bangladesh as a place where everything works as it should. Identity can also be seen as a coherent narrative of self, stories we tell about ourselves and others in order to make sense of and give shape to the world. Connected to this concept of identity is a continuous interpretive activity; a hermeneutics of the self, so to speak. If our identities are narratives, then they can be read, and misread, like any text. It also implies a belief that identity is not a fixed, innate quality, but rather a story or stories we create consciously or unconsciously that may change over time. Reinvention becomes a possibility. *White Teeth*, with its multitude of characters and voices, becomes a narrative containing many smaller narratives of self.

A third possibility is seeing identity as constantly in flux, heterogeneous and indefinable, depending on circumstances and chance. The concept of identity as a fixed stable

unit is thus negated. It is rather seen as random and changeable. Identity as a recognisable pattern may be a role we 'play' that we have created through gesture and a seeming consistency, or that is created by others for us, through interpretation of these gestures. This model allows for a sense of identity not rooted in the past, and it offers many possibilities for reinvention through borrowing gestures and roles from other sources, such as film, television or music, 'trying on' different identities, so to speak. Society, not unlike these novels themselves, contains many voices and many roles in a constant dialogue with each other. This thesis will in the following chapters investigate how these voices are represented in *White Teeth*. The first chapter will present the method and theoretical background for the discussion of identity in *White Teeth* and look at the different models of identity in some detail. In the second chapter I will see how these models are represented in the text, and whether any of the models are privileged.

Theoretical and Methodical Background

Bakhtin

According to Bakhtin the novel is fundamentally different from other textual forms, in that its most typical feature is the allowance of “the image of another’s language and outlook on the world, simultaneously represented *and* representing” (Bakhtin 1996, p.128) and at the same time “the language of the novel is a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other” (Bakhtin 1996, p.130). Two central terms connected to this are heteroglossia and polyphony. Heteroglossia refers to the speech diversity in the novel; the interweaving of different linguistic registers, represented and representing, whilst the concept of polyphony refers to the fact that these different represented voices each embody an ideological position. There is no unitary language or style in a novel, but a verbal-ideological centre of organisation, what Bakhtin calls the ‘postulated author’. The voices and ideological positions are in a dialogical relationship to each other and to the ideological centre, at varying degrees distant from this ‘authorial’ centre. Bakhtin sees subjectivity as socially constituted, and the multiplying of discourses must be understood by reference to the historical and social setting of specific language users (McHale 1987). Because these represented discourses are “historically relative, delimited and incomplete in the novel, they, so to speak, criticize themselves” (Bakhtin 1996, p.128).

The function of the novel is to represent human reality in all its polyphonic diversity. Every language is a point of view, a socio-ideological conceptual system of real social groups. Intrinsic to this polyphonic, heteroglot ‘reality’ of the novel is an element of parody. The language of another is the *object* of representation and mimesis, and the postulated author is almost completely outside it. It is only the author’s parodic and ironic accents that “penetrate this ‘language of another’” (Bakhtin 1996, p.127). “Under conditions of the novel every direct

word – epic, lyric, strictly dramatic- is to a greater or lesser degree made into an object, the word itself becomes a bounded image, one that quite often appears ridiculous in this framed position” (Bakhtin 1996, p.132). In parodic discourse there are two styles of languages: the language being parodied and the language that parodies. “This second parodying language, against whose background the parody is constructed and perceived, does not enter as such into the parody itself, but is invisibly present in it” (Bakhtin 1996, p.150). Laughter says Bakhtin, is the corrective of “a reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly too contradictory and heteroglot to be fitted into a high and straightforward genre” (Bakhtin 1996, p.136).

White Teeth is a realistic novel, and its portrayal of many diverse characters with distinctive voices makes it typical of the novel in a Bakhtinian perspective. A central theme is identity, in particular cultural and ethnic identity, in a multicultural setting. In order to discuss the different models of identity in this novel, I will use a method of close reading with a Bakhtinian dialogic foundation, attempting to separate the different voices and perspectives on the theme. The novel contains many, often conflicting, discourses about identity centred around the main characters, in particular on the role of the past, in the form of history and genetics in the constitution of identity. There seems to be no **one** answer to what identity is, or how important the past is, rather there are many different discourses in a dialogical relationship with each other, although there is a verbal centre around which these discourses are organized. Smith uses parody and laughter to undermine and deconstruct, so to speak, many of the polyphonic positions, almost as soon as she has constructed them.

Identity and Multiculturalism

Identity

Identity is a central term in the discourse of multiculturalism, but it is often used casually, without any clarification or definition. The term has been in use in English since the 17th century, but has only come into popular use since the 1950s. In 1974 Robert Coles complained that the term “had come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign” (quoted in Gleason 1983). Matters have hardly improved since. K. Mercer comments that: “As a keyword in contemporary politics it has taken on so many connotations that sometimes it is obvious that people are not even talking about the same thing” (Mercer 1998, p.43).

Surrounding ‘identity’ is a multitude of discourses, often in contradiction with each other. It may mean nothing more than a naming of a group or person, but it may also be used “in reference to the distinguishing characteristics marking whatever is known by that name or to the ensemble of cultural features that collectively constitutes the larger reality with which a person or group is identified through a certain name” (Gleason 1983, p.930). Confusing matters further is the fact that sometimes different terms are used to mean more or less the same, such as self, personality, character, subject and individuality. These terms are frequently used alternatively with little or no difference in meaning, at other times they refer to completely different things.

Part of the problem lies in its different use by different traditions. As a starting point it would be useful to distinguish between two main approaches: traditional psychology vs. sociology. The psychological tradition has tended to see identity as being an ‘inner sameness and continuity’. Sociologists would, on the other hand, dispute the ‘solid, given entity’ of the self, and see it as “rather a process, continuously created and recreated in each social situation that one enters, held together by the slender thread of memory.” The two approaches in other

words have markedly different definitions, broadly understanding identity respectively as something “internal that persists through change” or “ascribed from without that changes according to circumstance” (Gleason 1983).

There is an additional difference between the line of thought that describes identity as something ‘primordially given’ and essential and that which sees it as ‘optionally cultivated’. Central to both the primordial view and that of psychology is a sense of permanence. However, the one does not necessarily entail the other. The second approach regards identity as something that can be assumed or put aside by conscious choice. This is not dissimilar to the sociological point of view, which sees identity as something permanently changing according to circumstance, but sociology would place less emphasis on conscious individual choice, and more on the external processes that shape the individual.

Although these different approaches overlap and intersect, it is possible to divide them into two broad and general categories: a liberal humanist standpoint, and a constructionist approach. The differences between the various understandings of identity have at their base some central and interconnected problems: the unity and continuity of the self, the importance of external influences, such as society or culture, and individual agency and autonomy.

The unity of the self

“Identity is the essential core of who we are as individuals, the conscious experience of the self inside” (Gershen Kaufman 1980, quoted in Anzaldua 2000).

In the Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED) identity is defined in this way:

2. a. The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality.

personal identity (in *Psychology*), the condition or fact of remaining the same person throughout the various phases of existence; continuity of the personality.

The idea of the unity and sameness of the self has its roots in the humanist tradition of the western world. This view regards the subject as an atomistic, unique and autonomous unit. The individual is a rational being, capable of making independent decisions and the master of his or her own fate, and has an ‘inner core of beliefs, desires and memories’. According to Melley (Melley 2000), this ‘long-standing model of personhood’ derives from the liberal political philosophy of Hobbes and Locke. Identity, in this model, comes from within, and reflects the autonomy and uniqueness of the individual. External, social influences are seen as negative and invasive and a threat to this uniqueness. The first part of the OED definition echoes this idea of identity being a unique and continuous unit.

Within traditional, Eriksonian psychology, the ideal, healthy self and sense of identity are also seen as fairly stable and coherent. The Freudian perspective would argue that the root of the self lies in the early formation years, when personal identity is developed into a stable unit. A stable core self does not necessarily preclude the possibility of a changing sense of identity. However, any major challenges to this sense of self-identity would result in an identity crisis. Psychologists such as Erikson place emphasis on early identification processes, seeing identity as involving an interaction between the inner development of the ego and social interaction (Gleason 1983). The norms and roles of society are internalized, creating a stable sense of self. However, the introduction of the idea of the subconscious throws some doubt upon the autonomy and unity of the self with its suggestion of involuntary action and thought that is not subject to rational control.

