Reconciliation or Exasperation?

- A Study of Post colonialism in Zadie Smith’s White Teeth
INTRODUCTION

‘You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, you get yourself started... but you mean to go back!’ . . . ‘– who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained’. (WT 407)

The narrative of White Teeth is set in a multicultural London and it contains a rich collection of characters. The text uses both realistic and fantastic approaches. The realistic approach can be seen in the ways the settings are pictured and reproduced: like a camera lens the text shows scenes that could actually take place in these suburbs. The fantastic approach can be seen in the way the author takes the plot one step further with a slight exaggeration, so the reader more easily can see and understand the complications.

Society today is multifaceted and multicultural. Zadie Smith is, just like Irie Jones - the main character of the book, a part of this society. Her mother is Jamaican and her father is British. But the story is not nostalgic, as early writers on the same subject used to be (Boehmer 123). The discussion deals more with cultural and generational questions; this is “cultural self presentation” (Spivak, according to Landry, MacLean 261).

The title of this essay is Reconciliation or Exasperation. When looking at the above quotation, it is easy to discern a sharp picture of exasperation. Samad, one of the characters of the book, has lived all his grown-up life in Britain with the basic ambition of changing his standard of living for the better. But he realizes that life contains so much more than that, he wants to be a part of society, he wants to be included, but in reality he feels “only tolerated” (WT 407). The other characters of the book have different, but not less notable experiences.

Question at issue
Considering the transpositions of nationalities all over the world, it is hoped that people do not merely settle down and become accepted, but also live their lives in reconciliation and understanding with one another. In the postcolonial era we live in, people want to be directors of their own lives, of their destiny and decisions concerning themselves and their families. This is a desire and a human right, but our reality may look different. What kinds of elements determine people’s possibilities of being integrated into society? This is what I will try to illuminate in this essay, by discussing the plots and characters in White Teeth.
I have applied the works of postcolonial critics, such as Edward Said and Homi Bhaba, to the text, although I am ambivalent about them. I think their work sometimes comprise a negative view of life and history, whereas I possess a more positive view and believe that our history must serve to improve human relations.

**Great Britain, Jamaica and Bangladesh**

According to Said, no one today has only one nationality; no one originates from only one source or one nation (1993:448). If we look into the rear mirror of our family history, most of us will find an inheritance from a country other than our mother country. This is what the characters of the book do, to a greater or lesser extent.

The story takes place in Great Britain, a country where the minority groups make up around 8% of the population. When knowing this, it is interesting to read what Edward Said writes about the inheritance from the colonial years (1993:412). He calls it the burdensome inheritance and asks; how do you know when you have become British, is it something you are told, something you feel or is it written on a piece of paper? You live within the boundaries of a country, with your customs and personalities and yet some criteria have not been met. Is there a measurement of Englishness, or any other nationality for that matter? Said does not find the answer but points out that we still have an idea that people are to be identified according to their nationality. We know what we think we see, and around us we see what Said calls “the other” (26).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Great Britain had an immense immigration from Ireland, the West Indies and southern Asia (Cunliffe et al 261). It was during this time that Clara’s father – Darcus Bowden – came from Jamaica to Great Britain (WT 31). Jamaica is the third biggest country in the Caribbean, and around 90% out of Jamaica’s 2.59 millions inhabitants originate from African slaves, who were brought in to the country by British colonizers during the 16th century and onwards (Gilmore 72-73).

Another country, which is represented through the characters in the book, is Bangladesh: a country where the agricultural regions are fertile and seldom more than ten meters above sea level, and therefore very sensitive to inundation during the monsoon period (23). The rain waters and enriches the soil, but it also brings a time when the flood can be so immense that thousands of people drown and millions become homeless. It is when a catastrophe of a similar kind takes place that the countries in the West get a glimpse of countries like Bangladesh. The Westernized picture of the Orient becomes fortified; this is the part of their life and situations that we take in (Said 1978:7). People in the West often know about the problems in the third world, but not many can say the name
of an author or any of his/her work. Within this conception also lies the idea of Europe as superior to the East. (Said 1978:9).

Looking back to the colonial times there were always two identities: the colonizers and the indigenous people (Bhaba 44). The colonizers came in with a superior attitude; with a beforehand settled idea what kind of people they were going to work with. It was as if the British were placed on historical ground, but in a giant glass jar, so they would not be too much involved with the life outside their enormous bubble.