Connected to both the liberal and the psychological views of identity is the concept of authenticity; that a person should be identical to him or herself, and not merely a reflection of

others. This is the thought that lies behind statements such as “to be true to oneself”. The individual becomes ahistorical, separated from the society he or she lives in: “The self-actualizing person must be self-contained, true to his or her own nature, ruled by the laws of his or her own character rather than by the rules of society” (Kvale 1992, p.43). This line of thought presupposes that there is such a thing as an essential true core within an individual, which again echoes the “principle of the ‘one in the many’ [...] the psychological version of the classical idea of unity or logos, which gathers, as it were, the particulars of my psyche under a common description” (Løvlie 1992, p.123).

The constructed self

The essentialist view has received much criticism from proponents of identity politics, who see race and gender as social constructs. They have argued that the universal human character posited by liberal humanism, is in fact not universal but rather an identity coded white, male, bourgeois, able-bodied and heterosexual. However, identity politics has itself been accused of an essentialist position, particularly from poststructuralist critics. Judith Butler claims that identity politics assumes a cohesive, self-identical subject, with certain core essential attributes, that can be identified and reclaimed from oppression. Poststructuralists would instead posit that “the subject is itself always already a product of discourse, that possibilities for subjecthood are set out in advance of any possible expressions by an individual”(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP)).

The constructionist idea that there is no essential a-priori identity is not a new one. Locke, defining identity in this way: “The Identity of the same Man consists..in nothing but a participation of the same continued Life, by constantly fleeting Particles of Matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized Body” (OED), argued in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that human beings are *tabula rasa* when born, and that no values or characteristics are innate, but rather learned in time from the society in which they

live in. However, Locke would also see individuals as having an essential nature as rational agents that to a large extent fashion their own identity through choices based on experience.

Both the traditional psychological and sociological approaches recognize the importance of social factors in the development of identity. In traditional psychology the social aspect would be most important in the early years, whilst from a sociological point of view societal influences continue to be important throughout a person's life. This approach tends to see identity as a result of interaction between the individual and society. Identity is socially bestowed, but also socially sustained; a question of naming and labelling that involves identification with role models and reference groups. An individual would then not just have an identity or identities, but must consciously strive to maintain this through action and adherence to group values. Identity is thus an effect of society, which may have a certain coherence, but is not impermeable or unchanging. This difference in many ways mirrors the idea of inner vs. other directed individuals that the American sociologist David Riesman was concerned with shortly after World War II (Melley 2000, p.50). An inner-directed individual would have internalized certain values to such a degree that they appear as essential 'true' values that will guide the individual in his or her choices throughout life. An other-directed individual would to a much larger extent be influenced by the values and actions of others. This also could be said to mark the difference between the autonomous liberal individual and the subject placed in a dialogical relationship with society. The sociological tradition does not really negate the idea of a 'core' of self, but merely suggests that identity may not be so fixed and closely linked with 'self', but rather consists of roles that are vested and discarded over time. Other cultures may not have this idea of a centered and autonomous self, but derive personal identity from group belonging and social interaction.

In a poststructuralist foucauldian perspective the subject is constituted through discourse and power play. We are 'inscribed' into the text of the world. The individual's

choice of identities may be limited and predetermined by the culture and society we are placed within. Indeed, as even the very notion of the autonomous, authentic self may be ideologically based, the search for an identity that relies on continuity and self-sameness may be equally problematic: “We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for centuries” (Foucault, quoted in Løvlie 1992, p.132).

Poststructuralist thought would, rather than placing the emphasis on ‘sameness’, state that identity is as much a matter of difference: “Identity requires differences in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty” (Connolly 2002, quoted in SEP, p.16). It is impossible to define someone as being identical to him or herself, without also taking into account the fact that the sameness is linked to this “otherness of a kind that can be constitutive of selfhood as such” (Paul Ricoeur 1994, p.3). The shift of focus from sameness to difference also marks a shift from the atomistic concept of the liberal self to a post-modern decentralized and relational self. Self-identity is continually constituted in a dialogue with ‘the other’. “We are seen to live in webs of multiple representations of class, race, gender, language and social relations; meanings vary even within one individual” (Lather 1992, p.101). Postmodernist and poststructuralist theories have moved from unity to fragmentation, from independence to interdependence, the ‘core’ of self seen as an ideologically constituted fiction. Identity is no longer seen as an innate, a-priori quality, but an articulated ‘skin’ between the individual and the world, marking the boundary of self and other. It is itself part of language, and a result of being conceptualized and verbalized.

The narrated self

Ricoeur, in *Oneself as Another*, operates with a distinction between what he terms identity as sameness: the *idem*-identity, and identity as selfhood: the *ipse* identity. Within the identity as selfhood, there is a constant dialectic between ‘self’ and ‘other than self’. There is

also a distinction between mental predicates and physical predicates of identity, and: “One’s state of consciousness, one’s thoughts and actions are ascribed to the very same thing to which these physical characteristics, this physical situation, is ascribed” (Paul Ricoeur 1994, p.36). Both consciousness and the body are integral factors to the concept of identity. Because of the *idem* dimension of identity, personal identity can only be articulated in the temporal dimension. Because time is also a factor of “dissemblance, divergence, difference” the central question becomes. “Is there a form of permanence in time that is a reply to the question “Who am I?”” (Paul Ricoeur 1994, p.118)

Character, to Ricoeur, designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized, and is the “limit point where the problematic of *ipse* becomes indiscernible from that of *idem*, and where one is inclined not to distinguish them from one another” (Paul Ricoeur 1994, p.121). Part of what constitutes character is habit, which “gives a history to character”, and acquired identifications: “To a large extent, in fact, the identity of a person or a community is made up of these identifications with values, norms, ideals, models and heroes, *in* which the person or community recognizes itself. Recognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by*” (Paul Ricoeur 1994, p.121). This identification process, comparable to habit formation, occurs through an “internalization which annuls the initial effect of otherness or at least transfers it from the outside to the inside” (Paul Ricoeur 1994, p.121). It is “otherness assumed as one’s own”.

The polarity between *ipse* and *idem* suggests “an intervention of narrative identity in the conceptual constitution of personal identity [...]” (Paul Ricoeur 1994, pp.118-119). This narrative identity becomes important in order to create a sense of concordance while admitting the discordances which threaten the identity, what Ricoeur calls “the synthesis of the heterogeneous” (Paul Ricoeur 1994, p.142).

Following the line of concordance, the character draws his or her singularity from the unity of a life considered a temporal totality, which is itself singular and distinguished from all others. Following the line of discordance, this temporal unity is threatened by the disruptive effect of the unforeseeable events that punctuate it. Because of the concordant-discordant synthesis, the contingency of the event contributes to the necessity, retroactive so to speak, of the history of a life, to which is equated the identity of the character. Thus chance is transmuted into fate. And the identity of the character emploted, so to speak, can be understood only in this dialectic (Paul Ricoeur 1994, p.147).

Identity can thus be seen as a coherent narrative of self, stories we tell about ourselves and others in order to make sense of and give shape to a world that is fragmented and accidental. We are narrators and co-authors of our own stories, at the same time as we are characters within them. Connected to this concept of identity is a continuous interpretive activity, a hermeneutics of the self, so to speak. If our identities are narratives, then they can be read, and misread, like any text. It also implies a belief that identity is not a fixed, innate quality, but rather a story or stories we create consciously or unconsciously that may change over time. Reinvention becomes a possibility.

The autonomous self

A central issue is the question of autonomy and agency. To what extent can an individual optionally cultivate and freely choose an identity or identities? Within the humanist tradition, the individual has a fairly great deal of autonomy over his or her actions, but it follows from the essentialist perspective that there are certain traits, such as race or gender, that are *given*, that we have no possibility of changing. However, as Hume has argued, although one does not freely arrive at one's set of desires and beliefs, the only meaningful interpretation of freedom relates to one's ability to translate those desires and beliefs into

action. Constructionists would argue that even these so-called givens are constructs, and that our concept of for example race, beyond the most basic level of DNA, is a result of discourse. Poststructuralists would argue along with Derrida that ‘there is nothing outside the text’, that language determines what it is possible to say. Identity is negotiated through languages of various kinds (visual etc.) using pre-existing codes which influence how it is possible to ‘label’ oneself. “Beyond the origins that have assigned to us biological identity papers and a linguistic, religious, social, political, historical place, the freedom of contemporary individuals may be gauged according to their ability to choose their membership” (Kristeva 1993, p.16). Although the concept of identity as narrative seems to allow some personal autonomy in the constitution of identity, it still relies on which stories are possible to tell. The stories and genres may ‘always already’ be in place. Perhaps, then, it is merely a matter of choosing membership in preexisting clubs.

Do we choose freely, or is the choice imposed upon us? The fact that we always speak from a specific location in place and time may be felt to limit the choice. We are, after all, a product of history, upbringing and genes. The level to which humans can influence their future is itself dependent on their present and past. For some, the historical and social place may be of such a nature that the number of possible stories is greatly reduced, for others there may be such a plethora of possibilities that choice becomes equally difficult.

The poststructuralists’ insistence that the possibilities for subjecthood are set out in advance of any possible expressions by an individual, may be seen as reducing individual autonomy and capacity for self-definition. Identity is in this perspective not chosen freely, but largely bestowed socially. Certain groups may be ‘labelled’ through cultural expectations, based on the historical past and the associations connected with it. This, in turn, may lead to the marginalization of these groups from the main culture. Ethnic identity is thus imposed from the outside, on the group, and the individual within the group, on the basis of, for

example, skin colour. This imposed identity may then become internalized and part of one's own sense of identity, thus further reducing the options. Past history would be a defining factor for the discourse that creates the subject, and in consequence for bestowing and choosing identity: "I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*... I was responsible at the same time for my body, my race, for my ancestors" (Frantz Fanon, quoted in SEP, p.6).

There's an element of causality implicit in this way of thinking that is reminiscent of a deterministic outlook. Past history determines the present discourse, which again logically leads to the future. History 'creates' us, or at least places the parameters for identity. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990) argues that:

the question of locating 'agency' is usually associated with the viability of the 'subject', where the 'subject' is understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates. Or, if the subject is culturally constructed, it is nevertheless vested with an agency, usually figured as the capacity for reflexive mediation, that remains intact regardless of its cultural embeddedness (Butler 1990, p.182).

This, she claims, is seen as necessary in order to "establish a point of agency that is not fully *determined* by that culture and discourse" (Butler 1990, p.182). However, this is founded on the false presumption that "to be *constituted* by discourse is to be *determined* by discourse". Rather, she argues, the constitution of the subject simply means that the subject is a consequence of "certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity" (Butler 1990, p.185). These rules governing signification do not just restrict, but also make alternative assertions possible: "it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible" (Butler 1990, p.185) She concludes

that: “Construction is not the opposite of agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible” (Butler 1990, p.187).

Multiculturalism, Hybridity and Diaspora

Multiculturalism

In the debate surrounding multiculturalism, ethnic and cultural identity comes to the fore. The preoccupation with the question of identity within a multicultural society to a large extent began with the large-scale political movements of the second half of the 20th century, such as feminism and Black Civil Rights, which were fighting against the perceived oppression and stereotyping of certain social groups within the dominant culture. For many proponents there was, and still is, an emphasis on authenticity and reclaiming a state of being in existence before oppression. As previously mentioned, this has laid them open to charges of essentialism, particularly from poststructuralists. However, what is often labelled ‘Identity politics’ continues to influence the debate, and typically “concerns the liberation of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context” (SEP, p.1).

Multiculturalism is defined in OED as:

The characteristics of a multicultural society; (also) the policy or process whereby the distinctive identities of the cultural groups within such a society are maintained or supported.

What such a policy tends to suppress, is that these cultural groups are in themselves not homogenous communities, but consist of individuals with differing and sometimes antagonistic identities. The maintaining of one such group may lead to the oppression of another. After all, as J. Weeks comments:

Identities are not neutral. Behind the quest for identity are different and often

conflicting values. By saying who we are, we are also striving to express what we are, what we believe and what we desire. The problem is that these beliefs, needs and desires are often patently in conflict, not only between different communities but within individuals themselves (Weeks 1990, p. 89).

Multiculturalism may be said to imply a form of relativism, in that ‘maintaining the distinctive identities of a cultural group’ may prevent the interference with discriminatory practices within that group, such as female genital mutilation or forced marriages.

A problem with the OED definition is that multiculturalism, not unlike the concept of identity, is a far more elusive and complicated concept than this definition suggests. As one critic puts it: “‘Multiculturalism’ has become a term commonly used by a remarkably diverse array of institutions [...] Because these entities maintain such starkly different ideological agendas, any search for consensus almost immediately flounders on a sea of apparently ceaseless semantic flux” (Powell 2003, p.153). Part of the reason for this lies in the very nature of the multicultural concept. In the introduction to the collection *Theorizing Multiculturalism*, C. Willett argues that multiculturalism “as a political, social, and cultural movement has aimed to respect a multiplicity of diverging perspectives outside of dominant traditions” (Willett 1998, p.1). Powell, in his article, goes on to outline three different possible definitions: as an historical phenomenon, as a critique “wherein a wide array of scholars and activists” are demanding the right to define their cultural identity on their own terms, and as a theoretical movement that “sets out to theorize a multiplicity of cultural perspectives in what is often called a ‘relational’ or ‘dialogic’ context” (Powell 2003, p.155).

Multiculturalism as a philosophical and theoretical term has been the target of much criticism. Stanley Fish has claimed that “multiculturalism is an incoherent concept that cannot be meaningfully either affirmed or rejected”. (Fish 1997, p.388) He distinguishes between ‘Boutique Multiculturalism’ and ‘Strong Multiculturalism’. A boutique multiculturalist does

not take seriously the core values of the cultures he tolerates, because he cannot see these values as more than “overlays on a substratum of essential humanity” (Fish 1997, p.379.) As an example Fish goes on to quote Steven C. Rockefeller: “Our universal identity as human beings is our primary identity and is more fundamental than any particular identity, whether it be a matter of citizenship, gender, race, or ethnic origin” (Fish 1997, p.380). The strong multiculturalism will, on the other hand, accord a deep respect to all cultures at their core, because it values difference in and for itself. However, this poses a dilemma for the strong multiculturalist: “either he stretches his toleration so that it extends to the intolerance residing at the heart of a culture he would honor, in which case tolerance is no longer his guiding principle, or he condemns the core intolerance of that culture, in which case he is no longer according it respect at the point where its distinctiveness is most obviously at stake” (Fish 1997, p.383).

Hybridity

Homi Bhabha argues in an interview that “the whole nature of the public sphere is changing so that we really do need the notion of a politics which is based on unequal, uneven, multiple and potentially antagonistic, political identities” (Rutherford 1998, p.208). Multiculturalism in his view represents “an attempt both to respond to and control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference, administering a consensus based on a norm that propagates cultural diversity” (Rutherford 1998, p. 209). Instead of talking about cultural diversity, he prefers the term cultural difference, because he finds the liberal relativist perspective inadequate in itself: “It is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist”. He introduces the term ‘cultural translation’ to suggest that all forms of culture are related, because all culture is a signifying or symbolic activity. Cultures are decentred structures, “constituted in relation to that otherness internal to their own symbol-forming activity”

(Rutherford 1998, p.210). The act of cultural translation denies the essentialism of the a priori of a given original or originary culture, because every culture is continually in a process of hybridity. This displacement, or 'liminality', opens up the possibility of articulating "different, even incommensurable cultural practices and priorities". 'Hybridity', to Bhabha, is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge: "This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives" (Rutherford 1998, p.211).

Hybridity, although not necessarily a third space, might be the result when an individual is a member of more than one ethnic or cultural group, whose values and culture may be very different. Gloria Anzaldua describes in *Borderlands/La Frontera* how this combination of double or multiple identities can be experienced: "This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity [...]. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one" (Anzaldua 2000, p.901). Hybridity can, in other words, be seen as the result of, the problem with, and the solution to a multicultural society. The very duality and multiplicity of identities could form the basis of a new model for identity, or could create the need for one.

There's no place like home

"In these postmodernist times the question of identity has taken on colossal weight for those of us who are post-colonial migrants inhabiting histories of diaspora" (Rutherford 1998, p.106), one critic claims. The concept of diaspora has traditionally been used in connection with the Jewish community, but has in recent times been seen as useful also for describing the experience of other cultural groups. According to M. Fludernik in the introduction to *Diaspora and Multiculturalism* (Fludernik 2003) diaspora consciousness belongs to a stage

beyond hybridity. The recent interest in the concept of diaspora marks a development from individualism to communitarianism, where one's collective, rather than individual, identity becomes important. The individual feels a need to be situated within an ethnic and cultural community to which he or she belongs. In order for a diaspora to exist certain criteria need to be filled. Most importantly there must have been a dispersal or expansion from an original homeland. This transposed group must have "a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements" and with it an idealization of this putative ancestral home (Fludernik 2003).