The colonizers versus the indigenous, and with the results in hand we know the outcome. In 1947, the British left their Indian colony, which later on was split into two states: India, which primarily had Hindu inhabitants, and Pakistan, with mainly Muslim population. The partition meant also that the richest and most developed area of Bengal accrued to India, whereas the poorest part accrued to Pakistan. After many years of unrest, Pakistan was split and the western part kept the name of Pakistan whereas the eastern part became what today is known as Bangladesh.

The three families

Zadie Smith focuses on three main nationalities - and families - in *White Teeth*, the Bowden/Jones family, the Iqbal family, and the Chalfen family.

The Bowden/Jones family has roots in Great Britain and Jamaica and Archie Jones’ feelings for his country are clear and yet shallow: “Archie was amazed, it was his country; in his small, cold-blooded, average way he was one of the many essential vertebrae in its backbone, yet he could feel nothing comparable for it” (*WT* 95). Archie has a homeland and does not look for one. He is a part of Great Britain’s backbone, and does not contemplate this fact. As we will see later, his daughter Irie has a more complex relation to her background.

The Iqbal family are first- and second-generation immigrants from Bangladesh.

‘I’m not actually *from* India, you know’, said Samad with infinitely more patience than he had ever previously employed the many times he had been required to repeat this sentence since moving to England. . . .

‘No. I’m from Bangladesh’. . . . ‘Previous to that Pakistan. Previous to that Bengal’. (*WT* 133)

A majority of the people in Bangladesh are Bengaleese, speak Bengali, and originate from the historical area of Bengal, and this is what Samad Iqbal refers to in the above quotation.
According to historical sources, Bengal was known already in 1000 B.C. (Plunkett et al. 13). Samad who knows all this feels he needs to give a short history lesson when introducing himself. So many times have people looked at his complexion and concluded that he must originate from India, whereas he is from Bangladesh. Ignorance leads to intolerance, and excluding yourself from the multicultural world must, in my opinion, lead to estrangement.

The Iqbal’s historical background is so much a part of decisions made in British government level. If it had not been for the British interference in that region, the Iqbal’s would not have moved to the United Kingdom.

The story also contains the Chalfen family; a Jewish-Catholic-British family with roots in Poland (WT 328). This family will be discussed later in this essay.

LONGING FOR HEROES

Samad and Archie
In the novel you can see a need among the characters to find heroes, someone to admire, for example “Samad looked deep into his great-grandfather’s eyes. They had been through this battle many times, Samad and Pande, the battle for the latter’s reputation” (WT 250).

Samad feels he has to stand up for his great-grandfather, the man he admires immensely. Humanity has an indefatigable need of heroes; there is a desire in us to make history our own, to understand where we come from (Kittelson et al 96). In retrospect the characters of the book find a better version in their dreams than in reality. Stories are reconstructed to sound better and to give comfort and support. In this way, Samad leans on the heroic story of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande and the days when he and Archie fought side by side in Bulgaria during the Second World War (WT 88).

Even Archie finds strengths in the past, a period when he lived his life in completion. But it is only emblematical, knowing the story and knowing the realities of war – we realize it is a way of reconstruction. Archie also has a past as a track cyclist, which took him as far as the Olympics in London in 1948 (15). These courses of events and Mangal Pande are what Archie and Samad relate to as heroes, heroic dreams. But they are deceived; they hang on to the past and are about to miss the essentials in life. Who are their everyday heroes? Archie is there for Samad in all circumstances and is the counter-balance he needs. “Samad arrives, clasps Archie’s right hand in his own and feels the coldness of his friend’s fingers, feels the great debt he owes him . . . ‘I won’t forget this Archiebald,’ he is saying, ‘I won’t forget what you do for me tonight, my friend.’” (208).
However, during the Second World War and the beginning of their acquaintance their roles were different: “Archie went very red, unsure which item Samad was referring to. His hand wavered across the box of wires and bits and bobs. Samad discreetly coughed as Archie’s little finger strayed towards the correct item. It was awkward, an Indian telling an Englishman what to do . . . ” (93). Here we can see that even Samad and Archie play the roles of the colonizer and the domestic, they both know how they are supposed to behave. This changes through the years, though, and they develop a special friendship.