Stuart Hall in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" invokes this idea of diaspora in order to establish a concept of cultural identity that "lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (Hall 1998, p.235). This, he says, is necessary because of the dominant European discourse that has been "endlessly speaking – and endlessly speaking *us*" (Hall, 1998, p232), in the process marginalizing and making 'other' what is 'spoken' and at the same time influencing the way these 'others' see themselves, thus becoming a constitutive element in their own identities. Cultural identity should not just be grounded in history, but in the re-telling of the past, which would offer "a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas" (Hall 1998, p.224). Rather than seeing cultural identity as a fixed essence, he argues for the recognition of this identity as a *positioning* within the discourses of history and culture; the narratives of the past. History no longer speaks to us as a simple factual past, but constructed through "memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (Hall 1998, p.226).

R. Sommer, on the other hand, posits a distinction between transcultural and multicultural. According to him, ethnic minorities "have to meet at least two challenges: the external pressure of assimilation to the traditions of the cultural majority and internal tensions between different generations within the diaspora itself" (Sommer 2003, p.177). The response

may be to either adapt to the dominant culture, which he suggests is the hybrid, transcultural solution, or to hold on to the values of the cultural and ethnic group, which would be a diasporic and multicultural response.

There are two dominant visions as regards the question of identity in a multicultural society, he suggests. One is based on the idea that fixed, stable identities are a thing of the past and sees the identity of the future as composed by hybrid, shifting constellations of 'self' and 'Other'. The other is diasporic and insists on strong ethnic identities and roots. In the diasporic imaginary, which creates a sense of homogeneity within the group, community becomes pivotal to individual identity. The diasporic imaginary is grounded in communal experience dealing with a sense of displacement, and tends to be essentialist, he argues.

Summing up

The concepts of cultural and ethnic identity within a multiculturalist setting are surrounded by multiple and at times incommensurable discourses, and these are centered around a few main issues. Firstly, there's the question of whether identity is internal and connected to the individual self, or whether it is relational and grounded in a sense of group belonging. Secondly there's the role of external influences in the constitution and maintenance of identity. Is identity seen as something imposed, or is it voluntary? Is there an essential core to an identity, and is it possible to be authentic? Are identities fixed and stable, or are they fragmented and discursive? Connected to these questions are issues of difference, marginalization and power structures, which often make the debate distinctly political.

White Teeth

Introduction

In this chapter I will have a closer look at the different voices that make up the polyphonic multicultural landscape of the novel, predominantly presented through the characters, in an attempt to distinguish which ideological positions they represent. By ideology I will here not be referring to a political system of thought, but rather the different perspectives on identity, seeing ideology as a relatively coherent system of values, beliefs, or ideas shared by some social group and often taken for granted as natural or inherently true. Every voice and ‘language’ is a point of view that is part of a larger conceptual system. A central concept in Bakhtinian thought is that the different voices in the polyphony are in constant dialogue with each other. I will look closer at these dialogical constellations, keeping in mind the larger polyphonic whole of the text. I will also attempt to see what the verbal-ideological centre might be, and to see whether any of the various ideological positions are privileged and closer to the centre.

The basic conflict in *White Teeth* is between a sense of identity as imposed upon the individual by determining factors such as history and/or DNA and one that views individuals as *tabula rasa*, with full freedom to choose their identity. Connected to this are issues of causality versus randomness or chance. Smith presents multiple models of identity, from essentialist to constructionist, hybridity and post-modern ‘performance’ via narrative and diasporic.

A central question in the multicultural landscape depicted in the novel is how someone from a minority culture positions themselves in relation to the dominant culture when it comes to identity. Adding a layer of complication is the fact that the dominant culture in question is English rather than British. British would include Irish, Scottish and Welsh, all of which are countries that at some point have been politically dominated and even colonized by

the English, and which have some scepticism towards the English as part of their culture. The relationship in the text is thus coloured by an uneven power relationship in the past, and is informed by the history and discourse of colonialism. The minority groups in the narrative, mostly from previous colonies, are not just marginalised within the main discourse, but also historically defined as 'other' by the colonial power, and affected by certain sets of expectations directed towards them.

Several of the quotes that introduce the different sections refer to the dominant discourse that the minority groups are surrounded by and with which they are forced to be in dialogue. Although characters like Samad, who is originally from Bangladesh, try to maintain their own culture as a foundation for their sense of identity, they are still inevitably influenced by the main culture that surrounds them, by the mediated reality presented via television and newspapers, and by the larger, international culture present in films, fashions and popular music. How does one respond to this possible conflict between the values of the family and home culture and those of the dominant culture? The use of the phrase 'More English than the English' points to this dialogical relationship, and the conflict is also explored when Samad sends one twin back to Bangladesh in an effort to shield him from the English culture, while the other twin stays in England. In *White Teeth* the discussion then moves away from these simple binaries towards a different and more complex solution.

Through the rejection of essentialism and the insistence on the constructed nature of cultural identity through discourse and narrative, the novel opens up a space of uncertainty. It establishes a different ontology of identity, where "the past can be taken or left, identity can be changed at will or left to metamorphose by chance" (Sell 2006, p.32). This new space offers the possibility of not belonging, of roots becoming unimportant, or being just another part of the performance of identity.

The Structure, Characters, Style and Plot

The novel is fairly complex in structure, presenting a web of different plot threads and different voices. Its overall structure is in four main parts, all headed by personal names: Archie, Samad, Irie and Magid, Millat and Marcus. This structure establishes a focus on characters. Each main part is also marked by dates; with the present date first, then the past: 1974, 1945; 1984, 1857; 1990, 1907, apart from the last section which is headed 1992, 1999. This in itself indicates that the past plays a part in the novel, but as a background to the present.

The main characters are as suggested by the titles of the main parts. The story is organized around the interaction of three families: The Jones family, consisting of Archie, Clara their daughter Irie, and Clara's mother Hortense Bowden; the Iqbals - Samad and Alsana and their two sons Magid and Millat; and the Chalfens- Marcus and Joyce with their son Joshua. The friendship between Archie, the typical Englishman, and Samad, originally from Bangladesh, forms much of the 'backbone' of the narrative, as it links the two families in a mutual history, but also because they represent two very different perspectives on identity. The central positioning of the section named 'Irie' suggests her importance in the narrative. This is in many ways a 'bildungsroman' of Irie, following the events of her life from foetal stage to motherhood. This is emphasized by chapter headings such as "The Miseducation of Irie Jones", and the central position given to the section bearing her name.

The setting in the present is a multicultural London, and from a Bakhtinian perspective there is a constant dialogue between the characters representing minority cultures and the dominant English culture, as well as between these minority cultures themselves. Smith presents a number of binary pairs, emphasizing this dialogical relationship: in the plot in the form of the parental generation vs. the younger generation and English culture vs. the minority cultures; in the characters, such as the contrast between Archie and Magid; in

chapter headings like “Chalfenism vs. Bowdenism”, and even within the characters themselves, as when Samad says: “We are split people. For myself, half of me wishes to sit quietly with my legs crossed, letting the things that are beyond my control wash over me. But the other half wants to fight the holy war” (Smith 2001, p.179). Smith is discussing whether the meeting of two cultures will inevitably result in a sense of division within those from the minority culture, as they feel they have to choose one or the other. Through a process of parody and being distanced from the verbal-ideological centre, these binaries are to some extent also deconstructed in the narrative, suggesting a different solution to the question of identity.

The narrator is 3rd person omniscient, often commenting upon the thoughts and actions of the characters, thus adding another voice to the polyphony. The style is heteroglossic, both linguistically and textually. The characters themselves are represented with their distinctive linguistic registers, but within the narrative are also included different textual registers such as letters and quotations from encyclopaedias, films, literature and songs. Within the linguistic register of the characters, there’s also a great deal of code-switching, i.e. the moving from one register to another. The style of writing also reflects a mixing of registers, as when the text goes from straightforward prose into ‘catalogues’, and at times throwing all rules of punctuation and capitalisation away, ending up with something more similar to poetry.

The story is, very briefly, about two men, Archie and Samad, who meet at the end of WWII where they become friends. We encounter them again in the 1970s, when Samad has come to England with his wife. The narrative starts with Archie’s attempted suicide following a failed marriage. Both Archie and Samad start families, and we follow the two families and the various people they encounter until the year 1999. Samad at some point sends one of his twin sons, Magid, to Bangladesh. The other twin, Millat, together with Archie’s

daughter Irie, befriends the Chalfen family. Unbeknownst to them, so does Magid, through correspondence. Marcus Chalfen is involved in a project called FutureMouse©, a genetically manipulated mouse, a project which comes under attack both from religious groups and animal activists. The last part of the novel culminates in the launch of FutureMouse© and the convergence of these different groups as they unite in a planned protest against this experiment.