Samad establishes a confidence in Archie, a man who represents a country and a culture he does not feel welcome in. “. . . 1945 – when you know a man that long, and you’ve fought alongside him, then it’s your mission to make him happy if he is not” (50). Being the most intellectual of the two, Samad does have a mission in bringing Archie out of his uncommunicativeness to discuss and reflect over issues he would not come across without him.

To the reader they are not heroes because they do not correspond to the general view of heroes, that is someone who is admired for their bravery, goodness or great ability, someone who has performed an act of great courage under very dangerous conditions. In the novel they are characterized with a sharp eye and therefore appear very naked in their triviality. They have a deep friendship, but it is there only for them, it does not revolutionize or change anything around them.

**The second generation**

Samad’s second son, Millat, is looking for an example to follow, someone to look up to, someone who suits his own world, but “All his life he wanted a Godfather, and all he got was Samad” (506). KEVIN (The Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation), and the leaders within this group become his heroes. In the role as one of the group’s leader, it also embellishes his heroic dream and as a group of people can strengthen the identity, it can also strengthen the unity (Kittelson et al 98). But Millat has more arguments for joining KEVIN, he is more involved in his family’s tragic-historic situation than what is first obvious to the reader. His involvement in the group is a way of mediating his father’s heroic dreams (506). To his family and to society, he is still not a hero, but a person who offends the normative rules of conduct.

In the beginning of the story, when the children are still at school, we find Samad inflexible when there is a parental meeting at school. He questions the British heritage, traditions and his and his family’s part in it. “‘What is all this about the harvest festival? What is it? Why is it? And why must my children celebrate in it?’”(129). He is asking why
the Muslim festivals have to be squeezed between all the Christian Festivals. He suggests that traditions that are pagan in the Christian calendar should give room to Muslim traditions and festivals. He gets at cross-purposes with the British heroic world, and feels he belongs to nowhere and is afraid of losing what he has left. As the school is the place where his sons spend most of their time, this is also a question about the future, what will happen and what will form his sons’ attitudes.

Most probably there will be status quo, he will not feel that he belongs to the British culture, nor will he be able to keep what he has lost, but there will be something in between, which makes the future uncertain, or as Bhabha points out “an interstitial future, that emerges in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present” (219).

Every immigrant has to choose what he/she wants to adopt (the new culture), what he/she has to abandon from the old culture. Samad is so focused on this and expects that the next generation will view their situation with the same eyes.

‘Well, . . . Where are you from if you don’t mind me asking?’
‘Willesden’, said Irie and Millat simultaneously.
‘Yes, yes, of course, but where originally?’
‘Oh’, said Millat, . . . ‘You are meaning where from am I originally.’
Joyce looked confused. ‘Yes, originally.’
‘Whitechapel’, said Millat, . . . ‘Via the Royal London Hospital and the 207 bus.’

(WT 319)

Irie and Millat, the second generation, spontaneously give the name of the suburb as an answer, when asked where they come from. When the word originally is mentioned, they know of course what the lady is referring to, but still, in a humorous way, they (Millat) give a more precise answer to where they were born, how they, together with their mothers got home to their suburb from the maternity ward.

Irie Jones, Archie’s daughter is an observant young woman, the main character of the book and also the story’s heroine. In her mind she tries to work through her heritage, her past, and her own person. Who is she and why is she the way she is, compared to the others. Who are her parents and who will she be in the future. She turns against the heroic pseudo-world when she has the two families gathered on the bus and refers to the non-immigrants when saying:
'Go on, ask them. And they’ll tell you. No mosque. Maybe a little church. Hardly any sin. Plenty of forgiveness. No attics. No shit in attics. No skeletons in cupboards. No great-grandfathers. I will put twenty quid down now that Samad is the only person in here who knows the inside bloody leg measurement of his great-grandfather.’ (515)

She has come to an impasse in her life and questions the need of heroes and the dwelling in the past.

**THE PAST AND THE PRESENT**

**Your mirror**

My personal opinion is that to know who you are, you must know where you come from and what you are heading towards in the future, you must have dreams and visions for your life. The young generation in *White Teeth* is frequently cogitating over this issue. They want to see themselves in a context. As second-generation immigrants they have to deal with their past with parents who have left a country and who are not always satisfied with the new place. Their future is still uncertain and they wonder if they one day will become like their parents.

The way the characters in the novel describe themselves indicates that they do not fully feel as if they belong to the country where they live, nor do they completely want to adapt to the culture of this homeland. The first generation longs for something else, and the second generation wonders if they will adjust to their country, and abandon the life and culture of their parents. This young generation mirror themselves in the world around them to understand who they are; accepted, despised or trusted. Their personalities can change from one day to another depending on their own frame of mind, the reception from other people, their families’ emotional roller coaster, and the hope for the future or the contempt for the past.

Boehmer agrees that within most cultural contexts “identity is based on a distinction of the self from what is believed to be not self” (79). In other words, if I do not know who I am, at least I know who I am not; I am not like my parents, I am not British, I am not a swotter.
The women
Irie tries to vindicate her right to have a past, a history that is visible even at school. Her English class studies Shakespeare’s Sonnet 127 and the following conversation occurs between her and her English teacher:

‘Is she black?’
‘Is who black?’
‘The dark lady.’
‘No, dear, she is dark. She’s not black in the modern sense. There weren’t any...well, Afro-Carri-bee- yans in England at that time, dear ’ . . . (WT 271).

Irie is not satisfied with, or does not understand why she has to “be encouraged to interpret reality in a European way” (Boehmer 79). To understand who she is, she wants to see a glimpse of her past and her people even in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 127. Her hopes are obvious, because “She reddened. She had thought, just then, that she had seen something like a reflection, but it was receding; . . . ” (272).

Bhabha points out that a non-European will never be a part of a European past where the white man so evidently showed the way into the future (238). He will always look for his own past, his idiosyncratic history. No one likes to be a person without a history, or without being a part of a history so evidently submerging your country. Shakespeare is a historical corner stone in Great Britain and consequently takes up a great deal of time in the English classes at schools. Irie longs to see a reflection in the text, a proof that she is a part of her country’s history and a part of today’s literature classes, “There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land” (WT 266). Apparently, they never discussed Jamaican writers at school, nor authors from Bangladesh or any other non-European country.

In that way generation after generation will grow up – in a multi-cultural world – but ignorant of other countries’ history. A history that is “like everywhere else, . . . filled with significant human interaction- conflict, tragedy, friendship, ceremony . . . ” (Boehmer 195).

There is a lot to discuss about gender issues in White Teeth, but I will only deal with a small part in this study. When looking at the women of the older generation, Clara and Alsana, we can conclude that they have little formal education, but great knowledge of the hardships of life. What they cherish from the past is particularly the time of their youth when life still could look inviting and full of possibilities:
Clara was a teenage girl like any other; the object of her passion was only an accessory to the passion itself, a passion that through its long suppression was now asserting itself with volcanic necessity. (WT 37).

As a young person, Clara could easily fall in love, with ideas as well as with boys. We don’t know much about Alsana’s background and youth, only that she comes from an esteemed Bengali family:

‘A young girl has already been picked out for me [Samad]. A Miss Begum – daughter of Mr and Mrs Begum. The “in-laws”, as you say. Dear God, those two are so far up the rectums of the establishment in Bengal that even the Lord Governor sit snivelling waiting for his mullah to come in carrying a dinner invitation from them!’ (97).

Alsana was also very attractive, and Samad thought he had a good match. The two women married elderly men, and as Clara finds out: “No white knight, then this Archibald Jones. No aims, no hopes, no ambitions. A man whose greatest pleasures were English breakfasts and DIY. A dull man. An old man”. But, later on adds: “And yet...good”. (48). In a way, Clara seems to repeat the life of her mother who also had an absentminded husband and in that sense, she has not abandoned the life of her parents.

The younger generation in White Teeth does not live in a world with beautiful side-scenes placed there by the adults: they face reality every day. When Irie, as a teenager, goes with her mother to visit Joyce Chalfen, she corroborates her past versus Joyce’s past, her mother’s present versus Joyce’s hypothesized, self-righteous present. All this sums up in an anger that will be seen in the future.

‘Now, out of interest – I mean, I really am curious – which side do you think Irie gets it from – the Jamaican or the English?’

... ‘My side’, said Clara tentatively. ‘I guess the English in my side.’... As the front door closed behind her, Clara bit her own lip once more, this time in frustration and anger. Why had she said Captain Charlie Durham? (354-355).