Each part is introduced by a quote. These quotes are interesting enough to be studied in closer detail, as they suggest the prevalent themes, and also create an inter-textual space in which Smith positions herself.

The epigraph at the beginning of the novel is a quote from *The Tempest*: “What’s past is prologue”. Shakespeare, as part of the ‘canon’, and being taught in every school in Britain, including the one within this novel, represents the dominant culture of British society. Additionally, it is a play much discussed by postcolonial literary critics, which often see it as offering a justification for colonial oppression. In the play the words are uttered by Antonio, as he plans a fresh start for the future, dismissing the past as “a mere appendix to the future, prior to it in time but not necessarily a precondition of it” (Sell 2006, p.29). The quote certainly signifies a preoccupation with the past, and indicates the central theme of the role of the past for identity. Sell argues that *White Teeth* “feels its way towards a demotion of the past from a position of causal pre-eminence with respect to the present and the future” (Sell 2006, p.29). However, the past is obviously still felt to play an important part in the present of *White Teeth*, otherwise why include it at all? Sell suggests that, although the past is still there, “it has lost the crushing weight so manifest in postcolonial fiction” (Sell 2006, p.29). The characters in the novel, however, seem to various degrees to struggle with the weight of the past.

The first part, “Archie 1974, 1945”, is introduced by a Forster quote:

Every little trifle, for some reason, does seem incalculably important today, and when you say of a thing that ‘nothing hangs on it’ it sounds like blasphemy. There’s never any knowing – how am I to put it? – which of our actions, which of our idlenesses won’t have things hanging on it forever’ (Smith 2001, p.1).

Forster, living and writing at the height of British Imperialism, and discussing colonial issues, can also be said to represent the dominant culture of his time, and is today another writer on the British National Curriculum, a reminder of an imperial past. Here, the present is seen as possibly having an impact on the future, and by inference the past on the present. Every little thing may affect the future, may be a link in a chain of causality.

Section two, “Samad 1984, 1857” is introduced by a quote from Norman Tebbit: “The cricket test – which side do they cheer for? ... Are you still looking back to where you came from or where you are?” (Smith 2001, p.124) During the 1980s and 1990s there was a perception in parts of the UK that some immigrants did not have a primary loyalty to the UK, but continued to identify with their countries of origin. Tebbit suffered substantial criticism for his comment that integration could be measured by what cricket team a person supported, being branded, among other things, as a racist. Allegiance to a very English sport was seen as an equivalent of allegiance to the UK, thus equating England with the UK, a point of view guaranteed to also infuriate people from other parts of the UK, such as Scotland or Wales, in particular as they do not tend to support the English cricket team anyway, having their own sporting events of equal importance.

Cricket is of course the quintessentially English sport, and we encounter it already in the first chapter, ironically in a very different setting than what one would expect, as a halal butcher is using a cricket bat to kill the pigeons that infest his premises (Smith 2001, p.5). The immigrant may use objects associated with England in a way that was not originally intended. The quote again emphasises the conflict between the past and the present in determining

personal identity, and this time suggests that there may be an element of choice in the matter. Do you choose to let the past have an impact on the way you see yourself, or are you rooted in the present? It also emphasizes the continual dialogue between the main English culture and the minority cultures of the immigrants within this society.

Beginning the section named “Irie 1990, 1997” is a quote from *Lolita*: “In this wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect, could it be that the hidden throb I stole from them did not affect their future?” (Smith 2001, p.264) Here, again, is a reference to how the present may affect the future, implying a causal connection between the two. Nabokov, of course is seen as one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, and although Russian by birth, made his success as a writer in English. Interestingly, this is the first quote by someone who was an immigrant, and who was truly multicultural, with affiliations to Russian, American and English culture. Here Smith is perhaps suggesting that there are other possibilities to the question of cultural identity than conflict and opposition.

The last section, “Magid, Millat and Marcus: 1992,1999” (Smith 2001, p.414) is introduced by three small texts, two definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary of the words ‘fundamental’ and ‘fundamentalism’, and a verse from “As Time Goes By”, both in a direct reference to popular music and representing an essentialist outlook. The references to fundamentalism and essentialism refer to Millat’s increasing involvement with the Islamic fundamentalist group of KEVIN, but also perhaps to Hortense’s belief that the end of days is near, or Marcus’s firm belief in science, genetics and the perfection of FutureMouse, or even the rather fundamentalist approach of the animal activist group FATE.

Imagery

The imagery of teeth forms a prevalent metaphor in this novel. Apart from being included in the title, it appears not only in chapter headings, such as “Canines, the Ripping Teeth”, but also used in metaphors both used by, and as comments upon, the characters

themselves. Teeth, of course, have roots, and these roots are hidden from exposure, creating the stable foundation for what is visible above. Healthy roots and gums are necessary for the teeth to be healthy: a rotten root causes the tooth to fall out or die. However, as the narrator comments on Samad: “You would get nowhere telling him that weeds too have tubers, or that the first sign of loose teeth is something rotten, something degenerate, deep within the gums” (Smith 2001, p.193). Mr. Hamilton, who has too poor teeth to be able to eat anything that hasn’t been pulverized, discusses the problems of wisdom teeth, or third molars, and how one’s mouth may not be big enough for them. Because, as he says: “they’re your father’s teeth, you see, wisdom teeth are passed down by the father. [...] So you must be big enough for them” (Smith 2001, p.173). If not, the teeth will grow crooked or not at all. The irony of his own teeth being too weak to eat with suggests that Mr. Hamilton, in many ways representing the colonial discourse and racism in the way he refers to his past history in Africa, is not to be taken seriously. The imperial English identity is seen as dead or ailing, and his comments could be read as an indicator that roots are seen as a thing of the past and no longer fundamentally relevant as a basis for identity to the next generation.

Here teeth are also used as a metaphor for the role played by family relationships, possibly even inherited traits, as a foundation for personal character. Past history is not just social and general; it also has a strong personal dimension. This reading of the metaphor is also present when used in connection with Clara, Irie’s mother, who has all her teeth knocked out in an accident not long before she leaves home. Later on, there are several references to false teeth, indicating her complete break with her past, in the form of her mother Hortense. She has escaped the identity that her mother has imposed upon her and the religious determinism it springs from, but, although casting her lot with English Archie, has perhaps not replaced these roots with a solid identity of her own. When she removes her dentures, her

speech becomes practically unintelligible, suggesting that she is unable to articulate herself clearly, or that she speaks in two different registers.

Several of the chapters refer to 'root canals'. The term root canal has a double meaning, as it may refer both to the pulp-filled channel in the root of a tooth and to the treatment for a diseased root canal. When the root canal, in the first meaning, is healthy, it keeps the tooth resilient so that it can withstand shocks without breaking. The biggest threats to this are decay and trauma. In the latter meaning of the term, diseased tissue is removed and replaced by inert material. This is usually followed by the amputation of the nerve within the root, removing sensation. It's hard to decide to which of these definitions the metaphor refers. The image of roots in general is most likely to refer to the past, but are we dealing with a healthy, decayed or amputated past? Has the past been treated as diseased, removed and replaced by something else? In which case, what may this something else be? Or are we to read this metaphor as referring to the necessity of strong cultural and/or family roots for a healthy sense of identity? Or simply the impossibility of avoiding them, and the effect they have upon the individual, as when Alsana says about her and Clara's children: "One leg in the present, one in the past. [...] Their roots will always be tangled" (Smith 2001, p.80).

Although comments from Irie and narratorial comments indicate that the bias is on the side of freedom from roots, there is no final answer to this in the text, opening up for a double reading, and thus increasing the sense of uncertainty, of multiple possibilities.

Another strong metaphor or symbol is that of FutureMouse©. The life of the mouse is genetically completely determined; every random factor has been obliterated. Its identity has been imposed from the outside, as every stage of its life, including its length, has been planned from the outset. It is as much a plotted *site* as an animal. However, as Marcus contemplates in frustration, people seem "unable to think of the animal as a site, a biological site for experimentation into heredity, into disease, into mortality. The mouseness of the

mouse seemed inescapable” (Smith 2001, p.419). What to Marcus is a promise of liberation, of increased human agency, as it heralds “a new phase in history where we are not victims of the random but instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate” (Smith 2001, p.433), is to others a frightening prospect of ‘designer babies’ and the pre-plotting of a life: “And these people, like, *program* the mouse, plot its every move, yeah, when it’s going to have kids, when it’s going to die. It’s just *unnatural*” (Smith 2001, p.418). To FATE², there is no difference between mice and men, and the mouse is more than a symbol, to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and to KEVIN³ FutureMouse© represents tampering with God’s creation, and man setting himself up as equal to the Creator. FutureMouse© comes to signify the ultimately essentialist identity, one determined entirely by ‘God’, in this case man, or DNA. As Jonathan Sell comments:

To the religious, certainty is synonymous with God, to the rationalist with science.