Clara plays her part as the immigrant and feels inferior to Joyce, as if she does not belong to the country where she lives She knows what answer Joyce expects when asking where
Irie has got her brains from. She delivers the answer “‘... the English in my side’” and curses herself immediately afterwards. She knows that she is much more clever than Captain Charlie Durham ever was. She has let herself down, and worse than that, she has let Irie down.

MORE BRITISH THAN THE BRITISH

Truly British
The question when are you truly British can be applicable to any nationality within Great Britain, whereas the indigenous never have to ask this question. If you were born in a certain nation, you live and work there, you have your family there and if you have no plans of emigrating there is no need to ponder such matters. The only thing that threatens your position is the knowledge of the other (Boehmer 126).

No identity or nationality can exist on its own; it postulates the opposite, the other (Said 1993:95). A person who has moved to Great Britain and is neither fully British (as in Samad’s situation), nor Bengali – what is he? Is he a hybrid, a new nationality? Can he find like-minded people or does everybody in a comparable situation possess their own hybridity? According to Boehmer, identity and nationality are products of your history so the question is what becomes of the children (220). Can they be less a hybrid than their parents, or more British than their parents? Boehmer also deals with the idea whether the second generation can be independent and without a history, and in that case, if it is possible to find different nationalities within one family (195).

If we look at the Iqbal family, Samad and Alsana appear to be more Bengali than British, but even here there is confusion. In a discussion between Samad and Alsana, the following dialogue takes place:

‘My own culture? And what is that please?’
‘You are a Bengali. Act like one.’
‘And what is a Bengali, husband, please?’
‘Get out of the way of the television and look it up.’ (WT 236)

To the reader it is very humorous when you see Samad himself act in such a British manner where the television plays an important part of your life. Still, this is the same man who once proclaimed “‘I don’t wish to be a modern man! I wish to live as I always meant to! I wish to return to the East!’” (145)
In the beginning of the story, in the innocent childhood of the second generation, there is a carefree Millat, a buoyant schoolboy who wants to belong, and who is like everybody else – a child. His music teacher asks him “ ‘For example, what music do you like, Millat?’” and Millat, not realizing she expects an answer where he would give an example of his family’s traditional music answers “ ‘Bo-orn to ruun! Da da da da daaa! Bruce Springsteen, Miss!’ ” (156). Later on in life, he sadly acknowledges that “He knew that he, Millat was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; that he had no sexual identity; took other people’s jobs . . .” (234). It is not only through his search for a group identity, but also through the qualities of being the other that makes Millat join the militant organisation KEVIN.

According to Spivak, (Landry, MacLean 21) there is a connection between voice and identity. After a while you tend to think you are what you are fighting for. The group and its strongholds become the reality and its members breathe, think and talk its ideology. In this way, Millat more and more isolates himself with the members of KEVIN. He identifies himself with the proclamations of the militant organisation, which is manifested through KEVIN and the prejudgment of Society becomes confirmed.

. . . no one who looked like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short he knew he had no face in the country, until the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands. (WT 234)

Millat recognizes the anger he could see in the newscast, but he also recognizes himself among the youth in the feature. In Millat’s eyes, they were many, he is not alone anymore and he has got an identity.

White versus black
In colonial days white identity rejected the indigenous people, yet required their presence in order to experience to the full its own being as white colonialists. This drama, this contrasting relationship is what Boehmer calls “fundamental hypocrisy” (64). Generations later, there is still anger; there is still an anti-thesis, there is still the other. The East is mirrored by the West; Orientalism becomes the antipole to Occidentalism, black becomes the inferior complexion to white etc. The variety should be a reason to understand ourselves and respect others, but still we look for distinctions.
Magid, Millat’s brother finds his identity while studying in Bangladesh. There, of all places, his British side comes out in full bloom and Samad can sigh: “He is more English than the English” (WT 288). Spivak, (Landry, MacLean 257) points out that the history and management of the universities in the former colonies, by and large are conservative. This is what Magid picks up; this is what he is attracted to. Of course, he is second generation, he was born in the UK, and maybe this “Englishness” is a way to mitigate his homesickness, or to show rebellion “Why did you send me here?”. Bhabha’s idea is that there is a difference between being English and being Anglicized. Being the former, you choose yourself, whereas if you are the latter, you are compelled to conform (90). Even a person like Nelson Mandela writes in his autobiography that he is a hopeless Anglophile (Mandela 291). This is not expected from a man who has spent his entire life resisting white minority rule, which mainly originated from the Dutch and the British.