Both God and science are authors of a determinist metaphysics whose logic, if taken to the extreme, would build certainty on the basis of identity, for the over-application of determinism would mean that the past were so palpable in the present, so constitutive of it, that it would be the present, as it would also be the future. This is the bind for the gloomiest of determinists who believe they can never escape their past since it is their present and will accompany them in the future (Sell 2006, p.30).

Simultaneously it is reminiscent of an extreme application of the poststructuralist idea that the possibility for subjecthood are set out in advance. The mouse is a totally constructed being, with no agency whatsoever. The accidental escape of the mouse in the final chapter is an instance of the random, uncontrollable aspect, and perhaps suggests a similar approach to Judith Butler’s in *Gender Trouble*: that the subject is a result of “certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity” (Butler 1990, p.185), yet at the

² Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation

³ Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (They are aware they have an acronym problem)

same time this construction of the subject creates “the very terms in which agency is articulated” (Butler 1990, p.187). In other words, the deliberate constitution of the mouse does not mean that it is fully determined; there will always be the possibility of alternative expression within the rules governing its life. The mouse is now free to some extent to act as it pleases, but only within the parameters of its original conception; it will still live its allotted time span at the most, and still go through the various planned stages. Either way FutureMouse© is interpreted it represents a future dictated by the past; whether it is through social construction, through discourse or ‘bred in the bone’, and through its escape it signifies the possibility of escaping to a certain extent the emplotments of the past.

Of all the characters in the text, Samad is the person most connected to what the FutureMouse© represents, being first of all a fervent cultural determinist, a believer in the power of the past to shape the present. He is also a Muslim, believing that “This life I call mine is his to do with what he will. Indeed I shall be tossed and turned on the wave, and there shall be nothing to be done” (Smith 2001, p.288). Another believer in certainty is Hortense Bowden, who believes that the world will end on a set, predetermined date, which shall be followed by Judgement Day, when the non-believers will be punished. Marcus Chalfen has faith in science, and the determining powers of genetics. He bases his own sense of identity upon his long family lineage and the good DNA he has thus inherited. The past is, to him, defining who he is. To Irie, FutureMouse© is a symbol of what she wants to escape, of the determining factors of her roots and DNA, and the final escape of the mouse would signify hope and possibility.

Characters

Within this framework suggested by the symbol of FutureMouse© of chance versus determinism, essentialism versus construction, agency versus no agency, the characters of the

novel represent the many positions and the many voices that inform the discussion about what shapes identity.

The parental generation can be said to represent the past that the younger generation has to deal with. There's a marked difference between the attitudes of the parental generation compared to that of Irie, Joshua, Magid and Millat. The distance between the generations is also suggested by their very different use of language. The words themselves have changed their meaning; have become appropriated by the second generation and turned upside down, resulting in complete miscommunication between parents and children. When Millat refers to Magid as a '*chief*', meaning a complete and utter pillock, Samad hears it as praise: "Others may scoff, but you and I know that your brother will lead others out of the wilderness. He will be a leader of tribes. He is a natural *chief*" (Smith 2001, p.216). The parental generation sets great store by correct usage of grammar and syntax, whilst the young generation cannot see what is wrong with bending and even breaking the rules. What does it matter, to them, whether it is 'hanged' or 'hung', whether it is 'a historic' or 'an historic'; the rules are written by people of the past, and may be changed in the present. Conformity to the rules is in addition laden with unwelcome associations, making the speaker sound as if they are "puttin' on fucking airs" (Smith 2001, p.241), according to Millat. The language itself is changing with the reality it describes, as is the language of the narrator. In a section describing the Perret Institute where FutureMouse© is to be exhibited, the style goes from simple sentences, into catalogues that form an entire page of a sentence, the punctuation mostly commas and semicolons, ending in a paragraph with very little capitalisation and punctuation:

people can finally give the answers required when a space is designed, or when something is being rebranded, a room/furniture/Britain (that was the brief: a new British room, a space for Britain, Britishness, space of Britain, British industrial space cultural space space); they know what is meant when asked how matt chrome makes

them feel; and they know what is meant by national identity? symbols? paintings?
maps? music? air-conditioning? smiling black children or smiling Chinese children or
[tick the box]? world music? shag or pile? tile or floorboards? plants? running water?
they know what they want, especially those who've lived this century, forced
by one space to another like Mr de Winter (né Wojciech), renamed, rebranded, the
answer to every questionnaire nothing nothing space please just space nothing please
nothing space (Smith 2001, pp.518-519).

The overall effect is one of increased speed, and is almost claustrophobic although speaking of space. It presents a picture of modern society as a world filled with signifiers and conscious consumers, creating a contrast with the experience of the immigrant at the end of this quote, who echoes Irie's desire to be free of the defining constraints of discourse in his wish for space only, away from the renaming and rebranding. Identity is here described both as a concept and consumer brand and places it squarely within a 'Butlerian' framework of 'repetitive signifying' (Butler 1990, p.185). It can be seen as an interface between the individual and society, and is socially bestowed, but also socially sustained; a question of naming and labelling. Identity is thus an effect of society, which may have coherence, but is not impermeable or unchanging.

First and foremost representing faith in cultural determinism is Samad. He is a firm believer in the importance and weight of history and the necessity of roots. He is what Sell characterizes as a 'gloomy determinist', and believes both in the defining forces of history and in personal agency and the possibility of affecting the future. To Samad, every action has a consequence, every accident will have repercussions. We encounter his philosophy early on; already in 1945 Samad states that: "You must live life with the full knowledge that your actions will *remain*. We are creatures of consequence" (Smith 2001, p.102) and "Our children will be born of our actions. *Our accidents will become their destinies*" (Smith 2001,

p.102). To Samad, a person's actions also define him, what someone stands for will tell you what kind of man he is.

There's also an essentialist quality to Samad's outlook on life, in his insistence on the importance of 'blood'. Much of his sense of importance is connected to his family relationship with Mangal Pande, and upon seeing a picture of Pande, Samad exclaims: "This is our blood, Rajnu. [...] I have his nose!" (Smith 2001, p.259) The narrator at some stage comments upon Samad: "When a man has nothing but his blood to commend him, each drop of it matters, matters terribly" (Smith 2001, p.255).

Place of origin becomes important in this perspective. To Samad 'soil' and 'soul' are ultimately connected, as the soil is what your soul is rooted in, and "tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles" (Smith 2001, p.193). This is the bedrock of Samad's identity, and doubt throws him into existential confusion:

'And then you begin to give up the *very idea* of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long dirty lie...and I begin to believe that 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?' (Smith 2001, p.407)

This confusion is a reaction to the fact that Samad's philosophy is discredited through the results of his attempt to change the future. Samad finds that the country to which he has travelled in order to improve the life of his family, on the contrary seems to have a negative impact on the next generation, in the sense that they are discarding the values of their parents' culture. In the hope of counteracting the effect of the English culture he sends one twin, Magid, to Bangladesh, a decision triggered both by frustration with the culture he sees them encounter in Britain, and from a feeling of personal failure, as he has become involved in an extramarital relationship with his children's music teacher: "And the further Samad himself

floated out to sea, pulled down to the depths by a siren named Poppy Burt-Jones, the more determined he became to create for his boys roots on shore, deep roots that no storm or gale could displace” (Smith 2001, p.193). In Bangladesh, he hopes, Magid will be in contact with his roots, so that at least one of his sons will grow up a true Muslim. However, the outcome is not as expected: “The one I send home comes out a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer. The one I keep here is fully paid-up green bow-tie wearing fundamentalist terrorist. I sometimes wonder why I bother” (Smith 2001, p.407). Through this complete contradiction of Samad’s expectations, and through ironic narratorial comment, Samad, although a central voice, is being positioned somewhat at a distance from the verbal-ideological centre.