But why could not somebody be an Anglophile and an opponent of autocrats (Mandela) and why could not someone be a proud Bengali (Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal) and “More British than the British” at the same time? This question leads to Spivak’s asking how truths are produced (Landry, MacLean 90). Thoughts, truths so solid in peoples’ minds must originate from somewhere, there must be a source to all conceptions. Said talks about tautological reasoning, that people make their own history by repeating (1993:162). Humans know and can recognize what they or their parents already know or have done. It is all about repeating, it is all about copying – and in this way truths can be made.

In other words, Spivak encourages us to find the source to what we consider be a truth and revalue it, whereas Said indicates that truths are inherited from our parents, our forefathers, and again we need to revalue before establishing them as truths for the next generation. In the text, the Iqbal family and the Bowden-Jones family daily meet people who either reject them as not British or see them as truly British. Their approach has to do with how they look at fact and truths. Have they inherited prejudices from their parents, are they repeating the judgement from other generations or do they revalue the truths before they make them their own? Again, it is seen in their approach.

The Bowden/Jones family do not question their identity as strongly as the Iqbal’s, and therefore has a more mellow depiction concerning this issue in the book. It is Clara who is the immigrant in the family, and is described as a woman who is down-to-earth, who can not spend her days daydreaming but who has to care for her family’s well-being. Archie does not seem to give much thought to the issue, except once, when he incidentally mentions to Clara that Samad and Alsana “‘They are not those kind of Indians’” (WT 54).
Irie cogitate over the impressions from her parents and their background and particularly her mother’s background has an appeal for Irie; in fact she daydreams of visiting Jamaica. Boehmer claims that it is common for people with multiple nationalities to romanticize the country of their origin (119). Jamaica becomes the country where – in Irie’s mind – she will understand herself and her situation. Once there she will feel at ease, whole and happy. Irie does not seem to have any doubts about her British side; it is the Jamaican heritage she covets.

The Chalfen family

The Chalfen family stands out as typically British, even to the point of appearing as caricatures. Bromhead writes that “England is famous for its gardens, and most people like gardening” (106) and so does Joyce Chalfen. Joyce is a gardener but also an expert, a horticulturalist, and she cares for her family and those around her in the same manner as for her garden.

And not only were they bright children, they were happy, not hot-housed in any way. Their only after-school activity (they despised sport) was the individual therapy five times a week at the hands of an old fashioned Freudian called Marjorie who did Joyce and Marcus (separately) on weekends. (313)

This is a family which does not need other people, who think they have it all figured out, who admire themselves more than anything else (314). As long as everything is under control, “Every Chalfen proclaimed themselves mentally healthy and emotionally stable” (313). It is possible to get a feeling of the mental condition of Great Britain before colonialism. It is like a glimpse of pre colonialism that is reflected in their kitchen. “Joyce challenged anyone to show her a happier family” (314), and yet:

Sometimes there seemed nothing to improve, nothing to cultivate; recently she found herself pruning the dead sections from her rambling rose, wishing she could find some fault of Joshua’s worthy of attention, some secret trauma of Jack’s or Benjamin’s, a perversion in Oscar. (314)

Everything changes the moment Irie and Millat enter the house; “‘So you’re the two who’ve been corrupting my eldest son. I’m Joyce. Do you want some tea? So you’re Josh’s bad crowd ’ . . . ” (318). Here they find something Joyce can get her teeth into, something
she and Marcus can cultivate, and something they can change and mould according to their own truth and values.

Joyce is a person who accepts differences as long as the Europeans are superior (Boehmer 84). In her capacity as a horticulturalist for humanities, Joyce feels first-class British, or more British than the British. In their kitchen a cultural rendezvous takes place – but not on equal terms. The perception that everyone with a sound mind should want to become just like them, just like a Chalfen is obvious. “They referred to themselves as nouns, verbs and occasionally adjectives: It’s the Chalfen way, And then he came out with a real Chalfenism, He’s Chalfening again, We need to be a bit more Chalfenist about this” (314).

To see this clearly, or to understand post colonialism with new eyes – it is possible to exchange the word Chalfen for British. It is the British way . . . We need to be a bit more British about this. It is as if the Chalfens play the part of colonizers in their domestic life, but here they see the other around them; Irie and Millat, their neighbours and Joyce’s relatives (314). In this contrasting relationship, prejudices are confirmed; fair children versus dark-skinned “‘you look very exotic’” (319), unproblematic children versus problematic children, the West versus the East, British versus non-British, right versus wrong. But, the question remains, who are truly British?

**WHITE TEETH**

**Colour neutral**
As a contrast to the discussion of difference based on the notion of “the other”, it may be interesting to study the significance of some physical attributes such as teeth that most people can relate to and that are common to all people. Teeth are something that can be seen as colour-neutral in humans, and I think Zadie Smith plays with the thought that teeth are a common denominator, that has nothing to do with colour, in people. Teeth are more or less white, depending on the original colour of the enamel, external stipulations such as food, drink and tobacco. But the row of teeth itself cannot show your nationality, your ethnical background.

You can be identified through your row of teeth, both as living and dead. The row of teeth is personal and does not look exactly like another person’s – just like fingerprints. The teeth are also the last (except the skeleton), which will moulder away and decompose (www.dentistry.co.uk).
The title of the book is *White Teeth* and the nouns tooth or teeth can be found in more than 30 different contexts of the novel. Below follow some extracts:

Archie, who had just dropped a fag from his mouth which had been burning itself to death anyway, saw Clara quickly tread it underfoot. She gave him a wide grin that revealed possibly her one imperfection. A complete lack of teeth in the top of her mouth. (*WT* 24)

Clara is a beautiful woman, and when she meets Archie the first time, he can not help noticing the lack of teeth in the upper row. Archie himself is an old man, a dull man. He feels attracted to Clara, but she is much younger and more beautiful than other women Archie has had a relationship with before. Clara’s lack of teeth in the upper row equalizes that. Her missing teeth give him the courage he needs to respond to her flirtation.

‘Archie’, said Kelvin Hero, revealing a double row of pearly whites that owed more to expensive dentistry than to regular brushing. (70)

Archie seems to notice people’s teeth when conversing. This time Archie has a meeting with the Company Director, and the setting of teeth is again obvious. This perfect row of whites gives Archie inferiority complex. Here, teeth play the part of showing who is the boss, which social class you belong to.

‘And when your teeth rot’, continued Mr Hamilton, smiling at the ceiling, ‘aaah, there’s no return. They won’t look at you like they used to. The pretty ones won’t give you a second glance, not for love or money. But while you are still young, the important matter is the third molars. They are commonly referred to as the wisdom teeth, I believe. (173)

Mr Hamilton, a character who only appears briefly in the story, is an old, bitter man, full of prejudices. Again the row of teeth plays an important part. In this quotation, he talks about the relationship between sexes, that it is impossible to be attractive when your teeth rot in your mouth. If you have been neglecting the teeth in your childhood, they rot when you are old. There is no turning back.
Samad opened his eyes and saw quite clearly by the bandstand his two sons, their white teeth biting into two waxy apples, waving, smiling. (182)

There is innocence in the way Samad’s both sons are pictured. Samad is on his way to commit adultery with his sons’ teacher, and does not expect to see his children in the street, so far away from home. His two sons remind him of his responsibilities, their white teeth, biting into apples, show the pureness of childhood – teeth not stained or rotten in their mouths.

The characters in the book do not talk about teeth based on national background or ethnical belonging. Teeth become the common denominator, the common ground. Nor do they talk about it in a medical sense, but in a metaphorical way. So when Alsana feels threatened by the Chalfens, and refers to them as “Birds with teeth!” (345), it is more than a homemade idiom; it is a metaphorical language where the word *teeth* plays an important part.

**IRIE JONES IN A POSTCOLONIAL ERA**

**The truth**

It is said that the umbilical cord is cut many times, and sometimes by the child itself. Irie does definitely have such an intention after the meeting with her tired mum, one night in her parents’ bedroom. *Teeth*. She discovers that her mother has false teeth and “Irie had put two and two together. The midnight voice. The perfect daytime straightness and whiteness” (*WT* 378). Such an occurrence does not necessarily have to be a determining factor in life, “But Irie was sixteen and everything feels deliberate at that age. To her, this was yet another item in a long list of parental hypocrisies and untruths . . .” (379). At that instant, she packs her bag to leave home, convinced that she has been deceived, that her parents have pulled the wool over her eyes. She is now assured that she has to find her own path in life.