Archie, Samad’s best friend, is in many ways his total opposite. He starts off the novel by starting a completely new life, unfettered by the shackles of the past. The first chapter starts with Archie’s attempted suicide, and his rescue by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, the owner of a halal butchers. He is thus given a second chance: “In this manner, a new Archie is about to emerge. We have caught him on the hop. For he is in a past-tense, future-perfect kind of mood” (Smith 2001, p.18). The past is tense, but the future offers the possibility of perfection, in other words. The narrator suggests that “men retain the ancient ability to leave a family and a past. They just unhook themselves, like removing a fake beard, and skulk discreetly back into society, changed men” (Smith 2001, p.18), a comment that certainly could not be aimed at Samad. The past has little impact on Archie, and likewise he on history. His one accomplishment, participating in the Olympics in 1948, has left no trace, as the fact has been omitted by a sloppy secretary so that “madam Posterity struck Archie down the arm of the sofa and forgot about him” (Smith 2001, p.15). His actions leave no marks, in other words. Archie is, in the words of his friend, a ‘cipher’, someone who stands for nothing. When pushed by Samad in WWII, he says he is fighting for “democracy and Sunday

dinners, and . . . and . . . promenades and piers, and bangers and mash” (Smith 2001, p.120). He is not a person to worry overmuch about his roots. Even his new life is occasioned by accident, as “something happened that led to the transformation of Archie Jones in every particular way that a man can be transformed; and not due to any particular effort on his part, but by means of the entirely random, adventitious collision of one person with another” (Smith 2001, p. 23). To Clara, he quite accidentally becomes “the last man on earth”. Their meeting may be entirely random, but Clara’s motivation for becoming involved with a man more than twenty years her senior is not. She is “*from* somewhere. She had *roots*” (Smith 2001, p.27) and these roots she is trying to escape as quickly and completely as possible. Archie tries to avoid responsibility and to circumvent the whole issue of agency, as he makes most decisions at the flip of a coin, leaving the decision-making process entirely up to chance.

His actions, prompted by chance as they may be, still have consequences, though. By neglecting to kill Dr. Sick in WWII, he paves the way for FutureMouse© in the present. Here is Dr. Sick, as the brain and inspiration behind the project, thus linking FutureMouse© and the pre-plotting of life with Nazi ideology. In the very last chapter almost all of the characters are gathered together in one single room, which is “Just like on TV!” each with their own thoughts and their own agendas. Hortense and her fellow Jehovah’s Witnesses comprise the soundtrack to the scene, as they are standing outside singing hymns. There’s a flashback to Archie’s first coin flip, in WWII, which is now seen to have led up to this particular moment. In the present, he again saves the life of the German Doctor, moving in front of Millat’s bullet as it speeds towards the Doctor. At the same time, he breaks the glass box containing the mouse, and inadvertently frees it. “*Go on my son!* thought Archie” (Smith 2001, p.542) is the last line of the book, and in some way Archie may at least be seen as a ‘Godfather’ of the mouse: had he not spared the Doctor’s life in WWII, the mouse may well not have existed in 1992.

The final irony is that Samad, though attempting to change events, has no real impact, whilst Archie through running away from ever making a decision does. This irony creates a distance towards both options; neither acting nor non-acting is a viable solution.

Another important character from the previous generations is Hortense Bowden, Irie's maternal grandmother. Both she, and her friend Ryan Topps, erstwhile boyfriend of Clara, are believers in Destiny and searchers for Certainty. When Clara and Ryan have an accident with his motorbike, thus causing Clara's teeth to be knocked out, Ryan "knew it was because God had chosen Ryan as one of the saved and Clara as one of the unsaved. Not because one was wearing a helmet and the other wasn't" (Smith 2001, p.44). In Ryan's world nothing is ever an accident, rather it is a sign of God's plan. Hortense has spent most of her life waiting for the end of the world. As each new date is announced from the 'head quarters' of the Jehovah's Witnesses, she constantly expectant and constantly disappointed. The disappointments do not affect her faith, though, because to her, the Witness Church is "where my roots are" (Smith 2001, p.409).

Marcus Chalfen also represents a form of determinist philosophy in his attempts to eliminate the random aspect of life, being a fervent believer in the 'perfectability' of life through genetics. His sense of identity is also unrelentingly essentialist, with his emphasis on the 'good genes' of his side of the family, and his complete knowledge of the Chalfen family tree. The family refers to themselves as 'Chalfenist', and their way of life 'the Chalfen way'. Joyce thinks of people in terms of plants, and has great faith in the nurturing aspect. However, she is also interested in origins, and wants to know "where the cutting had come from" (Smith 2001, p.325). In a conversation with Clara she says: "I mean, after a while, you've got to suspect it's in the genes, haven't you? All these brains. I mean, nurture just won't explain it" (Smith 2001, p.354) and she is pleased when Clara tells her there's English blood in the family. The Chalfens exercise a great influence over Irie. To her they are a

refuge and present a different alternative to her own family situation. They are, somehow, “more English than the English”, and visiting them feels like “crossing borders, sneaking into England” (Smith 2001, p.328). Smith has a lot of scorn to offer for the Chalfens, ridiculing their hypocritical multiculturalism and tolerance in scenes such as when Joyce exclaims at a dinner party with a lesbian couple: “Do you use each other’s breasts for pillows?”(Smith 2001, p.350) The final irony is that the Chalfens are 3rd generation immigrants themselves.

The past is also represented in Mr. Hamilton, a fading, decrepit and toothless remnant of colonialism. Although British colonialism has been a predominant factor in the events that have led to the multicultural society the characters inhabit, it is in the persona of Mr. Hamilton discarded and brushed off as being of no more importance than a powerless and slightly ridiculous, albeit scary, ‘skeleton in the closet’. The past history of the British colonial venture means little to the second generation. They live in a present, in a common homeland, which brings new and different challenges. The injustices of the past are no longer enough to form part of the foundations of personal and cultural identity, as it does for Samad. This modern society is one of many races, creeds and cultures, as it follows “the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment” (Smith 2001, p.326).

Although there is still a strong sense of a dialogical relationship between the dominant English culture and the culture of people of immigrant stock, it is also a society where these different cultures are starting to merge and meld into hybrid constellations. This can be seen in the playground, where children are playing with “first and last names on a direct collision course” (Smith 2001, p.326). It is also manifest in the favourite haunt of Samad and Archie, O’Connell’s Pool House, run by Ali Yusuf, painted orange and green, with pictures of racehorses and fragments of the Qur’an on the walls, where they serve toast, eggs and fry-ups, but not pork, an “Irish pool house run by Arabs with no pool tables” (Smith 2001, p.183).

Similarly, this hybridity is visible in the code-switching of the second generation, where a Jamaican accent is used ‘by all kids, regardless of their nationality’ to express scorn

Smith’s contention at certain points seems to be that a pure culture and pure genes have never really existed, nor is it an aim in itself as it is for the Chalfens, and sometimes for Samad. As he admonishes his wife to ‘act Bengali’, she reaches for the encyclopaedia to discover that Bengalis are largely descended from Indo-Aryans, mixed with local groups of “various racial stocks”. “It looks like I’m Western after all!” Alsana exclaims. “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!” (Smith 2001, p.236)

The ideas of homeland, belonging and identity are all mainly constructions, convenient narratives. Samad’s idea of Bangladesh as a pure culture is an idyllic fiction, a diasporic imaginary, as is Irie’s picture of Jamaica as a place where “a young white captain could meet a young black girl with no complications, both of them fresh and untainted and without past and dictated future – a place where things simply *were*” (Smith 2001, p. 402). The narrative conventions, however, require beginnings and ends, and a sense of connection and causality between the two. Several of the characters have stories of their own beginnings, which are read as explanations and foundations for who they are in the present. Hortense gets a sense of importance from the fact that she was born in an earthquake. Her greatest wish is to be in Jamaica when the end of the world occurs, thus satisfying narrative rules. Samad’s narrative of himself starts with Mangal Pande, offering him a sense of a beginning that is sharply in opposition to the British Empire. If these connecting threads start to unravel, beginnings may be seen to be accidental, only given meaning by its surrounding narrative. Thus, if the idea of belonging is primarily a convenient fiction, the contention that identity is determined by one’s cultural and historical roots is seriously undermined.

The idea of an essential identity linked to DNA is negated in the fate of the twins Magid and Millat, who already from the start are markedly different although sharing most of their genetic material. The fact that Magid, growing up in Bangladesh, comes home 'more English than the English' and that Millat becomes involved with a group of fundamental Muslims further serves to accentuate the suggestion that, although identities may be culturally constructed, they are not fully determined in the sense that Samad seems to believe.

For the second generation the question becomes one of how to respond to the possibility of hybridity and one of how to deal with this constructed past. They are each attempting in their separate ways to escape the cultural, social and historical factors that are felt to impose an identity upon them.

Magid and Millat show two very different possible options of how to deal with this quandary. Magid chooses to adopt the standards of an old-fashioned colonial identity, and his admiration is directed towards the logical rationality that science, represented by Marcus Chalfen, represents. He wants certainty, as much as Marcus, but also as much as Hortense and Samad. Millat, on the other hand, has no such strong sense of affiliation. He has embraced hybridity with both arms, being "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" (Smith 2001, p.351). He firmly rejects his parents' culture, yet he is 'all things to everybody', having to 'please all of the people all of the time':

To the cockney wide-boys in the white jeans and the coloured shirts, he was the joker, the risk-taker, respected lady-killer. To the black kids he was fellow weed-smoker and valued costumer. To the Asian kids, hero and spokesman. Social chameleon. And underneath it all, there remained an ever present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere (Smith 2001, p.269).

Millat is a poser, a performer, seeing himself as if an actor in a film. To him, identity is a posture adapted for the benefit of others. He thus becomes a representative for the post-modern notion of identity as performance, where identity is no longer seen as an innate, a-priori quality, but an articulated 'skin' between the individual and the world, itself part of language, and a result of being conceptualized and verbalized. As Sell suggests: "[Identity] is a space we can play in and whose contours change from one moment to the next in response to the subject's relation to the context he or she happens to be in at any particular time" (Sell 2006, p.37). Millat is also a member of a 'new breed': the Raggastani, 'a kind of cultural mongrel':

Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican Patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called that, was equally a hybrid thing: Allah *featured*, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck *geez*er who would fight in their corner if necessary; Kung Fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; added to this was a smattering of Black Power [...] but mainly their mission was to put the Invincible back in Indian, the Bad-aaaass back in Bengali, the P-funk back in Pakistani (Smith 2001, p.232).

The second generation has more in common with a kind of international, hybrid, youth culture than they do with their parents' culture. Films, music and television provide the framework and reference for their re-imagining of themselves.

His turning point comes with the protests against *The Satanic Verses*, not because he finds the book offensive; he hasn't read it, but because he recognizes the anger of those defined by a white English majority culture. He knows that he is:

a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a

footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or felt like Millat, or spoke like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered (Smith 2001, p.234).

In other words, he is faced with a similar experience as Irie when she fails to see her reflection anywhere in this society, except in a distorted and negative sense: “There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a strange land” (Smith 2001, p.266). At one point Irie feels she has maybe found her own reflection in Shakespeare’s sonnet 127, with its reference to hair as black wires and a dark complexion, but is quickly disillusioned by her teacher. For Millat and Irie, the dialogue has turned into more of a monologue directed at the minority cultures by the surrounding society. The immigrant culture is marginalised or presented in a negative fashion by the media, creating a horizon of expectation without offering many possibilities for someone like Magid to retaliate and join the discussion. The uproar of the Muslims allows him the possibility of expressing his anger at this state of affairs, and also provides him with a sense of community.

Joshua, much inspired by his feelings for Joely, also rejects the values of his family, by choosing to step out of the ‘Chalfenist’ culture in order to immerse himself in that of FATE. Like Millat, he doesn’t want to be defined and determined by his family’s background, but rather seeks an alternative expression of himself. In his rebellion against his family’s values he chooses their complete opposite, as if positing a situation of being ‘either with me or against me’.

Irie truly has a foot in each camp, being half Jamaican and half English. If roots are important, then on which roots should she base her identity? The bipolarity implicit in the chapter “Bowdenism versus Chalfenism” implies that the differences between the choices make them incommensurable. Smith suggests through her deconstruction of cultural

determinism and essentialism as viable options that the binary opposites she herself has posited are too reductive in their dualistic simplicity. Life is too complex to be organized into such neat little columns. We live, rather, in “webs of multiple representations” (Lather 1992, p.101). It is possible to achieve a hybrid identity, one not relying on one culture or the other, but naturally rising from the borderland between them, within a liminal space of in-between and neither, a place of transition. Irie’s unborn child becomes a symbol of this ‘new’ identity, as it is “a perfectly plotted thing with no coordinates” (Smith 2001, p.516). Irie’s child “can never be mapped exactly nor spoken of with any certainty” (Smith 2001, p.527), in a complete opposite of the FutureMouse. This seems to Irie an ideal world, a world of accidents that “sounded like *paradise* to her. Sounded like freedom” (Smith 2001, p.408). In a post-modern perspective, reality and thus identity, is seen as constructed in and through our languages, discourses and semiotic systems. Yet, if there is ‘nothing outside the text’, that is exactly where Irie somehow wants to be. She wishes to be creating her own reality, unfettered by the discursive weight of the past. She looks forward to a world where culturally determining factors will no longer be important, where she will no longer haplessly be emplotted within a discourse, a time “when roots won’t matter any more because they can’t because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too tortuous and they’re just buried too damn deep” (Smith 2001, p.527).

Roots are important, in other words, and Irie at this point longs for a time when they no longer will be. At an earlier stage, Irie goes in search of her Jamaican roots in her grandmother’s house: “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[...], and she stores the pictures and news articles “under the sofa, so that if by osmosis the richness of them would pass through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her” (Smith 2001, p.400). Here Smith describes the longing for roots, for

belonging, while at the same time highlighting the constructed and fictional nature of the past. The narratives of the past are seen as part of the narratives of self, necessary to make sense of the fragmented and random nature of reality. Ricoeur would suggest that accidents “contribute to the necessity, retroactive so to speak, of the history of a life, to which is equated the identity of the character. Thus chance is transmuted into fate” (Ricoeur 1994, p.147). In this perspective, Smith is saying that the very idea of roots may just be a necessary fiction, one that gives shape and meaningful direction to a person’s sense of identity through creating a sense of belonging and community.

Irie is caught, then, between the need for a narrative of the past and a desire to be free from roots, to be ‘tabula rasa’. She wants to be able to construct herself, but it may simply not be possible, as the discourses of the past and the present continue to exercise their influence. However, in the notion of identity as narrative, there also lies the possibility for self-invention. Events may be ordered and interpreted into a coherent story, an emplotment of one’s own choosing. Samad does exactly this, as he eschews the official representations of Mangal Pande. These do not match his sense of identity and inheritance, so he simply waits until he finds an account that suits him better, which represents, to Samad, the *truth*. Narration, and the connected idea of the diasporic imaginary, allows the characters to create a sense of continuity where maybe none exists.

At the same time, complete reinvention is not possible, as Irie discovers when she tries to change her appearance. Her attempt to straighten her kinky hair to make herself more desirable to Millat, and more like the ideal she sees around her, ends in disaster as, in an ironic twist, all her hair falls out by the roots. Certain aspects are genetic, and not easily changed. Attempting to conform to the standards and values of the dominant culture, may mean the loss of roots altogether. In an odd parallel to her mother’s false teeth, Irie now needs false hair, although her state is only temporary. According to Butler, though, these are

just part of the parameters that govern the expression of identity, and may be circumvented, as these rules governing signification do not just restrict, but also make alternative assertions possible: “it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible” (Butler 1994, p.185) She concludes that: “Construction is not the opposite of agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible” (Butler 1994, p.185).

Conclusion

In the introduction I asked whether a multicultural society required a different model of identity. National cultural identity is under increasing pressure as it is influenced by other cultures through patterns of immigration and emigration and the international culture of film, television and music. Models of identity that do not take this into account will become more and more difficult to sustain as social and cultural groups continue to converge and create new constellations. Smith has in *White Teeth* suggested a possible model, taking into account post-modern theories of fragmentation and performance and discarding the liberal humanist ideas of self, cultural determinism and essentialism. This model still, however, acknowledges the concept that identity is both socially bestowed and sustained. Identities bestowed upon us socially or genetically may not be so easy to escape, as the experiences of Irie show, but they may be subverted and ‘played’ with through repetitive signification. Identity, Smith suggests, is not a fixed, innate quality or something inevitably arising from discourse. The possibility of a ‘hybrid’ identity that is less definable and more open to reinterpretation offers a new space in which to *be*.

To Irie this liminal borderland of no certainties is the future perfect. Identity may now be seen as more of a game, the “socially pragmatic strategy” which Millat masters so well, and releasing mankind from causal bonds to “freely and endlessly create for himself a persona

to suit each particular moment” (Sell 2006 p.39), yet always within “rule –governed discourses” (Butler 1990, p.185). Identity becomes performance, a surface concept rather than essence, no longer so much a question of who you ‘really’ are, but rather who do you want to be seen to be.

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