Oh what a tangled web we weave. Millat was right: These parents were damaged people, missing hands, missing teeth. These parents were full of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear. But she didn’t want it any more, she was tired of it. She was sick of never getting the whole truth. She was returning to sender. (379)
She escapes to her grandmother, and when she sees her, it is as if the circle of life forms and the beginning and end meet. The two women, from two different generations, are described with the same words:

It was Irie Jones all right. Six years older than the last time they met.
Taller, wider, with breasts and no hair and slippers just visible underneath a long duffle coat. And it was Hortense Bowden.
Six years older, shorter, wider, with breasts on her belly and no hair . . . and slippers just visible underneath a long, padded baby-pink housecoat. (381)

The resemblance is striking, and Irie can see like a vision what she will look like when she is eighty-four. Yet, there are differences, Hortense is eighty-four and “eighty-four is not seventy-seven or sixty-three; at eighty-four there is nothing but death ahead . . . “ (381). Irie is young and she has come to see her grandmother for a reason.

**Bonding**

Her Jehovah Witness’ grandmother has no deposited values to reclaim from her, but she has the closest connection to Jamaica, the country Irie starts to call her Homeland. “No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs – this is how Irie imagined her homeland” (402). It is as if Irie does not want to stand in the margin of her life and point towards the centre, but rather step into the middle and be the director of her own life.

After the outburst on the bus (514), Irie and her dad have a discussion about bus tickets (517). For the first time in the story, the reader can sense an open conversation, an honest dialogue between father and daughter. The subject is trivial – bus tickets – but they bond, they see each other, recognise each other. Irie is not aggressive, her dad is not suspicious – like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle they fall in the right places. Out of doubt and searching come expectation and prospect – summed up in Irie Jones.

The discovery of her mother’s false teeth and the bonding with her father, become necessary for her to be able to stand on her own feet. She becomes whole – even before her journey to Jamaica. But her longing for her homeland has not ceased. She wants to and needs to place herself in relationship to the unknown – her homeland. A longing that is, according to Said, typical of persons with multiple nationalities (1978:22).

She gives birth to a child, not knowing which of the twins is the father (WT 527), and in such a way she fools even science and has covered up the tracks of her child’s source.
She chooses life partner from her own values (541) and Irie expresses an expectation of a world where people are who they choose to be – not what other people condemn them to be.

In a vision, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now when roots won’t matter any more because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too tortuous and they’re buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it.

(527)

This vision expresses the same thoughts as those of Bhabha, when he writes that we need to rethink the meaning of citizenship and nationality (174). This could lead to a postcolonial and post-modern world without exasperation.

CONCLUSION

I have assumed that the novel White Teeth essentially belongs to the genre realistic fiction, and therefore is reliable in its narrative art. My starting point has been that the story illuminates contemporary problems in postcolonial London, and that the characters’ interactions answer the question whether it is reconciliation or exasperation that lead the way to the future. In the Bowden/Jones family, both Clara and Irie want to be understood as they are. Clara is unsatisfied with herself when feeling weak while conversing with Joyce Chalfen and at school, Irie wants to see a reflection of her own heritage. The interaction with other people determines how they look at themselves.

I have also been looking into the main characters’ national background, and tried to give example of what people might bring with them when they settle down in a new country. One of my aims has been to clarify the significance of having a heritage, a legend or heroes to convey to the new homeland and assert that there is space enough in a multicultural society. In the Iqbal family, heroes play an important part. Samad wants to show his historical importance by bringing up his great-grandfather now and then, and Millat joins the militant organisation KEVIN.

The novel’s younger generation repeatedly find themselves in new situations, where their own family and background are compared with the families and backgrounds of their new homeland. When the reader first encounters the Chalfen family, they seem friendly and helpful, but undercurrents of control run through their home. The question is what Irie and Millat see and how they are treated; the conclusion is who they choose to be.
Interaction is a keyword here; it takes two to make a unity, a unity where we constantly reflect ourselves in the other.

People interact everywhere and prejudice is the biggest threat to integration. Knowledge is the enemy of all kinds of prejudice, and therefore an open society and people with open minds are indispensable. *White Teeth* deals with these important subjects in a humorous way, a humour that gives hope for the future.
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